



UNIVERSITATEA BABEȘ-BOLYAI  
BABEȘ-BOLYAI TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM  
BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITÄT  
BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY  
TRADITIO ET EXCELLENTIA



Facultatea de Litere  
Str. Horea nr. 3  
400202, Cluj-Napoca  
Tel: 0264 532238  
Fax: 0264 432303  
E-mail: [lett@lett.ubbcluj.ro](mailto:lett@lett.ubbcluj.ro)

# Rethinking the Sentimental Eighteenth Century

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[studia.philologia@lett.ubbcluj.ro](mailto:studia.philologia@lett.ubbcluj.ro)

## Guest editors

Dr. Andrew Rudd, University of Exeter, UK

[A.Rudd@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:A.Rudd@exeter.ac.uk)

Dr. Dragoș Ivana, University of Bucharest, Romania

[dragos.ivana@lils.unibuc.ro](mailto:dragos.ivana@lils.unibuc.ro)

The eighteenth-century popularity of the term “sentiment” is indisputable. Along with its cognate terms “feeling” and “affect”, it was expressive of what early modern philosophers called “calm emotions”, which they radically opposed to “passions”, considered to be the violent, unrestrained and unreasonable version of the former. Apart from its in-depth exploration in philosophical treatises which theorised “sentiment” in tight relation with epistemology, ethics and aesthetics, the term was crucial to advancing medical theories about physical sensations and the human mind and, by extension, to understanding the profile and cultural background of eighteenth-century Western European societies. Various disciplines thus articulated the language of feeling which was inevitably borrowed by literature and the arts in the latter half of the century.

Deemed as a passage from the collapse of reason to the advent of Romanticism heralded by the French Revolution, the literature of sensibility extolled emotions as a staple diet which encompassed somatic responses (tears and faints), sympathy, moral feeling, melancholy and virtue in distress. At the same time, Henry Mackenzie portrayed sensibility as “a science of manners” in 1780, which was engaged in bringing individuals together in the public sphere through a language of the heart that pushed them to perform benevolent acts of generosity. Sensibility thus cultivated sociability as fundamental to what David Hume has called “the Science of Man”, according to which our passions overrule reason and are held accountable for our actions. Although criticized for excessive sentimentality and exquisite emotions, sensibility has been understood as an arena of critical debates about moral consciousness and the ability to act properly in accordance with sentimental ethics.

Recent advances in the history of emotions, however, allow us to reconsider sensibility as a “biocultural” (Boddice, 2020) phenomenon that is simultaneously embodied, but also situated, mediated and constructed. We must weigh the period’s conception of sensibility as an innate feature of human physiology that only requires cultivation against the particular historical moment in which it arose. Indeed, now is a time when the entire edifice of eighteenth-century culture, sensibility included, is being reappraised and reconfigured. How does recent scholarly work bear on existing accounts of eighteenth-century sensibility? How do the period’s frequent claims of the universal nature of sentiment, feeling and affect measure up against new and emerging critical contexts and the multiplicity of perspectives available to us today?

In this light, the present issue aims to reevaluate the eighteenth-century culture of feeling founded on the conflation of moral philosophical, literary, medical, political, economic and legal theories. Contributions which draw upon new and emerging scholarly methods and build upon academic writing from past decades are encouraged. Papers in English and French should focus on cross currents between literature and other disciplines in order to refresh our understanding of both theories and representations of sensibility across eighteenth-century Europe. Topics include, but are not limited, to the following:

- rethinking eighteenth-century affective theory
- the relationship between sentiment and ethics/epistemology/aesthetics
- the novel of sentiment
- the new cult of sensibility epitomised by the Man of Feeling
- the pre-Romantic poetry of sensibility
- the sentimental drama
- sentiment and economics/gender relations
- generosity and benevolence as suggestive of the language of the heart
- public and private emotions
- philanthropy and sensibility
- global sentiments and sensibilities
- sensibility and sentiment today
- sentiment and national identity/ies

### Indicative Bibliography:

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### Timeline

- 10 February 2023 – proposal submission deadline (200-word abstract, 7 keywords, 5 theoretical references, 150-word author's bio-note)
- 15 February 2023 – notification about acceptance
- 31 May 2023 – submission of full papers (Instructions for authors regarding formatting rules and style sheets can be found on the journal's webpage: [http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/serii/philologia/pdf/Instructions\\_En.pdf](http://studia.ubbcluj.ro/serii/philologia/pdf/Instructions_En.pdf))
- 30 September 2023 – publication of the special-themed issue

Please send your abstracts and papers to the following email addresses:

- [studia.philologia@lett.ubbcluj.ro](mailto:studia.philologia@lett.ubbcluj.ro)
- [a.rudd@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:a.rudd@exeter.ac.uk)
- [dragos.ivana@lts.unibuc.ro](mailto:dragos.ivana@lts.unibuc.ro)