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An Individual of Feeling: Emotion, Gender, and Subjectivity in Historical Perspectives on Sensibility

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INTRODUCTION

Emotions are simultaneously ephemeral and pervasive, both in the contemporary moment and in the past. Scholars are familiar with, and many subscribe to, the notion that emotions are a notoriously difficult area of study. Direct observation or access is extremely difficult, if not impossible. Emotions tend to be reflected or represented through other events and activities.

This chapter is not an historical analysis of the sensibility movement, in the sense that I do not examine primary sources. Instead, I consider how some historians have talked about sensibility in order to shed light on how we view emotions in the contemporary moment and how we, then, might apply those perceptions onto both the past and the present.

I focus on eighteenth century sensibility, primarily in Britain, because it was an historical movement in which particular conceptualizations of emotion were widely acknowledged as centrally significant. However, as we will see, there is no consensus on the part of historians as to what, precisely, those emotional aspects meant or what their gendered associations were.

In particular, I examine how contemporary gendered assumptions which conflate emotions with women and a private sphere pose challenges for the

study of emotions. The cult of sensibility is now most immediately associated with the emergent novel, emotional excess, and women as readers. But it was part of sensibility as a much larger cultural development that included aesthetic, economic, political, and philosophical configurations.

I argue that sensibility as a structure of feeling, *in Raymond Williams' term, was pivotal to the Enlightenment's formulation of the modern individual and the notion of emotional, as well as rational, interiority and consciousness. Then, borrowing from Foucault's analysis of the development of the modern subject, I outline how the role of the individual of feeling was central to the accomplishment of the modernity project. The modern subject is not only a rational being but becomes possible as a direct result of altered emotional structures and relationships. The Enlightenment's notions of self-awareness and self-determination led to a newly landscaped emotional as well as rational interiority.*

ENLIGHTENMENT SUBJECTIVITY

As has been argued widely, the advent of the Enlightenment brought with it new emphasis on the individual. Reason, the foundational principle for Enlightenment ideas and ideals, required a discrete being able to perform out of self-awareness (consciousness), and on the basis of scientific concepts and methodologies (rationality).

This new conscious, rational self-made sense of and created the world in which he, and sometimes she, existed. Man now replaced, to varying degrees, a universe previously wholly determined by God. Beginning in the latter half of the seventeenth century, Enlightenment principles both required and produced a more complex individual subject, one who needed to be autonomous and self-determining on the basis of self-reflective thought. The Enlightenment subject was capable of knowing the world either because it was centered in him (government, society) or because he understood the laws governing it (natural sciences).

The emphasis on a multi-faceted, self-knowing individual prompted other developments in subjectivity beyond the reasoned being. Intense focus on an autonomous individual led to increased attention toward feelings, also understood as a phenomenon or property of the individual being.[1] The term, 'emotion,' came to signify agitation of mind, feeling, passion only in the second half of the seventeenth century, around the time that the many meanings of 'feeling' developed the additional sense of affective consciousness. With the Enlightenment, all aspects of individuality, emotions included, demanded a new scrutiny and a new design. Interest in an emerging rational being caused a

parallel interest in all aspects of what it meant or required to be a modern subject.

The concept of sensibility, appearing as early as the last decades of the seventeenth century (Todd 1986; Ellison 2000*;* Ellison 1999) and widely considered to reach its peak in the mid- to latter half of the eighteenth century, was temporally and discursively part of the Enlightenment. Sensibility, stressing compassion, moral virtue, and personal refinement, functioned to construct a certain range of emotions towards the accomplishment of a particular notion of individuality, and as such, helped make possible the humanist subject. Sensibility merits attention in part because it was an emotional movement that was discussed in terms of its *social* implications in its own day and because it has received a good deal of contemporary critical study, precisely as a socioemotional phenomenon.[2]

SENSIBILITY AS SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Speaking more narrowly about what often has been referred to as the cult of sensibility, the eighteenth-century subculture dominated by novel-reading women, John Mullan cites a lengthy passage from a 1749 letter. The letter is to novelist Samuel Richardson from his friend and fan, Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh. She writes him upon completing her reading of the final three volumes of Richardson's novel, *Clarissa*. Lady Bradshaigh relays her reading experience in what are, by contemporary measures, emotionally overblown terms: "When alone in agonies would I lay down the Book, take it up again, walk about the

Room, let fall a Flood of Tears, wipe my eyes, read again, perhaps not three Lines, throw away the Book crying out excuse me good Mr. Richardson, I cannot go on" (qtd. in Mullan 1997, 119).

Although Lady Bradshaigh's words sound extravagant to more contemporary ears, Mullan points out that people in the second half of the eighteenth century spoke and wrote about sensibility in the way that we, more currently, might think and talk of stress (121). In other words, sensibility was then, as stress is now, genuinely *felt*. Felt experiences, whether sensibility or stress, bear cultural meanings. More accurately, they are felt *because* they bear cultural meanings, embodied or enacted by individuals. To analyze any particular emotion as a structure of feeling is to ask to what uses, cultural and individual, it is put.

Cultural theorist Raymond Williams developed the concept, 'structure of feeling,' to describe the particular emotional relations of a specific historical location. The concept is intended to pinpoint emotions that are culturally shared or widely felt. Structure of feeling describes social and historical events, not individual responses or phenomena (Williams 1975).[3]

Like any structure of feeling, eighteenth century sensibility encompassed a certain range of emotions and associated behaviors while excluding others. Among the characteristics defining sensibility, as indicated by Lady Bradshaigh but applicable to both women and men, were pity and pathos manifesting in tears and other physical frailties or debilities. Sensibility was intended to oppose selfishness (Novak and Mellor 2000, 12; Mullan 1997, 125) and did not include,

for example, emotions such as rage or a desire for vengeance. Indeed, David Hume linked sensibility with the notion of humanity, and praised it for its ability to incapacitate ”rougher and more boisterous” emotions (qtd. in Barker-Benfield 1992, 133, 135).

The significance of this set of emotional attributes was that only certain people were capable of feeling it, individuals of refinement and taste. Sensibility was completely infiltrated with discourses of class: a potential possession or quality of only the upper and the growing middle classes. There appears to be fairly wide consensus among scholars that the age of sensibility served principally the interests of the solidifying middle classes and a developing market/capitalist economy, in these years leading up to and overlapping with the onset of the Industrial Revolution (Marshall 2000, Zimmerman 2000, Langford 1989, Barker-Benfield 1992, Skinner 1999, Barbalet 2005).[4]

As recompense for its adoption, sensibility provided the middle classes with a kind of status that did not require lineage, a form of ‘classiness’ not dependent on inherited class. Instead, it served as the foundation for a “meritocracy of feeling” (Todd 1986, 13), for the acquisition of distinction and refinement achieved through an individual’s endeavors. Langford argues that gentility “was the most prized possession of all in a society obsessed with the pursuit of property and wealth,” and that attaining social status oiled the wheels of commerce and industry as much as did acquiring consumer goods (1989, 464, 65). And the means to gentility and status were found in the exercise of civility and sensibility (4, 464).

Sensibility, therefore, described a particular range of feelings available to a particular range of people. And although constrained, its impact was felt across numerous social contexts. In addition to being fundamental to the establishment of a new class structure and ideology, to greater social mobility, and to other aspects of a developing capitalist economy, sensibility underpinned the formations or changes occurring in other significant cultural arenas, such as philosophy and moral theory, politics, religion, social reform, medicine (nervous disorders), and aesthetics.

Scholars have argued that sensibility was the discursive frame structuring the shape of eighteenth-century politics, both conservative and revolutionary (Johnson 1995; Novak and Mellor 2000; C. Jones 1993; Vincent-Buffault 1991). Additionally, in its notion of 'humanity,' based on the values of compassion, pity, and benevolence, sensibility spurred numerous social reform movements, among them campaigns concerning the indigent, the ill, and slavery (Barker-Benfield 1992, 224; Stone 1977, 238, 266; Van Sant 193, 21-23; Langford 1989 482-487, 500-504). Such movements which attempted to ameliorate social ills, paradoxically caused largely by the development of capitalism and those same sentimental middle classes, were widely participated in by women. Although women could not themselves enact legislation, they played their part in instigating significant legal reforms in the last few decades of the eighteenth century (Barker-Benfield 1992, 224-225).[5]

Widely acknowledged to have had enormous impact on constructs of femininity and masculinity in the eighteenth century, an understanding of

sensibility's specific relation to gender formations is less clear-cut and contested by historians. Sensibility has often been associated, in its emotional excesses, with an increasingly frail and restrictive notion of femininity and, in turn, to an evolving separation of social spaces – private versus public, domestic versus worldly. Women pursued activities such as reading sentimental literature in the privacy of their own homes, made necessary by their intense sentimental responses, both emotional and physical. Their nerves were perceived to be significantly more delicate than men's, making them extremely susceptible to sensibility's vagaries (weeping, trembling, fainting). Middle- and upper-class women were so finely attuned to emotional and moral sensibility, in this argument, that they were unfit for a more public and less rarified world. The home was the site to which they were most ideally suited.

Recent arguments, however, suggest that sensibility was far from the dominant prerogative of women. That is to say, sensibility was not gender specific, although it was gender differentiated. If one wishes to make the argument for sensibility's impact on economics, politics, science, law, and philosophy, all eighteenth century dominantly masculine realms, then sensibility must also, or primarily, be the prerogative of men.

GENDERED SENSIBILITY

Much of the early critical interest in sensibility originated with studies of the emergent novel and its largest initial readership: middle class women. Barker-Benfield itemizes a list of literary critics and historians, ranging from 1931 to the

end of the 1980s, who describe the relationship between readers and writers of sentimental literature (poetry and drama as well as novels) as “the cult of sensibility” (1992, xix, 398). Mullan identifies novels as “the age’s laboratories of emotion,” the place where people went to experience the feelings associated with sensibility (1997, 123, 120).

Simultaneously, Barker-Benfield and Mullan attribute the novel and its cult of sensibility to a much larger cultural deployment of sensibility in the eighteenth century, for instance, both acknowledge its importance for Enlightenment moral philosophy, particularly the Scottish Enlightenment. Yet both are inclined to assign the origins or heart of sensibility to the novel and to a women’s private culture.

From Barker-Benfield’s perspective:

> Men cultivated sensibility, too, but unlike women their doing so was not to be at the expense of the cultivation of other qualities and their participation in larger and more various goals, including the elaboration of a public culture of their own. (xviii)

Here we encounter a number of assumptions about sensibility as an emotional phenomenon. First, that sensibility is a function of the private, antithetical to the development of a public culture. Second, although Barker-Benfield acknowledges that men participated in the culture of sensibility, they did so in a more measured fashion than women. Third, it was precisely the limitations men placed on sensibility that enabled them to develop a public culture. In other words, middle class men formulated and inhabited a public sphere *despite* their participation in the culture of sensibility. And finally, it was precisely women’s

excessive participation in the culture of sensibility that kept them from “larger” or more public activities.

For his part, Mullan closely associates sensibility with the novel, and then, because women are its dominant readership, links both the novel and sensibility to a sphere of private consumption:

> In the eighteenth century, the experience of novel-reading was characteristically described as an exercise in sympathy. It was an exercise in sympathy that was a private, exceptional and even covert experience, for sensibility was unworldly. In a sense, a novel was the natural place to find this experience because novels concerned themselves with the private individual. (123)

By giving primacy to the novel as the cultural location (“natural place”) of sensibility, in both the novel’s mode of consumption and its content, Mullan is able to perform an elision in which sensibility itself becomes “unworldly,” exercised privately and covertly, recalling its cultish aspects. But the concept of sensibility as unworldly does not fit contemporary historical interpretations concerning sensibility’s importance in the construction of a wide range of eighteenth century social, and clearly public, discourses. And as we will see, while women, novels, and sensibility are formulated as private individuals or activities, the representation of sensibility in male aesthetics is understood as very much a public event, indeed, one pivotal to the shaping of the Enlightenment social sphere.

The problem, *pace* Barker-Benfield, is how does something as important as sensibility originate within the relatively powerless culture of women and yet go on to influence eighteenth century society so profoundly? Similarly, following

Mullan, how does sensibility as an entity so private, domestic, and separate come to take on such public meanings and effects?

Ellison maintains that although there are now a growing number of studies, the problem of the relationship between masculine and feminine sensibility is not yet sufficiently understood (1999, 9). Johnson's solution is to argue that the affective practices associated with sensibility were valued only *after* they had been recoded as masculine (1995, 14, 78). Johnson's purpose is not to defend either the novels or the emotional excesses of sensibility. Indeed, she describes the novels as displaying "egregious affectivity" (1). Her concern, instead, is to argue that as male culture increasingly appropriated the signs and behaviors of sensibility – gender traits formerly identified as feminine – women were left with little choice but to take up the position of egregious affectivity (12, 14). Women were confined or marginalized into becoming "excessively delicate, morbidly *over*-sensitive" (12).

Johnson's argument, although it accounts for the seemingly excessive power and influence attributed to women in other scholarly versions, continues to locate the origins of sensibility in women's culture. In contrast, Ellison and Todd argue that the principles of sensibility and civility materialized as part of masculine public and political identity early in the history of sensibility, in the 1680s and 1690s. They locate its origins in Restoration drama and in various homosocial activities of the time, which are linked very closely to political developments (Ellison 2000, 27-29; Ellison 1999, 9-10, 16, 23, 29, 74; Todd 1986, 9 –11, 33). Todd also points out that women's inseparable association

with sensibility occurred only in the latter part of the eighteenth century (8, 61), when sensibility as a cultural movement was already in decline, under attack for being effeminate, destabilizing, self-indulgent, and self-centered (61-62, 140), the inverse of the benevolence and compassion it had represented earlier in the century.

Following these arguments, then, the role of the novel in women's culture is only one, and one very specific, manifestation of sensibility excerpted from a much broader spectrum. Complicating the problem further are the ways sentimental literature has been analyzed. Pinch notes that some scholars like Barker-Benfield take the example of literature too literally, accepting it at face-value as documentary evidence (1995, 108-109). Literary works are always complex representations, themselves interpretations located in and mediated by often contradictory cultural and historical specificities. For example, a common feature in sentimental novels was for fictional men of feeling to oppose the commerce and mercantilism of the day and to withdraw from society (Todd 1986, 96-97, 108). Yet sensibility is widely considered by present-day commentators to have enabled the establishment of the commercial middle classes and the development of capitalism. How an expressed opposition to commerce on the part of middle-class male characters might actually abet the establishment of capitalist economic activity then becomes more difficult to disentangle.

Similarly, if women at that historical period were being forced to retreat into a newly evolving private realm, and the novel was an activity closely associated with such a private sphere, why did there exist so much opposition to

women's, especially young women's, novel-reading (Mullan 1997, 124; Todd 1986, 134-135; Langford 1989, 478; V. Jones 1996, 131-132)? Encouragement of solitary activities such as novel reading, undertaken in private closets, would seem to facilitate a withdrawal from society, a supposedly appropriate move for women. Yet hostility towards novel-reading was based precisely on the grounds that women were reading in solitude, beyond the bounds of more public supervision (Mullan 124), and that such an activity could prove detrimental to their role as wives and mothers (Todd 134).

The contradictory linking of sensibility with the novel, women's culture, and a private sphere and, simultaneously or possibly subsequently, its very influential public role in a male social culture of economics, politics, philosophy, and aesthetics is due partially to the paradoxes and complexities of sensibility as an eighteenth-century phenomenon, as those writing on the era recognize. Sensibility was never a singular, unified ideology or cultural formation. It was deployed in many contexts and towards many purposes, often competing ones, as in the case of both radical and conservative politics.

But also a factor, and of particular concern here, is the troubling tendency to collapse emotion with women and the private. One construct crumbles into the next and the very different concepts they represent are effaced.

SENSIBILITY'S PUBLIC COUNTENANCE

Barker-Benfield attempts to reconcile the seeming contradiction between sensibility's public importance and the simultaneous development of women's restriction to a private, domestic sphere by turning to the notion of a constrained

women's public culture. In contending that one of the most significant aspects of sensibility was how it contributed to a sharp growth in consumerism in the eighteenth century, he argues for an increased public role for middle-class women primarily as consumers (xxvi). New domestic, private-sphere spaces were essential to the advance of consumerism, as more closely managed and better-appointed households fuelled the desire for and purchase of material goods (xxv).

In his analysis, women were confined principally to the public sphere activities of pleasure and leisure. Pleasure and leisure activities were public because they were heterosocial – participated in by men and women together – taking place in the new spa resort towns, shopping parades, public walks, and gardens (30).[6] He describes such pleasure and leisure activities as themselves forms of consumerism. In Barker-Benfield's view, then, it is principally consumerism which is able to cross back and forth between the arenas of public and private, or which permits women some access to the public even as it grounds them in the private.

Barker-Benfield also describes how the sensibility movement among women was made possible by a steep rise in women's literacy rates, an increase beginning in the seventeenth century as part of an overall rise in literacy rates in Britain (xviii, 161-162; Stone 1977, 226; Langford 1989, 90-91). For instance, he cites the estimate that by 1750 sixty percent of men and forty percent of women could read (Barker-Benfield 59-60). Further, literacy rates increased as part of a

general improvement in the education of the middle classes, including women (2, 163-164).

Certainly a significant rise in women's literacy, as with literacy in general, was a matter of public concern with profound social implications beyond simply enabling women to read novels in the privacy of their own homes. Goodman notes that, for Habermas, the development of a public sphere of civil society was made possible because of an emerging "reading public" (1992, 4). In addition, the rise of the novel and other forms of sentimental literature, and of women as their dominant readership, resulted in women's participation in publishing as *commerce* (Barker-Benfield xix, 164-168). Women authored the majority of the novels published in the eighteenth century and also wrote in numerous other literary forms (169). And as a market, "[l]iterate women had become an audience that authors and booksellers could not afford to ignore" (170).

As noted earlier, Barker-Benfield acknowledges the prominent role of women in the striking social reforms and political movements of the latter half of the eighteenth century, and describes how sentimental literature set the example for such involvement (224). Taken together, examples such as consumerism, literacy, and social reform can hardly be considered insignificant indicators of public presence. Yet, for the most part, Barker-Benfield continues to relegate women to a private, domestic arena, although arguably less so than do many others writing on the era (Pinch 1995, 103), and he mostly locates sensibility there with them. So, the division into a male public sphere and a female

household sphere was, throughout the eighteenth century, “already becoming what it would be for women in the nineteenth century” (Barker-Benfield xxv).

However, this remains a contested proposition. In Johnson’s view, the boundaries between public and private, in the 1790s, at the end of both the century and the era of sensibility, were “still under construction” (1995, 18), and Pinch suggests there is a tendency to “overemphasize the absolute rule of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women in the late eighteenth century” (1995, 103). Similarly, Battersby argues that David Hume understands both men and women as emotional beings; feminine passions are simply the wrong ones. In Battersby’s interpretation, women and their emotions are not part of a private sphere for Hume. On the contrary, they are significant precisely because women’s emotions are “socially disruptive” (Battersby 2005, 142):

> Far from women’s passions being condemned because they are limited to the domestic…, they are regarded as a threat precisely because they operate in the public sphere and incite the men to religion – and away from philosophy. (142)

Like Barker-Benfield, Mullan also is aware of a broader public role for sensibility. Along with the prominence of sensibility in fiction, the arenas of philosophy and aesthetics are replete with “the vocabulary of sentiment and sympathy” and contemporary thinkers such as Hume and Adam Smith “try to found a moral philosophy on the ‘natural’ capacity for fellow-feeling” (125). The vital place of sympathy for certain branches of Enlightenment thinking, for the Scottish Enlightenment in particular, closely links sensibility to morality and aesthetics. Aesthetics is where sensibility is experienced; morality where it is

tested. For a number of eighteenth-century intellectuals, as men of feeling, sensibility is the principle that "allows moral and aesthetic sensitivities to be equated" and, indeed, sensibility becomes "the essential experience of art" (127).

Analyzing in greater detail the role of aesthetics in this sequence of activities, Mullan argues that the kinds of artistic work considered appropriate to the Enlightenment

> were those that were either experienced collectively…or as the shared objects of 'Taste' (a social as well as a critical standard). (127)

When Mullan describes sensibility in the context of aesthetics – excluding the novel – and moral theory, it becomes a public phenomenon, indicated by calling the forms appropriate to Enlightenment aesthetics those which are experienced "collectively" or as "shared" objects, as well as in his contention that the concept of Taste was a social standard. Contrary to what he stated elsewhere, sensibility was not necessarily unworldly; it did not mean having to turn from an unfeeling world (123, 125). For many people sensibility meant acting upon its principles in public spaces.

In other words, Mullan displays the tendency to consider sentimental aesthetics when practiced by men as public, yet sentimental literature, when engaged in predominantly by women, as a private and mostly covert experience (125). In a manner similar to Barker-Benfield, the mode of representation is positioned as inherently public or private, *determined by its gendered audience* and not, for instance, on the basis of the uses to which it was put.

It is difficult to see how male aesthetics as a social activity pursued by a self-conscious community differed significantly from women's aesthetic activities. Women certainly could, and did, self-consciously talk and write about novels as indicated by Lady Bradshaigh's letter, only a single instance in an era of sharply increased letter-writing on the part of women (Barker-Benfield 162; Stone 1977, 228). Those letters very specifically included discussion of current reading material and other aspects of sentimental behavior (Todd 1986, 66; Vincent-Buffault 1991, 7-8). Sentimental aesthetics in its varying forms was intended to promote similar, if not identical, feelings on the part of its various audiences. Women, in a knowing and self-aware manner, understood sentimental literature as providing models of appropriate behavior similar to the ways men were perceived to understand their aesthetic activities. Wouldn't women self-consciously communicating about and writing sentimental literature (novels, plays, poetry as well as histories, treatises on education, moral essays, political pamphlets and tracts) indicate that their aesthetic activity involved public standards as well? On the occasions when communication was intra-gender, shouldn't it be considered social activity when shared collectively with other women, when taking the shape of female homosociality?

In insisting on the development of the individual as a private matter, Mullan loses the point that the Enlightenment's shaping of the individual subject was an event of the most public magnitude. Individual subjectivity was central to the vast public workings of the Enlightenment and to modernity. Conflating sensibility with women and the private makes it impossible, at certain moments,

to accord sensibility its position at the center of the formation of a public world. The wish to preserve emotion as part of a private world and part of women's culture necessitates the sometime disavowal of sensibility's public aspects.

Barker-Benfield, Mullan, and others link the private with domesticity, family, and "individual conscience" (Goodman 1992, 3), in contrast to a collectively shared, more worldly social space. In recent years, however, feminist criticism has shown that the domestic arena is an integral part of the economic marketplace and that political events cannot be adequately understood without taking women's circumstances into account (V. Jones 1996, 111; Skinner 1999, 192). Even if one takes up Habermas' notion of the authentic public sphere as the result of private people "coming together as a public" through the use of reason (Goodman 5), both masculine and feminine sensibility, as aspects of the Enlightenment, would correspond to that transition. Yet, in various accounts, masculine society and reason evolve into a newly forming public, while emotions and women are left behind in either a pre-existing or simultaneously developing private setting, in which experiences become personal rather than social, internalized in the household or in the heart. To the extent that sensibility was key to a masculine and publicly-identified culture, it calls the ostensibly private nature of women's sentimental culture into question. Among similar feelings and behaviors what renders them private in certain instances yet public in others, beyond the gender of those experiencing them? As a structure of feeling, built around the emotions of pity and compassion, sensibility was socially pervasive.

The uses to which sensibility was put were a means of identifying and claiming one's place in a social landscape. Meant to be displayed as a "shared" or "collective" experience, sensibility located an individual in the company of others. This is not to equate 'public' with 'power.' As Johnson accurately points out, "women's presence in a sentimental public sphere is not to be confused with her empowerment there" (1995, 14). Foucault has illustrated many instances, at numerous sites created under modernity, in which existing in a public context did not mean being in a position of power (criminals, the insane, the ill, school children).

Commentators like Mullan are correct in stating that for eighteenth century culture, "the art of being an individual involved learning to have feelings" (131). But I take issue with the assumption that learning to have feelings meant having them privately, personally, and uniquely. Instead, becoming a modern individual meant learning to have feelings socially, collectively, and *accountably.*

AN INDIVIDUAL OF FEELING

Following Foucault's analysis of modernity, the development of a heightened individual subjectivity that began with the Enlightenment was a means of disciplining a newly conceived vast, unruly 'population' whose policing was essential to the existence, efficiency, and well-being of the modern state. In this account, "as power becomes more anonymous and more functional, those on whom it is exercised tend to be more strongly individualized" (Foucault 1995, 193). By segmenting human beings into discrete units of individuality, normative

criteria of behavior could be established against which individual subjects were to be measured and found adequate or wanting (182-184). Further, in the creation of self-awareness – consciousness and interiority – subjects would become *self-monitoring*, active in disciplining themselves upon the basis of cultural discourses or ideological norms.

If Foucault is correct, modernity marks the advent of an externally policed and simultaneously self-policing individual whose daily and, over time, increasingly minute habits of existence came under ever closer scrutiny and measurement in order to ensure the delivery of a healthy and productive populace. In addition to more overt exercises of power, governance now also occurs, in increasingly significant ways, through a comprehensive, intricate normatizing of social and personal behaviors.

Two major aspects of this scenario are particularly pertinent to the discussion here. First is the centrality of a domestic sphere in the formation of the modern individual. Second is the role of the individual of feeling in the accomplishment of the modernity project.

From a Foucauldian perspective on modernity, the domestic sphere comes to the fore of the social landscape, becoming pivotal in the training and disciplining of the individual through, for example, childrearing, nutrition, hygiene, moral and social education. Foucault contends that the aim of modern power is "to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply" (208). As much as schools, prisons, or workplaces, the domestic front's

contribution to the strengthening of social forces grows in importance through the care of individual family members. Additionally, the productive increase of power is achieved only when it is “exercised continuously in the very foundations of society, in the subtlest possible way” (Ibid.). The daily repetitive minutiae of domesticity offers one of the most effective sites in the spread of procedures that work to formulate disciplined and useful individuals.

Such a change in the status and positioning of the domestic arena is indicated by, for instance, a sharp rise in training manuals and other forms of educational material concerning the management of the new bourgeois household, one set of elements in an overall increased social consciousness felt by women in terms of what was expected of them as domestic managers (V. Jones 1996, 108-113; Skinner 1999, 4-7). In turn, a new emphasis on, for instance, the care and cleanliness of family members and household had a direct impact on the health, and so productivity, of the workforce and overall population.

For middle class women, their emergent social role entailed exercising more dedicated, meticulous oversight of their households (and through reform movements, over other people’s domestic spaces and ‘private’ lives as well). In a Foucauldian context, ‘oversight’ carries the double weight of supervision and gaze. Through women, in the main, the household comes under the controlling gaze of modernity. Household economy, in the eighteenth century’s encompassing sense of household management (Skinner 1999, 4-5), becomes central to the modern state and to modern society, not only as the site of

consumer demand but as a key location for many of the age's mechanisms for constituting the modern individual.

In this sense, the domestic arena becomes one of the most public of social locations. Of pivotal interest to the state and society at large, it becomes a crucial site in the exertion of power through social intervention, normatization, and measurement. My argument is that confining women largely to domestic activities did not occur as a means of rendering them absent or locating them in the deep background of society. Instead, it had precisely the opposite purpose and effect. Women's activities were critical to the formation of the modern self. Their segregation into a separated domestic arena made them and the household *more* apparent, *more* visible, *more* accessible.

The isolation of a domestic, but far from private, space rendered all members of the household, including the women overseeing it, more available to policing and governance. Women's surveillance role over the household becomes akin to the position of employees in the modern Benthamite prison or similar institutional structures (hospitals, schools) in which, as supervisors, they not only oversee those enclosed within the "transparent" space but they themselves are observed and their effectivity monitored (Foucault 1995, 207, 204).

The ways in which state and social power were exerted over and through the domestic arena has much to do with changed emotional relations among modern subjects and the role of the individual of feeling in the emergence of modernity. The transformation in the conception of the household, involving

greater investment in the domestic sphere, occurred in concert with altered familial affective relationships such as the trend towards companionate marriages and growing emotional bonds between parents and children. For instance, speaking of a French context, Vincent-Buffault notes: “The modern concern for the care of children’s health was accompanied by a maternal sensitivity to their suffering, a constant solicitude for them” (1991, 47). She points out that the portrayal in novels of unhappy, indigent, or otherwise victimized children was certain to prompt emotion in the hearts of adult readers and that, at the same time, letters of the day indicate the increased attention devoted to children’s health (46). Similarly, in *Strange Dislocations,* Steedman traces the literary portrayal of the child, Mignon, over a century and a half. First appearing in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Theatrical Mission* in the late 1770s, the destitute and mistreated Mignon prompts feelings of “intense pity,” in the main character, Wilhelm, and is meant to do the same for viewers or readers (Steedman 1995, 23).

Such representations suggest a correlation between the better material care taken of children and a rise in the intensity of emotion directed towards them. Altered feelings, as much as other social circumstances, facilitated a modern concern with the health and welfare of the populace’s individual members. A new emphasis on family and parental love becomes the means of enacting a new focus on the productivity of the individual. Greater attention devoted to the physical, educational, and ethical care of immediate family members is propelled by emergent or changed emotional obligations.

Much of the new emotionality is structured around the principles of sensibility: attention to the suffering and needs of others; an emphasis on care and affection; a stress on the 'social feelings' of virtue, compassion, and charity – all directed outward to fellow human beings, familial and beyond, as recipients. Pity becomes the overarching concept of the age just as perhaps the notion of 'justice' dominates our own. In its turning of attention onto others, and in its heightened or excessive emotionality, it becomes possible to see how this particular range of emotions – sensibility as a social phenomenon – facilitates the construction of a productive, modern subject.

Sensibility, then, can be understood as a mechanism of circulation for the cultural changes and shifting relationships that helped formulate modernity's humanist being. A particular emotion or set of emotions, operating as a structure of feeling, infuses social identities, such as gender and class, at the specific historical juncture in which it takes shape. In the relationality of emotions and identities, meanings are forged, changed, exchanged, struggled over, and contested. Such contestation occurs, in part, through the realignment of emotional meanings and, therefore, in altered conceptions of self and social identity. Shifting socioemotional meanings enable subjects to take up positions that have become newly available to them.

Understanding sensibility as a structure of feeling helps explain how power is circulated, in that emotions link the individual subject to social structures and discursive events. Structures of feeling are cultural practices that participate in the production and exchange of social meanings and power differentials. A

structure of feeling offers or compels ways for people to live in the world, to function in society as social beings (Harding and Pribram 2004, 868-870). Emotions circulate meanings, transmit social relations, and help constitute diverse identities, bringing into being relations among individuals, and between individuals and social structures (Harding and Pribram 2009). In this understanding, emotions are a mode of exchange through which specific subject positions become possible or impossible. Emotions circulate, create, and subordinate and, in doing so, they constitute both subjects and social formations.

The onset of modernity required not just a knowing but a feeling being. Feelings were in the mainstream of Enlightenment existence, critical to the project of developing an emotionally as well as a bodily and rationally disciplined individual. The objective wasn't to render emotions absent, to banish or seclude them, as the all-too frequent conflation of emotions with women and a private sphere would suggest. Quite the opposite: emotions were enhanced and socialized, developed in specific directions in order to construct and sustain a properly-behaving, deeply caring individual of feeling. This is indicated by the pervasiveness of sensibility across the social landscape – its role in the formation of economic, political, and philosophical discourses, as much as domestic ones. Contemporary scholars repeatedly speak of sensibility's influence across the social formation and of its importance to concepts, such as sociability, which defined the age and identified its individual members. Even the most ostensibly private of feelings were earmarked for social display. Tears, shed by both men

and women, were a “liquid commodity” that was meant to be shared, mingled, and exchanged (Vincent-Buffault 1991, 17).

The age’s new individualism required a new stress on interiority. Interiority is what identified the individual subject as separate, coherent, and unified. A self-conscious interiority, in turn, demanded a revaluation of emotion. A humanist sense of interiority consists in existing as a conscious, rationally thinking being but, also, in experiencing oneself (and others) as a feeling being, in having feelings and in being self-aware of having them. Sensibility involved an almost continuous process of self-examination; it entailed maintaining constant *oversight* of one’s affective feelings, behaviors, expressions, and displays.

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[1] Although it should be noted that until this era emotions were not yet considered in distinction from physical sensation. In the Renaissance, feelings could also be attributed to plants, metals, and other objects as well as to humans (Hooper-Greenhill 1995, 34).

[2] Most commentators use the terms 'sentiment' or 'sentimental' interchangeably with 'sensibility' (Barker-Benfield 1992, xvii; C. Jones 1993, 5; Todd 1986, 6-7, 9; Ellison 1999, 6) and the OED describes them as eighteenth-century synonyms. In *Keywords*, Raymond Williams notes that it is only with the nineteenth century that 'sentimental' takes on the meaning, to feel excessively or to indulge one's emotions. 'Sensibility' largely escaped this negative connotation in the nineteenth century, although it was

increasingly relegated to describe one cultural arena only: the field of aesthetics (1985, 282).

[3] For more information on Williams' analysis of structure of feeling, see Harding and Pribram, 2009; 2004.

[4] See Langford for an explanation of the complex of peoples who composed the middle classes (1989, 61-62), and for a description of the new developing economy (2-3).

[5] Although Barker-Benfield cites Langford regarding the striking legal reforms at the end of the century, the attribution of women's significant role in the reform movements is Barker-Benfield's. Langford speaks almost exclusively of male reformers (1989, 482-487), as does Stone (1977, 266). In a view closer to Barker-Benfield's, Todd notes that social reform issues in sentimental drama and poetry were largely the purview of women playwrights and poets (1986, 41, 60).

[6] These examples are part of a general increase in socialization between women and men (Barker-Benfield 1992, 249; Johnson 1995, 13). Langford also cites assemblies as a significant forum for "social and sexual mixing" with activities such as cards, dancing, and conversation (1989, 101). For a broader view of the complex social, economic, class, and ideological implications of the new leisure industries and the commercialization of pleasure, see Porter, "Enlightenment and Pleasure," (1996). Also meriting attention is Marie Mulvey Roberts examination of the rise of homosocial clubs in which she argues that the activities experienced at the new clubs were a mix of public and private and that women as well as men formed such clubs (1996).