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Dale McDaniel

Henry Mackenzie's Harley: A Reaction Against Commercialism

The narrator of Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) introduces Harley, its title character, in the chapter entitled "Of worldly interests" by hinting at a deficiency in Harley's character that makes him ill-suited for participating in a society based on commercialism and self-preservation. When introducing Harley, the narrator makes the following observation:

> Indeed I have observed one ingredient, somewhat necessary in a man's composition towards happiness, which people of feeling would do well to acquire; a certain respect for the follies of mankind: for there are so many fools whom the opinion of the world entitles to regard, whom accident has placed in heights of which they are unworthy, that he who cannot restrain his contempt or indignation at the sight, will be too often quarrelling with the disposal of things, to relish that share which is allotted to himself.[1]

Mackenzie's narrator warns the readers that those who believe that benevolent actions will reap rewards for the bestowers will be sadly disillusioned by the economic advancements of those who have no sympathy for the less fortunate. Although some upwardly mobile individuals seem to believe that they deserve their social positions because they have worked hard or made shrewd investments, the narrator points out that these individuals' good fortune is often the

[1]Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers (London, 1967), p. 11. Henceforth Mackenzie.

result of an accident of birth or of simply being at the right place at the right time. Therefore, social position is not a reward for someone's goodness but a result of purely random occurrences.

In the economic world of eighteenth-century Britain, success in commercial activities required the use of disguise and subterfuge, regardless of any negative consequences on other people. If a man had benevolent feelings toward others, these feelings often placed him at a disadvantage in the commercial world. In Mackenzie's work, the sincerity and benevolence of "men of feeling," such as Harley, who believe that they have a social obligation to protect those less fortunate than themselves, make them unable to act in their own self-interests. In his representation of Harley, Mackenzie takes a nostalgic look into the past for a hero who represents the older medieval ideals that those in positions of authority, the aristocracy in particular, had an obligation to assist the less fortunate in their times of need. However, as with most nostalgic representations, this one does not accurately represent the social relationships as they had existed in the past and that can be summed up with the term "noblesse oblige." Instead, Mackenzie's representation of Harley is a reaction against the social changes brought about by commercialism. The narrator makes a sharp distinction between men of feeling, such as Harley, who saw the artificiality and affectation associated with the increase in commercialism in Great Britain in the eighteenth century as negative qualities and those who welcomed these qualities as necessary for economic survival. This lack of competitiveness manifests itself in Harley as an inability to act in his own self-interests and leads to his attributes of physical and emotional weakness.

Within the economic world represented in *The Man of Feeling*, those who are not motivated by economic self-interest are labeled as "romantic" and as not being able to function in the world. In this context *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives the following definitions for "romantic" that were current from the late fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries: "of a fabulous or fictitious character; having no foundation in fact"; "having no real existence: imaginary; purely ideal"; "readily influenced by the imagination"; "appealing to the imagination and feelings." Even though the term has a negative connotation, Harley is quite satisfied with being labeled as "romantic" or "melancholy" and seems to have little regard for the practical consideration of obtaining wealth through either commerce or marriage.

Anyone who was not motivated by economic self-interest and who did not disregard the rights and feelings of others was a romantic and could not function in the world because he did not have the ability to participate in the rising commercialism of eighteenth-century Britain. John Mullan argues that, in *The Man of Feeling*, Mackenzie "sets feeling...against an impervious 'world' which is the cause of every misery" rather than providing specific commercial

interests as villains.[2] Thomas R. Preston comments "Harley's lack of respect for [the] follies [of the world] invariably places him in [the] painful situations" in which he finds himself.[3] In his death speech, Harley judges the world harshly as he describes it as "a scene of dissimulation, of restraint, of disappointment" and "is in general selfish, interested, and unthinking, and throws the imputation of romance or melancholy on every temper more susceptible than its own" (Mackenzie, pp. 127-8). Although Harley suggests in his death speech that his disillusionment with eighteenth-century British culture has led only to melancholy, he seems to be bordering on misanthropy.[4] However, the world, not Harley, equates romance with melancholy and both romance and melancholy with sensibility; all of these feelings then contradict the requirement of self-preservation needed for successful commercial activities.

Many readers of the work have seen Harley as a positive example of "a man of feeling" for other men to emulate. However, two Scottish writers closely associated with Mackenzie, Robert Burns and Walter Scott, were unable to reconcile Harley as an exemplar of a man of feeling with the practicality that was necessary for economic survival. While admiring Mackenzie's work, both Burns and Scott express concern that the man of feeling as a character type, as Maureen Harkin puts it, is "at odds with practical social requirements."[5] Writing to Mrs. Dunlap in 1790, Burns expresses his concern that Harley's sensibility may negatively affect young men when they are involved in commercial activities.[6] Furthermore, in 1825 when Mackenzie was 80 years old, Scott emphatically states that Mackenzie was quite unlike Harley in terms of both his physical characteristics and his philosophy.[7]

Late twentieth-century critics have also questioned the relevance of sentimental fiction, in general, and Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, in particular, to the rising commercialism of eighteenth-century Britain. During that time, British writers of sentimental fiction compiled and communicated to their

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[2]John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1988), p. 122.

[3]Thomas R. Preston, *Not in Timon's Manner: Feeling, Misanthropy, and Satire in Eighteenth-Century England* (University, AL, 1975), pp. 26-7. Henceforth Preston.

[4]See Preston, pp. 26-7.

[5]Maureen Harkin, "Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*: Embalming Sensibility," *ELH*, 61 (1994), 320. Henceforth Harkin.

[6]*The Letters of Robert Burns*, 2nd edn., ed. G. Ross Roy, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985), II, 25.

[7]Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott from the Original Manuscript at Abbotsford*, 2 vols. (New York, 1890), I, 35.

readers "a code of ethics based on sensibility." These writers believed that the traditional social relations had been displaced by "the fragmentation of an increasingly complex and specialized society, a commercialism that challenged traditional forms of social filiation, and [in the case of Scottish writers] Scotland's loss of sovereignty with the Act of Union" (Harkin, pp. 317-8). Raymond Williams describes this model of social change: "what seems an old order, a 'traditional' society, keeps appearing, reappearing, at bewilderingly various dates...as an idea...against which contemporary change can be measured."[8] Following this argument then, writers such as Mackenzie were supplying "appropriate regulations and models of emulation in their texts." The critics who see *The Man of Feeling* as "an attempt to provide a model of practical morality for contemporaries in the figure of ...Harley" then see the work as a failure because of Harley's "general powerlessness and too-exacting standards,"[9] which make him unable to act in ways that would be of economic benefit to himself.

Mackenzie represents Harley as a part of an older established way of life that is succumbing to a newer economy based on commercialism. Williams refers to this nostalgia for an older established way of life as "an idealisation of feudal and immediately post-feudal values: of an order based on settled and reciprocal social and economic relations of an avowedly total kind," (p. 35) an older order against which the volatile atmosphere in the new eighteenth-century marketplace could be compared. Mackenzie's representation of Harley provides an outlet for the nostalgia felt during the century for a return to an older social order based on benevolent social relationships. At times Mackenzie supports this return to an older social order through his critique of the negative effects of commercialism on Harley and on other displaced members of the eighteenth-century British social order. In this respect, Mackenzie seems to be yearning for a return to an idealized past in which a benevolent social order protected the less fortunate. Harley's death at the end of the novel, then, represents "more than that of a solitary individual"; it also represents "the passing of a way of life." Mackenzie decries the "forces of modern innovation, taste and commercialism" and focuses on ruined buildings and ruined, frag-

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[8]Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973), p. 35. Henceforth Williams.

[9]Harkin, pp. 317-19. C. J. M. Machlachlan's review of Harkin's "Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*: Embalming Sensibility" in *Scottish Literary Journal: The Year's Work in Scottish Literary and Linguistic Studies 1993/1994*, ed. W. F. H. Nicolaisen (Glasgow, 1997), 43, remarks that Harkin's article "is a useful corrective to the modern enthusiasm for seeing *The Man of Feeling* as a fictionalisation of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*." However, he points out the paradox of Harkin's main point that "*The Man of Feeling* is a novel instructing the reader against the novel as instruction, especially as that novel was immensely popular and imitated."

mentary manuscripts—images often associated with the romanticism of times past (Harkin, pp. 322-5). These images provide the focal point for the nostalgia that a man of feeling has for past social values. For example, Harley's reaction to the destruction of his former schoolhouse to improve the estate owner's view—similar to that in Goldsmith's "Deserted Village" (1770)—reveals his distaste for the destruction of the older social relations between landlords and tenants.

The fictional editor of *The Man of Feeling* tells the reader that those who equate happiness with "power, wealth, or grandeur" label those who do not agree with this philosophy as "romantic" (Mackenzie, p. 10). Therefore, in Mackenzie's view, the rising commercial interests were contributing to "coarsening manners and corrupting morals" in eighteenth-century Britain (Harkin, p. 324). These commercial interests were helping break down the economic and social relations which Mackenzie and others in Great Britain of the 1760's and '70's saw as traditional. Harley is the sole representative of the man of feeling in Mackenzie's work, except possibly for Old Edwards. Even on his rural Scottish estate, Harley is surrounded by friends who are "enthusiastic advocates for the forces producing the consumerist revolution of eighteenth-century Britain" and undertakes his trip to London in search of economic advancement only at their insistence.[10] Although in *The Man of Feeling* Mackenzie extols traditional social relations, Harley does not consciously identify with the aristocracy of which he is a part. Like other men of feeling, he communicates and sympathizes with all of the social classes he encounters during his travels, including prostitutes, lunatics, and beggars. He criticizes contemporary social problems but does not base his criticism on the loss of aristocratic privileges. Instead he sees these problems as resulting from a lack of the "principles of humanity and virtue" (Harkin, pp. 327-8).

Through Harley, Mackenzie strongly attacks the British imperial and commercial policy in India, one of the earliest and most severe on record according to Harkin (pp. 102-3). Brian Vickers points out that not until two years after the publication of *The Man of Feeling* did "the first Parliamentary report of Indian affairs [appear], and this took a fairly neutral attitude" (Mackenzie, p. 137). Seventeen years later, in 1788, Edmund Burke delivered his speech of indictment against Warren Hastings for his misconduct in India. Mackenzie, however, maintains an ambiguous attitude toward Harley's idealism and reliance on benevolence as a universal sign of humanity. The fragment of the chapter in which Harley severely castigates British policy in India is entitled "The Man of Feeling talks of what he does not understand—An in-

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[10]Harkin, pp. 322-5. Williams views the "idea of a 'traditional' order" as misleading, especially when the innocence of past stages is "contrasted with the ruthlessness of subsequent stages." The transformation of the ownership of rural property consisted of "complicated jealousies and bitterness" in a "shifting and relative historical process" (p. 50).

cident." Immediately after Harley's attack on British policy in India, Mackenzie subverts Harley's expression of sympathy toward the victims of British colonialism and trade as well as Harley's disdain for those who had profited from that policy when Old Edwards reminds Harley of the potential for all men to choose self-aggrandizement rather than beneficence. The text of *The Man of Feeling* supports "Harley's social analyses" quite well; therefore, it also supports Harley as "an ideal of sentiment and action." However, "one of the notable characteristics of *The Man of Feeling* is the extent to which it simultaneously endorses and subverts Harley's position" (Harkin, p. 326). Mackenzie's inclusion of both sides of this discourse about British imperialism indicates that he was not entirely comfortable with either position. Mackenzie's ambiguous, or even parodic, stance toward Harley's excessive benevolence and lack of worldly wisdom results from the presumed author/narrator, as opposed to Mackenzie himself, characterizing Harley, in the title of this chapter, as talking of what he does not understand. The title then can be read in two ways: that Harley does not understand the British colonial policy in India and, therefore, his condemnation is inaccurate; or that Harley is completely unlike the majority of his fellow men and does not understand the power of the motive of self-aggrandizement. Even as Mackenzie admires Harley's beliefs, he represents them as out of date and Harley as one of the few remaining men of feeling.

Maureen Harkin concludes her analysis of Harley as a paragon, which many critics believe him to be, by arguing that his position as a remnant of an older social order confers a marginal status on him. However, she goes on to say that this "marginal status [does] not necessarily...undermine Harley's status as a model worthy of emulation." His position outside the rising commercial interests might even be seen as disinterested and as "tending to validate his comments." Harkin relates Harley's character to what Raymond Williams calls "'the residual,' those forces in a culture that, as residues of previous social formations, provide possibilities of difference from and critiques of 'dominant' social forms." (Harkin, p. 329) Even while affirming the social order that is passing away, Mackenzie also calls attention to its inadequacies in dealing with the social problems then current in eighteenth-century Britain through his representation of Harley.

Mackenzie is able to subvert Harley as a model man of feeling through his at times parodic representation, in the sense that Linda Hutcheon describes parody as the "double process of installing and ironizing" through which it "signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference."[11] Old Edwards's comments on the worldly temptations to which most people succumb do not indicate that Mackenzie was opposed to Harley's condemnation of the British

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[11]Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London, 1989), p. 93.

activities in India. However, Mackenzie does indicate that Harley, as a representative man of feeling, should have been more aware than he was that most of his fellow men allow their self-interests (especially as these relate to obtaining wealth) to overpower their benevolent impulses for their fellow humans.

In addition to criticizing the lack of worldly wisdom that contributes to excessive benevolence in a man of feeling, Mackenzie also parodies the negative effects that an excessive sensibility was thought to have on a man's physical well-being. To many eighteenth-century writers of fiction as well as to many physicians, an excessive emotional sensibility to the feelings of other people also indicated a potential for an excessive physical sensibility that could result in illness and even death. The man of feeling was especially prone to nervous diseases because of the belief that the nerves conveyed outside stimuli to both the soul and the brain. Mackenzie draws a close connection between the delicacy of Harley's nerves and both his inability to woo Miss Walton and his death. The editor relates to the reader information from the mutilated parts of the manuscript revealing that Harley had not proposed to Miss Walton, even after she had rejected other suitors, because of a decline in his health brought on by a fever he contracted from Old Edwards. He was unable to recover completely from this fever "and though he had no formed complaint, his health was manifestly on the decline" (Mackenzie, pp. 25-6). The lack of a clear physical diagnosis for Harley's illness indicates that Mackenzie was hinting at a source in Harley's extreme sensibility.

While attributing Harley's inability to declare his romantic interest in Miss Walton to his deteriorating physical health, the editor introduces the idea that the causal relationship may have been just the opposite. A friend points out that he believes that Harley's physical illness is caused by his "hopeless love for Miss Walton; for according to the conceptions of the world, the love of a man of Harley's fortune[12] for the heiress of 4000 l. [*sic*] a-year, is indeed desperate" (Mackenzie, p. 126). This satiric statement indicates that Mackenzie was not entirely in agreement with Harley's failure to propose to Miss Walton. It is the friend's opinion that Harley's love for Miss Walton was hopeless, and the editor clearly indicates that it is the world's opinion that Harley's love for her was desperate.

Because Harley is a man of feeling, the delicate condition of his nerves will not allow him to survive the overpowering emotion of sexualized, romantic love. Mackenzie represents Harley as being unable to survive hearing Miss Walton even hint that she loves him in return, an event that immediately brings about Harley's death. In his last statement before his death, Harley manages to declare his love for Miss Walton, to which she responds with tears "now

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[12]Although Harley was a member of the aristocracy, he was "now possessed of bare 250 l. [*sic*] a year" (Mackenzie, p. 9).

flowing without controul." She tells Harley: "'I know your worth—I have known it long—I have esteemed it—What would you have me say?—I have loved it as it deserved'" (Mackenzie, pp. 130-1). Mackenzie has desexualized Harley's relationship with Miss Walton be representing death as a substitute for sexual union. The presumed author/narrator describes their union and Harley's death as follows:

> He seized her hand—a languid colour reddened his cheek—a smile brightened faintly in his eye. As he gazed on her, it grew dim, it fixed, it closed—He sighed, and fell back on his seat.—Miss Walton screamed at the sight—His aunt and the servants rushed into the room—They found them lying motionless together.—His physician happened to call at that instant.—Every art was tried to recover them—With Miss Walton they succeeded—But Harley was gone for ever! (Mackenzie, pp. 130-1).

The scene is ludicrous to the extent that Harley is physically unable to grasp the one thing he most desires—Miss Walton's love—because his excessive physical and emotional sensibility prevents it. Even taking into consideration the parody in Mackenzie's representation, William Burling argues that "Mackenzie is dead serious about the merits of these odd lovers." He points out that "Miss Walton and Harley are both at heart sincere and virtuous, and while each has more than a fair share of social defects and personal foibles, the point remains that they are far from being held up as total failures."[13]

Harley defends his right to decide for himself the propriety of his philosophy of benevolence, even if this philosophy is at odds with the culture of which he is a part and which ultimately contributes to his death. As a man of feeling, he must rely on his own private judgments of the appropriateness of his feelings and actions because the characters who represent the world are motivated only by self-interest and are incapable of adequately understanding a man of feeling. The worldly characters' only response to the man of feeling, according to Harley, is to label him as romantic or melancholy. G. A. Starr believes that "Harley's spontaneity, naivete, and innocence," or in other words his lack of worldliness, cause the reader to wish to identify with Harley "despite (or perhaps because of) [his/her] own compromised, inhibited worldliness."[14] In *The Man of Feeling* only Harley exhibits virtue, and this virtue not only sets

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[13]William J. Burling, "A 'sickly sort of refinement': The Problem of Sentimentalism in Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*," *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 23 (1988), 144. Burling also summarizes the "opposing and apparently irreconcilable camps" of critical responses to Mackenzie's work in depth and reaches his own conclusion that Mackenzie's writings "simultaneously advocate humane sensibility...but at the same time they scorn the cult of sentimentalism" (p. 138-40).

[14]G. A. Starr, "'Only a Boy': Notes on Sentimental Novels," *Genre*, 10 (1977), 514.

him above the worldly characters but also makes him vulnerable to the machinations of the world.

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