

# An Attempt to Apply Motoori Norinaga's Concept of *Mono no Aware* to the Novels of Jane Austen

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The Japanese literary scholar Motoori Norinaga (1730-1801) developed an aesthetic of *mono no aware* based largely on his close reading and innovative interpretation of Murasaki Shikibu's 11th-century novel **The Tale of Genji** and posited the expression of *mono no aware* as the greatest goal of literature. While it is a difficult undertaking to apply a concept so deeply rooted in one literary tradition to novels of a different culture, Norinaga himself believed a sense of *aware* to be a universal human quality and an analysis on the basis of his ideas related to *mono no aware*, despite inevitable limitations and contradictions, provides vivid potential to examine his conception of literature as well as an opportunity to explore the themes of Jane Austen in a fresh and meaningful way.

Among Norinaga's three main literary concepts of *makoto*, *fuuga*, and *mono no aware*<sup>1)</sup>, the last is the most important and to some degree represents a culmination of the ideas expressed in his writings concerning *makoto* and *fuuga*. Norinaga was the first scholar to notice the extremely frequent use of the term *aware* in **The Tale of Genji**. (It occurs 1,044 times.) On the basis of his observations Norinaga interpreted **The Tale of Genji** according to this term and undertook an extensive examination of the meaning of *aware*, tracing the origin of the word back to two separate words, *a* and *hare*, exclamations used when one sees or hears something which stirs one's heart:

"*Aware* originally is the lamentation one emits when one feels in one's heart something one has seen or heard, and in our contemporary words also we express this by the words *a* and *hare*."<sup>2)</sup>

Although *aware* first indicated a spontaneous utterance emitted when

one's heart was moved by a profound emotion, including happiness, surprise, fear, and disgust, it had come to be used almost exclusively in connection with sadness. By Norinaga's day this tendency had grown more marked, and a new, derivative term, *appare*, had appeared to indicate happier emotion.

Although the term *mono no aware*, meaning the *aware* of things, occurs only 14 times in **The Tale of Genji**, Norinaga selected this term rather than *aware* as his concept in an effort to distinguish it from purely sad connotations. In his writings Norinaga repeatedly emphasizes the aspect of depth of emotion regardless of its type and further suggests that an appropriate way of writing *aware* would be to use the Chinese character for sense (感).<sup>3)</sup>

Having defined *mono no aware* as that which moves one to a profundity of feeling, Norinaga considers the concept in relation to literature in general with particular reference to **The Tale of Genji**. According to Norinaga, good literature has two necessary characteristics; it must join depth of heart with beautiful words<sup>4)</sup> and he states explicitly that its purpose is the expression of a variety of feelings evoked through experiences, to console the bored or nervous mind, and above all, to elicit *mono no aware*:

“If one asks what the aim of tales is, or for what purpose one reads them, it is to express all the variety and features of the good things, bad things, unusual things, funny things, and things possessing *aware*, in this world, inserting illustrations, to serve as a plaything for the hours of tedium and boredom, to while the times of gloom or anxiety, to have good knowledge of the world, and to know *mono no aware*.”<sup>5)</sup>

Again:

“All tales are expressions of what is in the world, the conditions of man and hearts; therefore when reading them one spontaneously comes to apprehend the state of mankind.”<sup>6)</sup>

In remarkably similar words, Jane Austen inserts the author's voice into **Northanger Abbey** in defense of novels:

“‘Oh! It is only a novel!’ replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame. . . . ‘It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda;’ or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.”<sup>7)</sup>

Certainly many 18th and 19th century English novelists display a panoply of full-blown emotions. Norinaga, however, asserts that *aware* requires subtlety in its expression and condemns those who, slightly sensing *mono no aware*, display their reaction wholeheartedly. *Aware* involves the sense of something being held back, of unknown depths of human emotion. Norinaga quotes from **The Tale of Genji**:

“When one deliberately tries to show one’s tender feelings, one is doing a terrible thing . . . Showing another person all of what one senses only slightly is regrettable . . . Generally one should display an unknowing face on that which one knows in one’s heart, and even in the things which one wants to say, it is preferable to keep back and refrain from saying one or two things.”<sup>8)</sup>

Noginaga states that the deeper one’s feelings, and the more they are confined in one’s heart, the greater the *aware*. Feelings are delicate things; no matter how sincere they may be, if expressed too freely, they become “laughable” (かたはらいたくこそ) as Norinaga quotes Murasaki no Ue in **The Tale of Genji**.<sup>9)</sup>

Captain Benwick is certainly a comic figure in **Persuasion** as he wallows in his sorrow at the death of his fiancée, Fanny Harville, while discussing poetry with Anne:

“For though shy, he did not seem reserved; it had rather the appearance of feelings glad to burst their usual restraints . . . he repeated, with such tremulous feeling, the various lines which imaged a broken heart, or a mind destroyed by wretchedness, and looked so entirely as if he meant to

be understood, that she ventured to hope that he did not always read only poetry; and to say that she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly."<sup>10)</sup>

Benwick thrives on his feelings of romantic loss, expressing them eagerly. Yet Anne is only momentarily surprised to hear of his engagement soon after to Louisa Musgrove, reflecting to herself that she had suspected he was not inconsolable.<sup>11)</sup> Benwick subsequently shows a complete lack of sensitivity when he asks Captain Harville, Fanny's brother, to set a miniature portrait, originally intended for Fanny, in order to give it to Louisa.

Unlike Benwick who is quick to give passionate voice to his rather puny feelings, Norinaga emphasizes that a true sense of *aware* requires time in the heart to gain intensity:

"In this way, knowing, one acts unknowing. One locks it tight within so that still more one's thoughts are tied tightly to one's heart and *aware* deepens."<sup>12)</sup>

Fanny, in **Mansfield Park**, particularly refrains from expressing her deepest emotions. Even when she learns that she will be able to return to visit her family who she has not seen since age 10, she is outwardly subdued:

"Had she ever given way to bursts of delight, it must have been then, for she was delighted, but her happiness was of a quiet, deep, heart-swelling sort; and though never a great talker, she was always more inclined to silence when feeling most strongly. At the moment she could only thank and accept. Afterwards, when familiarized with the visions of enjoyment so suddenly opened, she could speak more largely to William and Edmund of what she felt; but still there were emotions of tenderness that could not be clothed in words."<sup>13)</sup>

Fanny's suppressed emotion and her sense that some things must remain unsaid closely parallel Norinaga's ideal of *aware*. She feels fully her

happiness at the prospect of returning home yet is reluctant to give full vent to it.

Jane Austen's heroines are full of restrained feeling; indeed it is this energy which propels the novels more than any explicit outward action. Yet as Barbara Hardy notes:

"Throughout the nineteenth century, when passion was assumed to be a required constituent of novels, and indeed in the twentieth century too, one can find repeated complaints that it was not to be found in Jane Austen. Strong feeling, emotional depth, sublimity, elevation, and soul, critics objected or admitted, are absent in her six major novels."<sup>14)</sup>

Critics could not find passion in Austen's novels because they were looking for overt, obvious patterns whereas Austen gives her main characters a complete range of feelings but in a form which is marked for subtlety and complexity in a manner corresponding to Norinaga's *aware*.

Nonetheless, it is hard to believe that Austen's characters could be thought to lack strong feeling when one considers such passages as the following from **Persuasion** when Anne meets Captain Wentworth for the first time since she turned down his proposal of marriage eight years earlier:

"Mary talked but she could not attend. She had seen him. They had met. They had once more been in the same room!

Soon, however, she began to reason with herself, and try to be feeling less. Eight years, almost eight years had passed since all had been given up. How absurd to be resuming the agitation which such an interval had banished into distance and indistinctness! What might not eight years do? Events of every description, changes, alienations, removals, — all must be comprised in it; and oblivion of the past — how natural, how certain too! It included nearly a third part of her own life.

Alas! with all her reasonings, she found, that to retentive feelings eight years may be little more than nothing."<sup>15)</sup>

The feelings of Austen's heroines are not confined to love and familial feelings. When Fanny in **Mansfield Park** receives a proposal of marriage from Mr. Crawford, to whom she is beholden for her brother William's promotion but who she knows to be inconstant in his affections, Austen describes her emotions in the following way:

"She was feeling, thinking, trembling, about every thing; — agitated, happy, miserable, infinitely obliged, absolutely angry. It was all beyond belief! He was inexcusable, incomprehensible!"<sup>16)</sup>

It is especially in **Mansfield Park** and **Persuasion** that Austen portrays her heroines from the start as highly perceptive regarding their own feelings and those around them. The author draws attention to Fanny's subtlety of perception in comparison with the character of Miss Crawford:

"Miss Crawford was very unlike her. She had none of Fanny's delicacy of taste, of mind, of feeling . . ." <sup>17)</sup>

Anne is similarly described as possessing an "elegance of mind"<sup>18)</sup> and a "delicacy which must be pained by any lightness of conduct in a well-meaning young woman, and a heart to sympathize in any of the sufferings it occasioned."<sup>19)</sup>

Elizabeth in **Pride and Prejudice**, on the other hand, is "arch" in her behavior.<sup>20)</sup> Yet Austen appears to characterize her in this way to further heighten the effect when Elizabeth realizes the mistakes she has made in judgment regarding Mr. Darcy and Mr. Wickham:

"How despicably have I acted!' she cried. — 'I, who have prided myself on my discernment! . . . Till this moment, I never knew myself.'" <sup>21)</sup>

Elizabeth's self-knowledge is suffused with an ironic regret that remains unvoiced to others, as Mr. Darcy who she formerly disliked takes leave of her:

"As he quitted the room, Elizabeth felt how improbable it was that they

should ever see each other again on such terms of cordiality as had marked their several meetings in Derbyshire; and as she threw a retrospective glance over the whole of their acquaintance, so full of contradictions and varieties, sighed at the perverseness of those feelings which would have now promoted its continuance, and would formerly have rejoiced in temination."<sup>22)</sup>

As embodiments of sensitivity, Anne and Fanny are also shown to respond to nature. In going to Bath, Anne's chief regret is that she must "forego all the influences so sweet and sad of the autumnal months in the country."<sup>23)</sup>

Fanny gives voice to her most ebullient declaration when gazing out the window in the evening with Edmund:

"'Here's harmony!' said she. 'here's repose! Here's what may leave all paintings and all music behind, and what poetry can only attempt to describe. Here's what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither wickedness nor sorrow in the world...'"<sup>24)</sup>

In contrast, it is Marianne, the heroine's sister, in **Sense and Sensibility** who bursts out enthusiastically about the fallen leaves at their previous home at Norland to Edward who was there a month previously while Elinor attempts to wryly tone down her passion:

"'And how does dear, dear Norland look?' cried Marianne.

'Dear, dear Norland,' said Elinor, 'probably looks much as it always does at this time of year. The woods and walks thickly covered with dead leaves.'

'Oh!' cried Marianne, 'with what transporting sensations have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me in the wind! What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired! Now there is no one to regard them. They are

seen only as a nuisance, swept hastily off, and driven as much as possible from the sight.'

'It is not everyone,' said Elinor, 'who has your passion for dead leaves.'"<sup>25)</sup>

While Elinor is scathing in her comment she is reacting to her mother and Marianne's tendency to deliberately agitate their feelings to the highest degree of escalation possible, as seen in this example following the death of Mr. Dashwood:

"Elinor saw, with concern, the excess of her sister's sensibility; but by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future."<sup>26)</sup>

When Mr. Willoughby leaves for London Marianne again intentionally indulges her emotion by playing only the music and reading only the books that she and Mr. Willoughby had enjoyed together in a "nourishment of grief" against the onset of a calmer melancholy.<sup>27)</sup>

Not only does Marianne give free rein to her emotions, she moreover condemns effort to suppress feelings, making her the antithesis of Norinaga's vision of *aware*:

"Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to common-place and mistaken notions."<sup>28)</sup>

Against the backdrop of Marianne's excesses, Elinor's emotions at times appear diminished or even non-existent, yet Austen does show her to keenly feel the loss of Norland<sup>29)</sup> and describes her sorrow and shock upon hearing



of Edward's secret engagement to Lucy who has given him a token of her affection:

“... Perhaps you might notice the ring when you saw him?”

‘I did;’ said Elinor, with a composure of voice, under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond anything she had ever felt before. She was mortified shocked, confounded.”<sup>30)</sup>

Austen's touch is rather lighter and more humorous in **Emma** and **Northanger Abbey** as the heroines are often unaware of what is going on underneath the surface of social niceties and make blunders in judgment based on their own imaginative leanings. Nonetheless, both Catherine in **Northanger Abbey** and Emma do become more sensitive in the course of the novels.

For Catherine, it is the fact of being turned out of General Tilney's home that is the impetus for her setting aside of childish flights of imagination and engaging in real sentiment:

“Heavily passed the night. Sleep, or repose that deserved the name of sleep, was out of the question. That room, in which her disturbed imagination had tormented her on her arrival, was again the scene of agitated spirits and unquiet slumbers. Yet how different now the source of her inquietude from what it had been then — how mournfully superior in reality and substance!”<sup>31)</sup>

In **Emma** the character who most appears to feel strongly and yet restrain herself from its expression is Jane Fairfax rather than Emma. Emma, who cannot understand her, considers her disgustingly, suspiciously reserved<sup>32)</sup> until the scene where Jane in great agitation leaves the gathering at Donwell Abbey, arousing Emma's sympathy although she misinterprets the cause of Jane's distress.

Like Elizabeth in **Pride and Prejudice**, Emma has a moment of self-realization which leaves her less buoyant but more capable of true feeling:

“When it came to such a pitch as this, she was not able to refrain from a start, or a heavy sigh, or even from walking about the room for a few seconds; and the only source whence anything like consolation or composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone.”<sup>33)</sup>

While Anne, Fanny, and Elinor remain unchanged in their essential natures throughout the novels in which they appear, Austen develops the characters of Elizabeth, Catherine, and Emma, bringing them to a state of greater awareness and sympathy so that by the end of her six main novels all of the heroines have experienced a variety of deep emotions which they keep locked in their hearts in a way that fits Norinaga's definition of *mono no aware*.

Nonetheless, Norinaga and Austen part company regarding one significant issue. Norinaga takes *aware* one step further, to emphasize it as the supreme morality in literature.

Norinaga notes that in **The Tale of Genji** Kokiden is cheerfully insensitive to the emperor's sadness at the death of Kiritsubo. Although she is not guilty of any immoral action in the novel she is thoroughly condemned for not “knowing” *aware*. On the other hand, Genji, Fujitsubo, and many others commit adultery yet are considered good on the basis of their sensitivity:

“The tale sets aside Genji's immorality and says almost nothing bad of it, considering those who are against Genji as bad people and making them all people who do not know *mono no aware*. There can be no reason for this other than that Genji is being made into the person who knows *aware* and accordingly is good. If this were a usual essay, in the Confucianist style, Fujitsubo, as a lower-ranking lady than Kokiden, should be portrayed as a worse person than her, but she is portrayed as a model woman, and Kokiden, who commits no injustice, in this way is made into a severely bad person; the tale makes those who know *mono no aware*

central and makes that knowledge into goodness."<sup>34)</sup>

Norinaga never suggests that that knowing *mono no aware* should be the main morality outside of literature but within this realm he believes it paramount.

Austen's main characters are also highly sensitive and those who are insensitive are frequently seen as objects of ridicule or at least not seen as worthy of the heroine's love. Moreover, a central theme of **Persuasion** and **Sense and Sensibility** is that of the heroine remaining steadfast in her love for a man who, though sensitive, is limited in fortune. In the case of Fanny in **Mansfield Park** it is she herself who is seen as completely worthy of her cousin's love despite her humble background.

Notwithstanding this emphasis on sensitivity as a mandatory characteristic overriding the social demands of making a suitable marriage, Austen always further vilifies insensitive suitors by making them additionally immoral, at times shockingly so.

Willoughby in **Sense and Sensibility** seduces Colonel Brandon's niece Eliza leaving her "in a situation of the utmost distress, with no creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address!"<sup>35)</sup> Wickham in **Pride and Prejudice** attempts to elope with Darcy's sister to gain her fortune and wreak revenge against Darcy and later elopes with Elizabeth's sister Lydia in what is also portrayed as an attempt at extortion. Yet again, in **Mansfield Park**, Crawford runs off with Maria, Fanny's married cousin.

The villains of the remaining novels are somewhat milder, but not completely free of guilt: Frank Churchill in **Emma** conceals his engagement to Jane Fairfax, William Elliot in **Persuasion** refuses help to the widow of a man he has led to financial ruin, and John Thorpe in **Northanger Abbey** engages in subterfuge to get Catherine to accompany him on an excursion.

Norinaga values a sense of *mono no aware* in literary characters above moral action. Austen, on the other hand, seems to feel it necessary to have both sensitive and moral characters. For Austen, morality is not enough.

Neither, however, can she approve of sensitivity irrespective of action.

While Austen was certainly unaware of Norinaga's aesthetic of *mono no aware*, her characters feel passionately and yet retain these feelings of love, sorrow, shock, distaste, indignation, and anger unvoiced in their hearts in a manner that directly parallels Norinaga's *aware*. Their one point of difference on the issue of the relative importance of morality, while not insignificant, does not negate the strong emphasis both Norinaga and Austen place on true sensitivity and awareness.

Norinaga describes Murasaki Shikibu and her novel in the following words:

"The writer herself, knowing *mono no aware* very deeply in her heart, and coming into contact with all things, with the hearts and actions of good people and bad, hearing and seeing these things and sensing their meaning, they collected in her heart until she could no longer conceal them and she expressed them in detail through the people in her work: in short, the things she herself thought good or bad, the things she wanted to say, she made those people think and say, and gave vent to her own pent-up heart. This tale contains all the *aware* of the world."<sup>36)</sup>

Such a passage might equally describe Austen and her novels.

### Notes

- 1) Norinaga develops his concepts of *makoto* and *fuuga* in *Uiyamabumi* and *Ashiwake Obune*, Volumes 9 and 10 of *Zouhou Motoori Norinaga Zenshuu*. Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1902.
- 2) Motoori Norinaga, *Tama no Ogushi* (MNZ Vol. 7), p. 490. (Here and elsewhere the translations from the Japanese original are my own.)
- 3) *Ibid.*, p. 491
- 4) Norinaga repeats this assertion frequently in *Ashiwake Obune*.
- 5) *Tama no Ogushi*, pp. 463-464.
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 473
- 7) Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey*. New York: New American Library, 1965, pp. 29-30.
- 8) *Tama no Ogushi*, p. 496
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 497.

- 10) Jane Austen, *Persuasion*. London: Penguin Books, 1965, pp. 121-122.
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 178.
- 12) *Tama no Ogushi*, p. 498.
- 13) Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*. London: Penguin Books, 1966, p. 364
- 14) Barbara Hardy, *A Reading of Jane Austen*. London: The Athlone Press, 1979, p. 37.
- 15) *Persuasion*, p. 85.
- 16) *Mansfield Park*, p. 305.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 110.
- 18) *Persuasion*, p. 37.
- 19) *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 20) Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin Books, 1985, p. 73 and p. 96.
- 21) *Ibid.*, pp. 236-237.
- 22) *Ibid.*, p. 296.
- 23) *Persuasion*, p. 61.
- 24) *Mansfield Park*, p. 139.
- 25) Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*. London: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 77.
- 26) *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 27) *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 28) *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- 29) *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 30) *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 31) *Northanger Abbey*, pp. 189-190.
- 32) Jane Austen, *Emma*. New York: Bantam Classic, 1981, p. 153.
- 33) *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 34) *Tama no Ogushi*, p. 494.
- 35) *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 177.
- 36) *Tama no Ogushi*, p. 503.