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Sense and Sensibility: Recognition of Female Power Through the Divided Self

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Sense and Sensibility:

Recognition of Female Power Through the Divided Self

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Senior Honors Project

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In Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, propriety presents a mask for the women in the novel to conceal their agency and true identities. This mask divides their internal selves from the external expectations for women of the nineteenth century as presented in the conduct manuals. While women maintain this divided self, Austen also shows how men have more freedom to move between the social and the domestic spheres because they are able to operate in both spheres. In this essay I will expand on work the of critics like Nancy Armstrong, who argues that the feminine self is realized through the recognition of society's expectations and that the nature of the feminine self is shaped by both internal and external forces. I will also build on the work of critics like Jenny Davidson, who argues that this mask of propriety presented by the main female characters shields their hypocrisy from society. I will argue that in *Sense and Sensibility* Austen presents a more progressive and modern version of women that acknowledges women's agency and their intelligence by allowing them to divide their social and private selves. I will further argue that Austen's recognition of the female division of self is portrayed in her promotion of Elinor's ability to recognize her own power. Austen shows that women gain power through their ability to balance their internal and external selves and this power is manifested in their choices for marriage.

In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen articulates an intricate knowledge of the standards for feminine propriety. Her work demonstrates a familiarity with the roles of propriety as developed in the conduct manuals of the eighteenth century. Janet Todd describes the female conduct books as "books [that] prescribe a construction of femininity and chart changing notions of womanhood, displaying the ideal to which women were urged to aspire" (vii). Conduct manuals were the authority on all that was feminine and desirable

in a woman of the nineteenth century. In *Letters to A Young Lady*, a conduct manual written by Jane West in 1806, women were supposed to be “the faithful wife, the tender mother, the dutiful daughter, or the affectionate sister, [and] must still be the guardian angel to bring the cup of consolation; and [...] her arms must [...] afford the wretched outcast a secure asylum” (31). This notion of femininity presented by the conduct manuals is, according to Todd, an “effort to reconcile the needs of men and women in the construction of woman’s role” (vii). The role of women in the conduct manuals was always to cater to the needs of men and to suppress their own ideas. Women were expected to achieve the greatest sense of fulfillment through selflessness. This presented women with a difficult task because their internal desires did not coincide with their societal expectations. Through the development of the feminine model in the conduct manuals, women were able to perform that external/social side by encasing it in propriety and manners. In this way, women were forced to reconcile their internal self with their external self by repressing their wants and desires in order to abide by the acceptable social guidelines.

This division is showcased as Elinor offers a unique portrayal of these conduct manual “fronts” as she acts one way in society yet thinks quite differently. For instance, when Elinor discovers that Lucy Steele and Edward Ferrars have been engaged for quite some time, she is able to contain her internal feelings despite her horror. “Elinor’s security sunk; but her self-command did not sink with it” (Austen 123). Elinor is able to maintain the façade of feminine propriety, which allows her to operate in the social system ruled by manners, while she simultaneously masks her internal grief. Later, when Elinor and Lucy part, Elinor is “at liberty to think and be wretched” (126). Austen’s

representation of a social encounter in which Elinor holds back her true feelings reveals the skill required to separate selves when the occasion demands.

While Austen acknowledges that women must mask their true inner feelings, she conversely shows that men do not have to separate their true inner selves from their external ones. When Edward returns to visit the Dashwoods after his long absence, Austen's description of him exposes his true feelings; something that Elinor is a master at hiding. "His complexion was white with agitation, and he looked as if fearful of his reception, and conscious that he merited no kind one" (334). This description contrasts with Elinor's ability to mask her feelings and emphasizes Austen's identification of the power that women hold in their ability to shield their emotions from the world.

Austen shows how Elinor is adept at concealing her internal thoughts from the world and how this allows her to have the most sense in the novel. As Nancy Armstrong discusses in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, "an individual developed herself through an exchange between subject and object worlds" (100). Armstrong is saying that female characters take this internal and external divide as a way to develop a true and whole self. Austen portrays this idea through her distinction between Elinor and Marianne. While Elinor is able to mask her feelings and present herself to others as calm and sensible, Marianne is not able to master this art. This is illustrated when Marianne meets Willoughby at a party and is unable to contain herself from expressing her emotion in public. When confronted by Willoughby, "Elinor was robbed of all presence of mind by such an address, and was unable to say a word. But the feelings of her sister [Marianne] were instantly expressed. Her face was crimsoned over and she exclaimed in a voice of greatest emotion" (162). Elinor expresses herself through

silence, while Marianne is vocal and outspoken because she has trouble concealing what she truly thinks and feels. By the end of the novel, however, Austen reveals how Marianne has matured in her ability to divide herself to reduce scrutiny and function in society, much like the conduct manuals suggest. “Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract by her conduct, her most favourite maxims” (354). Marianne’s fate is described in terms of her ability to recognize her own internal “falsehoods” and rectify them through her conduct. Here Austen reveals how the ability to mask the internal self is a skill that must be learned to operate smoothly in the social sphere and to retain the power that comes with this skill.

This mask of propriety gives power to the women in the novel because it allows them the guise of operating under society’s conventions, while in reality this proper exterior gives them the ability to integrate the internal feminine self further into society. In *Hypocrisy and the Politics of Politeness*, Jenny Davidson discusses the contrast between the two eldest Dashwood sisters that Austen presents in her book and how this contrast represents the struggle between the internal and external integration. Davidson argues that:

The Dashwood sisters work by a division of labor when it comes to politeness: because ‘it was impossible for [Marianne] to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; ... upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell’ (122). [...] Politeness evidently constitutes itself as something like a vocation, though

the sisters also '[pay] their tribute of politeness to those who exact it'
(175). (151)

Davidson argues that hypocrisy in this text is hidden by manners and that the novel "polarizes the two Dashwood sisters according to their respective attitudes towards self-command" (151). This polarization that Davidson describes reflects Austen's attitudes towards manners and "self-command." Austen presents these two opposites to explore the dynamic between the public/external and the private/internal divide in women of the time. Both sisters showcase an internal knowledge of "sensibility." Elinor hides this knowledge and Marianne portrays it openly, thus showing how each side impacts their character in its strong opposition to her sister's attitude.

Austen's representation of these opposites relates to her larger purpose for the novel. Both Elinor and Marianne are preoccupied with marriage and their prospective husbands. Janet Todd discusses this intense need for women to marry as:

the assumption [that] marriage [is] the high spot and crown of a woman's life, where it is but one element in a man's. Since in the middle and gentry classes, this marriage was essential for a woman, she no doubt went along with the education and conduct that would apparently procure her a husband. (xv)

However, the concept of marriage was shifting in the late-eighteenth/early-nineteenth century. In Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage: In England 1500-1800*, he discusses the shift of marriage for economic reasons towards marriage for love or companionate marriage. Stone explains that marriage was once a method for establishing

economic bonds, but had begun to move more in the direction of a social and emotional contract:

Once it was doubted that affection could and would naturally develop after marriage, decision-making power had to be transferred [from the parents/kin] to the future spouses themselves, and more and more of them in the eighteenth century began to put the prospects of emotional satisfaction before the ambition for increased income or status. This in turn also had its effect in equalizing relationships between husband and wife. (217)

Stone's discussion of this shift in marital obligation is extremely important to the female characters in Austen's novel, because both the economic and the emotional aspects of marriage weigh heavily on their decisions to marry.

Austen articulates her modern views by endorsing companionate marriage. Austen uses both of the Dashwood sisters to point out that by mastering the ability to conceal emotions and divide the social ideals from internal ones, this gives women agency. First, she presents Elinor as a character who is powerful in both her internal and external affairs:

Elinor [...] possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counselor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart; —her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew

how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught. (4-5)

Through this external display of placidity, Elinor reinforces the conduct manual's guidelines, while internally it seems "her feelings were strong," thus showcasing that Elinor has a wealth of character underneath her conforming appearance. Austen promotes this wealth of feelings that hides under the surface by rewarding Elinor's outward display of a mixture of emotion and sense with a companionable marriage. "[Elinor and Edward] were brought together by mutual affection, with the warmest approbation of their real friends, their intimate knowledge of each other seemed to make their happiness certain" (345). Austen continues by providing them with an economic wage that will support them, despite their original poor state.

Austen recognizes Marianne's struggle with the balance of the internal and external forces, but allots Marianne instead with a more economically driven marriage. Marianne is shown to be almost the opposite of her sister as "she was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent" (5). Because she is unable to control her impulses and put on Elinor's mask of civility and manners, Austen uses these differences to showcase how women who operate (as Elinor does) by dividing their internal and external selves are able to maintain a solid place in the social and public sphere. Elinor and Marianne differ in their abilities and in what they show the world, but in the end Elinor is rewarded with love, while Marianne is rewarded with economic gain. This seems to indicate that separating the inner feelings from external duties is a more modern power play than a merely simplistic arranged marriage.

The modern and progressive marriage is one that relies on affections and less on economic ties. In “The Imagination Goes Visiting: Jane Austen, Judgment and the Social,” Hina Nazar argues that Austen’s portrayal of this disconnect in Marianne is central to Austen’s exploration of the effect of manners in society. “Predicated on an understanding of the emotions and subjectivity as prior to experience, Marianne’s sensibility, Austen suggests, too readily slides into an insensibility to the world. [...] Marianne is blind to the real worth of the men who come to Barton to woo the sisters, because she looks to her intuitions about these men rather than to the men themselves for knowledge of their worth” (169). Thus, if a woman of the nineteenth century could not divide herself to shield her inner feelings, disaster could be in store:

To deploy the novel’s own trope of the screen (as in the “screens” of propriety), Marianne’s quite literal ‘flattening’ of the suitors into their suits [...] suggests that she views them as screens with nothing behind them. [...] Elinor, by contrast, screens not only herself but also others, and her gesture of screening, like Marianne’s gesture of ‘unscreening,’ acquires multiple connotations. (169)

Nazar’s suggestion that these “screens” of propriety reflect the feminine division of self, offers a new insight into Austen’s motives. The novel suggests that both extremes of trying to mask one’s true self entirely and revealing one’s true self readily is too over simplistic, but rather there must be a compromise of the two. This compromised self is one that abides by the rules of propriety, while at the same time brings out the power of the internal female. This suggests that femininity is more complex than the conduct manuals of the nineteenth century suggest.

This complex dynamic that Austen articulates is evident in her recognition of the companionate marriage as a form of power for women who could recognize the internal/external divide. Once a woman was married, she legally lost her agency and her role became defined solely by her husband and his standing in society. However, with the rise of the companionate marriage, women were able to retain their internal agency because marriage no longer meant only economic control, but rather an equal relationship and marriage of minds, rather than a matter of economics. Through this distinction, Austen's progressive motive comes through. By giving Elinor a companionate marriage, Austen recognizes Elinor's power in the relationship by allowing both the internal and external to be combined in her union with Edward. While, Marianne is shown to have a marriage that is mainly external because she cannot master the art of this division and is given a largely external form of marriage that reflects the more antiquated idea of marriage as solely an external economic tie. Elinor can hold her own among the external sphere of society and companionate marriage allows her to realize this. While Elinor can maintain some independence in her marriage, Marianne will not be doomed to depend on a man to define her. "Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself from expecting, [...] she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" (355). Austen seems to show that Marianne's situation is one that the reader should pity because of the entirely external life that she will always live. Marianne's position within an economically driven marriage is to play to the role of society and to lose most of her independence from her husband and his status in society.

Both Elinor and Marianne Dashwood represent the changing view of the female power dynamic and the impact that propriety has on their relationships to their future husbands. The shifting status of women in the nineteenth century in both the domestic and social spheres echoes the shift towards companionate marriage. The emergence of a well-rounded woman who can mask her internal biases while remaining in the social sphere shows the power that women were beginning to have in the movement towards equality within marriage. This woman who is able to bridge the gap between the old standards of the conduct manuals in society and still maintain their independent emotions is a more progressive and modern standard for Austen's time and Austen is actively promoting this new model of femininity within her novel.

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