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Jane Austen and Marianne Dashwood: Learning Sensibility, Unlearning Tradition

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Today, many of the literary conventions and tropes utilized in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are lost to us; it is understandable, then, that critics have either overlooked or simplified Jane Austen's subtly revolutionary rewriting of the figure of the fallen woman in *Sense and Sensibility*. Literature leading up to Austen's time was often riddled with clichés of the fallen woman: this figure was usually punished for her sexual and social missteppings through disease and death. Austen makes use of such established tropes, as seen in the tale of the Elizas, but with her own aims of undermining this literary tradition. She subverts this convention of punishing the fallen woman through Marianne Dashwood; not only is Marianne allowed to live, but she is allowed to maintain her sensibility even after illness and marriage. Austen creates this new paradigm in light of her representation of Marianne's extravagant sensibility as both taught and reinforced by her culture, and she therefore refuses to punish Marianne as so many women were punished before her.

In her essay "'Only to Sink Deeper': Venereal Disease in *Sense and Sensibility*," Marie McAllister establishes a long literary tradition of the connection between the fallen woman and venereal disease. She raises specific examples of this, including Phillis' death in the anonymously written *Love a la Mode: or, the Amours of Florella and Phillis* and Elizabeth Helme's *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest*. McAllister draws attention to

the fact that for Phillis and Helme's Emma, both prostitutes, death brought on by venereal disease is represented as punishments for their fallen status. McAllister writes that "Phillis warns comely young women against getting lured into a life of prostitution and keeping, which, she says, can result only in 'Ruine and Death'" (90). Moreover, "Emma asserts that 'my punishment, though perhaps not adequate to my faults, has yet been severe; the Hand of God, I am convinced, is upon me,'" and that Emma sank "into the grave, the victim of her own error, and a striking example of the inefficacy of every human endowment without virtue'" (92). The underlying message in both these women's tales is that becoming fallen is the woman's fault, and that the punishment for this fault is disease and death. While many authors during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries do not explicitly reference venereal disease as the cause of death for a fallen woman, McAllister explains, these authors "simply follow the convention under which the fallen woman must die" (94). She argues that the death of the fallen woman was a well-established literary trope by the time Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility.*

Austen herself uses the trope of the fallen woman, and her demise, in the novel. McAllister makes a case in her essay that the elder Eliza, Colonel Brandon's first love and a tragic figure of a good woman gone bad, does not, in fact, die of a "consumption" (179) as Austen writes, but a venereal disease (89). McAllister, however, has examined closely a few words in this long passage on Eliza; other critics have been less than interested in analyzing this section. Barbara Seeber notes in her essay "'I See Every Thing As You Desire Me to Do': The Scolding and Schooling of Marianne Dashwood" that Austen critics have seen the Eliza storyline as "uncomfortably conspicuous," a

"hackneyed tale," a moment at which "Jane Austen's control of her subject collapses utterly," and which "verge[s] on hilarity or acute boredom" (227).

Tara Ghoshal Wallace takes the Eliza tale a bit more seriously in her essay "*Sense and Sensibility* and the Problem of Feminine Authority," but still finds fault with Austen's use of the storyline: "Eliza's sin excludes her from society forever, and Austen's silence about her fate assumes that her expulstion is necessary and appropriate" (155). This silence, I would argue, is intentional on Austen's part. Austen very deliberately plays on what McAllister calls the "convention" of fallen womanhood, and disease and death as punishment for fallenness. Seeber too sees the Eliza story as a strategic move on Austen's part; she contends that "[t]his narrative plays an important function; spilling beyond its frame, it creates a rippling effect that changes the surface of the novel" (227). Austen creates this ripple, this spot of incongruous narration, of silence, to set her readers up for a subversion of the literary convention of a fallen woman's punishment through Marianne.

The parallels between both the elder and younger Elizas and Marianne's situation are obvious. The elder Eliza and Marianne's stories are linked in the mind of readers on several counts: both have lost their loves, both fall fatally (or near-fatally) ill, both are attended to at their bedsides by a loved one, and both are physically transformed by their illness (Eliza is "So altered—so faded, worn down" and is "a melancholy and sickly figure" (179); Marianne recovers from what she lost in the appearance of "her breath, her skin, her lips" (262).) Moreover, the younger Eliza and Marianne share the same seducer, Willoughby. Readers, and, indeed, Marianne herself, are made to take the

stories of the Elizas as a warning, a cautionary tale of what could have become of Marianne had she been even slightly less guarded.

In the introduction to her book *Strange Fits of Passion*, Adela Pinch writes that, conventionally, "[e]xtravagant feelings could...lead women to their ruin" during Austen's time (2). Pinch makes explicit the real danger facing women who ascribe to the kind of emotional extravagance that the Elizas and Marianne demonstrate. The elder Eliza is ruined by her inability to "restrain" (178) her passion, first directed at Colonel Brandon, then, because of her stifling marriage, toward her sexual relationships which lead to her downfall. This results in first her disease, and then her death. The younger Eliza also falls victim to extreme passion, presumably giving in to Willoughby's romancing, only to lose her virtue in the most explicit way; through pregnancy.

Marianne too flirts with these dangers—she tumbles into a giddy, even fanatical, relationship with Willoughby, attaching herself emotionally without the security of an official engagement. Marianne even broaches a sexual exchange with Willoughby; he offers her a horse (the Queen Mab) and she gives him a lock of hair. These "gifts" are presented within the Romantic context of courtship, yet both acts have serious sexual undertones to them. The horse's name is a play on a reference which appears in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and is laden with sexual innuendo. The giving of hair in Austen's novel occurs in private, in fact in secret (except for Margaret's accidental witnessing of it). Willoughby kisses the hair (implying sexual desire) and folds it into his pocketbook (making the connection of marriage and courtship to financial gain clear). While the gifts of horse and hair appear to be Romantic courtship gestures, they are actually riddled with the same sexual undertones which creates the Elizas' fallenness.

When the union between Marianne and Willoughby falls apart, Marianne again demonstrates her intense passion, romantically and painfully longing for Willoughby. She falls ill; yet Marianne does not die, does not contract a venereal disease, and does not become pregnant.

To draw further connection between the Elizas and Marianne, all three women share an emotional sensibility which contributes to their status as fallen women; while Marianne has most likely not fallen sexually, she does "fall" ill. During her illness, Marianne has a rational fall, a loss of control of her senses. She "cries out" with a feverish wildness" (259) that she wants to see her mother, and Elinor worries that Mrs. Dashwood will arrive "too late...to see [Marianne] rational" (261). As she recovers from her illness, Marianne regains her senses (and sense), and is called "rational" (263) again. In this instance, Austen directly links fallenness with loss of rationality; after having already read the tale of the Elizas, readers can draw connection between Marianne's loss of rationality with the Elizas' loss of sexual virtue. Austen has made the jump from sexual fallenness to emotional extravagance (and strengthened the ties between the Elizas and Marinanne) through her language in the scene of Marianne's illness.

Why does Marianne escape from the conventional literary trope of the death of a fallen woman, a trope we know Austen is willing to use in her creation of a novel? McAllister states:

> The melodrama of the elder Eliza's tale helps reinforce the comparison [of Eliza to Marianne]: quite unusually for Austen, the reader has already seen one woman die horribly and so cannot help wondering if Marianne, too, will be destroyed by love. Ultimately, though, the contrasts between the cases prove more important than the similarities. Marianne lives: Austen refuses to punish her, or let her punish herself, with the classic death scene meted out to sentimental heroines who have dared to feel passion. (102-103)

Austen refuses to follow the literary tradition of punishing fallen women, and subsequently punishing them for their sensibility, which is made even more explicit by the fact that she draws on the very tradition which she shatters to contrast her revision of it even further. As McAllister points out, Austen will not crush the passion of her heroine, nor will she crush her heroine for having passion. This is where McAllister's argument ends; the question still remains, however: *why* does Austen refuse to punish Marianne? I would argue that it is because throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen reveals the fact that the extravagant emotions of her time are learned, that they are taught and reinforced in women who are then destroyed because of them.

Even within the first chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, we are told that, although it would be easy to categorize her as such, Marianne is not an empty-headed, emotion-driven and silly girl; she is not "all sensibility." Austen complicates the rigid castes of "sense" and "sensibility," noting that "Marianne's abilities were in many respects quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever, but eager in everything; her sorrows, her joys, could have not moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great" (24). This passage is just one of many examples of a connection drawn between Marianne and her mother, a notoriously emotive character in the novel. In fact, Marianne is implied to be Mrs. Dashwood's favorite daughter; Marianne is described as Mrs. Dashwood's "darling child" (261) and "her beloved child" (279). Marianne, as Mrs. Dashwood's favorite, has been brought up to over-exaggerate her sensibility; she clearly contains sense, just as Elinor does, but has been encouraged by her mother to develop her emotional side.

Marianne also extracts some of her emotional fervor from literature. She reads Cowper and Smith, reveling in the Romantic, emotionally unbridled poetry about death, lost love, and insanity. After Willoughby abruptly departs for London, Marianne turns to literature to guide her in her sorrow: "In books...she courted the misery which a contrast between the past and the present was certain of giving" (84). Pinch notes that Austen's *Persuasion* takes up the "exploration of what it feels like to derive one's 'sentiments and ideas' from reading, as women in particular [did]," and states that Austen was interested in "the effects of literature upon women's emotional lives" (10). These ideas seem applicable in the case of *Sense and Sensibility* as well. However, reading about emotional extravagance is not the sole factor in Marianne's enactment of these extremes; Edward and Elinor read the same poetry as Marianne, but do not express such extreme emotion outwardly. It is rather the reinforcement of the Romantic literature by Mrs. Dashwood which cements Marianne's sentimentalism. Austen makes this clear by writing "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" (24).

Austen depicts the encouragement of emotional fervor as beginning at an early age. In one particularly revealing passage, Austen presents a scene in which Lady Middleton's daughter is slightly scratched by a hairpin, and efforts are made to comfort the child. In this scene, Austen details the ways in which women are educated into extravagant expressions of emotion by other women, starting from childhood:

> But unfortunately bestowing these embraces, a pin in her ladyship's head-dress, slightly scratching the child's neck, produced from this pattern of gentleness such violent screams as could hardly be outdone by any creature professedly noisy. The mother's consternation was excessive; but it could not surpass the alarm of

> the Miss Steeles, and everything was done by all three, in so critical an emergency, which affection could suggest as likely to assuage the agonies of the littler sufferer. She was seated in her mother's lap, covered with kisses, her wound bathed with lavender-water, by one of the Miss Steeles, who was on her knees to attend her, and her mouth stuffed with sugar plums by the other. With such a reward for her tears, the child was too wise to cease crying. She still screamed and sobbed lustily, kicked her two brothers for offering to touch her, and all their united soothings were ineffectual till lady Middleton luckily remembered that in a scene of similar distress last week some apricot marmalade had been successfully applied for a bruised temple, the same remedy was eagerly proposed for this unfortunate scratch, and a slight intermission of screams in the young lady on hearing it gave them reason to hope that it would not be rejected. (113)

Austen first establishes that the pin does no real damage to the child, that it only "slightly" scratches her. In an ironically hyperbolic moment, Austen uses the very over-sensible style in constructing the passage that she is critiquing. She notes the "agonies of the little sufferer," lightly playing on the child as the sufferer who is little, and on the little amount the child actually suffers. Yet the insignificance of the event does not prevent the Miss Steeles and Lady Middleton from experiencing "consternation" and "alarm" over "so critical an emergency." One of the Miss Steeles even gets "on her knees to attend" the girl, displaying a physical representation of over-accommodation to and a playing up of the tantrum.

The child has learned that coddling will follow such an overacted display, and that the longer she fusses and the louder she becomes, the more she is rewarded with sweets and attention. Because of such rewards, "the child was too wise to cease crying"; the girl has astutely learned that such emotional outpouring is encouraged by her mother and other adult women. Likewise, Marianne has been encouraged by her mother to enact similar displays of emotional extravagance. Yet Marianne responds to the scene with disgust; she exclaims that the scene "is the usual way of heightening alarm, when there is

nothing to be alarmed at in reality" (113). It is deliciously ironic for Marianne to make such commentary, when she herself engages in the act of "heightening alarm" through emotional extremes. While Austen uses humor in this scene to depict the silliness of such excess, as is often the case with Austen, humor is used as a veneer for the scathing commentary just below the surface. Just as the child is "slightly scratched," so too does Austen's work require a scratching at the surface, which reveals a cutting observation of women's trained roles in society. There are real and dangerous consequences for women who give in to the performance of such passions, as Austen reminds us through the examples of the two Elizas, and through Marianne's near-fatal illness. McAllister points out that "women educated only for love too easily become Elizas" (110); the passions that women were educated into too frequently lead to their fall.

Austen is able to model the dangers involved in women's expression of passion, but because of how she presents the origin of these dangers (as a taught performance enforced by culture), she subverts the conventional punishment of Marianne. Some would argue that the illness itself is Marianne's punishment; the elder Eliza is the most fallen of the three women (as a divorcee and possible prostitute), and suffers disease and death fitting with her crime. The younger Eliza, while unchaste, does not turn to prostitution, and is "only" removed to the country with an illegitimate child. Marianne, the most physically safe of the three, experiences a severe illness, but nothing more. This notion would fit with John Wiltshire's exploration in his essay, "Jane Austen, Health, and the Body," of how illness was constructed in Austen's time; Wiltshire describes illnesses as having been "interpreted as the result of fault or responsibility, for example, or come to function as a metaphor for a life-failure or disaster...The body is thus, on this

understanding, the site in which cultural meanings are inscribed, and illness one of the main means by which the body participates in and is determined by culture" (127). Culture imposes its value-judgment of one's morality or wrongdoing onto the body; thus, Marianne's illness is read as a character-flaw or a punishment for passion.

Following this argument, if illness were a punishment for passion, the illness would cleanse Marianne of her emotional sensibility and raise her to a place of tranquil sense, just as the fallen women McAllister presents eventually become right with God and cleansed of their sins through death. McAllister points out that up until the last few years, this has been the common interpretation of the ending of the novel. "Until quite recently," she writes, "most readers of *Sense and Sensibility* have objected vociferously to [Colonel Brandon's] marrying Marianne, some claiming that the match represents the triumph of oppressive convention, some seeing him as Austen's way of punishing and thus warning readers against Marianne's excess, some seeing the ending as a narrative failure or a convention adapted from inferior fiction" (108). Many critics, including Seeber, seem to find this to be the case. Seeber writes, "Although Marianne starts out as a heroine of sensibility, she becomes a member of the community of sense...At the end of the novel, her individualism is renounced and she is defined strictly in terms of her role as a member of society" (225). Marianne, according to Seeber's reading, has been completely assimilated into the culture of sense.

This reading of Marianne's punishment through illness cannot be valid, however, since Marianne is not "cured" of her sensibility. Austen subtly states, "Marianne's illness, though weakening in its kind had not been long enough to make her recovery slow; and with youth, natural strength, and her mother's presence in aid it proceeded so

smoothly as to enable her" to move out of the sickroom (283). The specific reference to the aid Mrs. Dashwood provides can give no impression but that the gentle education of sensibility is begun again. Furthermore, upon recovering from the illness, Marianne vows to rise every morning at six a.m. and spend all day reading and playing music. Elinor notices that Marianne applies "the same eager fancy which had been leading her to the extreme of languid indolence and selfish repining, now at work in introducing excess into a scheme of such rational employment and virtuous self-control" (286). Marianne's passion and sensibility is not cured, it is merely applied to a project Elinor decides has more sense. Seeber, moreover, seems to overlook a slippery line at the conclusion of the novel: "Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband as it had once been to Willoughby" (315). Again, we see Marianne's sensibility peeping out from the appearance of a more reserved exterior. If we are to believe that Marianne loves Colonel Brandon as she loved Willoughby, then she will be just as full of passion and emotion as she was before; she is not whitewashed into an all-sense member of society as Seeber argues, but rather still holds onto her sensibility.

The fact that Austen includes these hints at Marianne's persistent sensibility solidifies her unwillingness to make Marianne into a simple cautionary tale or case of reform. Austen prefers instead to imply that both sense and sensibility should not be performed in excess, but neither should they be uprooted and eradicated all together. The novel, after all, is called *Sense and Sensibility*, not *Sense or Sensibility*. While Austen plays with the literary trope of the fallen woman and her subsequent punishment, she reinvents and subverts this tradition through Marianne. Austen draws attention to the fact

that women often fall because of a cultural education in sensibility and extravagant emotion, which she refuses to support in the form of a punishment of Marianne. Instead, she subtly creates room for Marianne's sensibility, even after her illness and marriage to the staid Colonel Brandon. Perhaps Austen is alerting us to just how pervasive an early education in sensibility can be.

Annotated Bibliography

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. New York, NY: Signet, 1995.

McAllister, Marie E. "'Only to Sink Deeper': Venereal Disease in *Sense and Sensibility*." University of Mary Washington, 2004. This article built a defense for reading Eliza's death as being caused by venereal disease. It established a conflation of the term "consumption" with venereal disease, then applied this code to *Sense and Sensibility*. It set up the relationship of the fallen woman and punishment, and showed the connections Austen establishes between the elder Eliza and Marianne. This article was extremely helpful to me in that it laid out some of the literary history of the trope of the fallen woman, and made connections the differences Austen writes into Marianne's situation.

Pinch, Adela. "Introduction" to *Strange Fits of Passion*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996. The introduction to Pinch's book explores where feelings come from and why they are labeled extravagant. Pinch makes the point that feelings were thought to be almost infectious, dangerously contagious. Much of the introduction is spent setting up the works she investigates in the rest of her book, and her logic in choosing them. It contained several interesting lines about how emotions were considered dangerous for women, and how emotions were thought to reach women through literature.

Seeber, Barbara K. "'I See Every Thing As You Desire Me to Do': The Scolding and Schooling of Marianne Dashwood." Brock University, 1999. As the title implies, this article is about the reforming of Marianne from a sensible heroine into a sense-driven and broken member of society. Seeber uses *Sense and Sensibility* to depict how Marianne is made to conform, to lose her spirit and vivaciousness. This article was useful to me in that it provided both support to my ideas and offered points of difference from which to launch. It brings attention to the lack of credit given to the Eliza story, which was useful to me; it also makes the assumption that Marianne has been forced to give up all of her sensibility, which I disagreed with.

Wallace, Tara Ghoshal. "*Sense and Sensibility* and the Problem of Feminine Authority." George Washington University, 1992. This article focused largely on showing that Austen is uncomfortable with feminine authority. Ghoshal uses examples of power-hungry, abusive, and back-stabbing women to support her position. She argues that Austen's texts make feminine authority out to be negative, cautionary, and devaluing. This text was mostly useless to me, except in that it raised the

issue of Austen's silence with regard to the Eliza story, which allowed me to make my point that such a silence is intentional and adds to the breakdown of the trope of the fallen woman.

Wiltshire, John. "Jane Austen, Health, and the Body." The Critical Review, 1991. While unfortunately not very useful to my aims in this paper, this was a very fascinating article on how culture affects illness. Wiltshire presents the idea of somatization and how emotions are placed onto the body through culture. He writes that the physical manifestation of illness can often be the only socially acceptable form of expression for women in Austen's time. He also describes how illness was seen as a reflection of one's character, which was important in my establishment of how Marianne's illness can be viewed.