

**“HER SENSIBILITY WAS POTENT ENOUGH!”: THEATRICALITY, MORAL
PHILOSOPHY, AND THE FEMININE IDEAL IN *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY***

by

Haymen Gar Kern Leong

B.A. (Hons.), The University of British Columbia, 2007

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Abstract

Much work has been done recently on the way late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British women novelists portray female experience. A considerable portion of this work on Jane Austen emphasizes a link between contemporary books on feminine conduct and the novel's portrayal of its heroine's subjectivity as well as the impact of the theatre and ideas about the theatre on her novels' representations of feminine propriety. Nancy Armstrong argues that conduct literature for women in the eighteenth century became "such a common phenomenon that many different kinds of writers felt compelled to add their wrinkles to the female character" (65). Austen's conception of the female ideal draws on conduct literature but she combines theatrical elements in her portrayals to introduce elements of social change. Recent studies have demonstrated Austen's deep and abiding interest in theatrical representation and theatrical sociability. Critics, such as Joseph Litvak, argue that Austen's novels share certain representational strategies with the theatre and "their very implication in a widespread social network of vigilance and visibility – of looking and of being looked at – renders them inherently, if covertly, theatrical" (x). This essay builds on this research; however, it focuses on another less discussed influence upon Austen's novels. Specifically, it considers the influence of the moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, particularly the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith, on the novel's use of theatricality to represent the feminine ideal. Focusing on *Sense and Sensibility*, my argument is that Austen eschews Humean sympathy and uncontrollable passion in favour of Smith's impartial spectator. Austen's novel suggests a conservative model of proper feminine conduct that is characterized by perspicuity and a morality defined by Christian principles. Her emphasis on Christian principles, particularly conformity and self-denial stems, I argue,

from her Tory Anglican beliefs and conscientious efforts to underscore the importance for females to adhere to tradition and regulate their desires. Supporting a Johnsonian perspective about human nature that private interests and desires must be curtailed, Austen stresses moral behaviour to support the Burkean model of preserving tradition and maintaining the existing hierarchical model of social structure.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents. Without your moral and financial support throughout my years of education, this thesis would not have been possible.

1 Introduction

Over the past several years, much work has been done on the way late eighteenth and early nineteenth century British women novelists portray female experience. A considerable portion of this work on Jane Austen emphasizes a link between contemporary books on feminine conduct and the novel's portrayal of its heroine's subjectivity as well as the impact of the theatre and ideas about the theatre on her novels' representations of feminine propriety. Nancy Armstrong argues that conduct literature for women in the eighteenth century became "such a common phenomenon that many different kinds of writers felt compelled to add their wrinkles to the female character" (65). Austen's conception of the female ideal draws on conduct literature but she combines theatrical elements in her portrayals to introduce elements of social change. Two full-length studies published in recent years by Penny Gay and Paula Byrne have demonstrated Austen's deep and abiding interest in theatrical representation and theatrical sociability. Critics such as Joseph Litvak have felt that Austen's novels share certain representational strategies with the theatre and "their very implication in a widespread social network of vigilance and visibility – of looking and of being looked at – renders them inherently, if covertly, theatrical" (Litvak x). This essay builds on this research; however, it focuses on another less discussed influence upon Austen's novels. Specifically, it considers the influence of the moral philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, particularly the writings of David Hume and Adam Smith, on the novel's use of theatricality to represent the feminine ideal. Focusing on *Sense and Sensibility*, I contend that Austen eschews Humean sympathy and uncontrollable passion in favour of Smith's impartial spectator. Austen's first novel suggests a conservative model of proper feminine conduct that is characterized by perspicuity and a morality defined by

Christian principles. Her emphasis on Christian principles, particularly conformity and self-denial, I argue, stems from her Tory Anglican beliefs and conscientious efforts to underscore the importance for females to adhere to tradition and regulate their desires.

With the exception of a few tantalizing fragments of the *Juvenilia*, Austen did not write plays but her interest in the theatre is certain and her works bear the traces of her lifelong interest in drama. Naomi Nachumi has convincingly presented Austen not as a passive spectator but an avid theatregoer who actively engages in the debate concerning the effects of drama on her spectators' emotions and manipulates her readers' perspectives in her novels (1-15). Gay and Byrne show persuasively how Austen is directly influenced by her fascination in the theatre and how her literary apprenticeship, which began with the vogue for private theatricals that swept Britain when she was a child, challenges the assumption that Austen was "immovably attached to village life and deeply suspicious of urban pleasures – the theatre foremost among these" (Byrne xii). This essay adds to the recovery of the theatrical Austen by combining her lively interest as a novelist in theatrical modes of behaviour with an interest in the writings of Hume and Smith to suggest a political and cultural context that informs Austen's incorporation of theatricality in the characterization of various individuals in *Sense and Sensibility*. I hope to show that Austen engages with Hume and Smith's moral philosophy to validate a conservative model of feminine propriety based on conforming to absolute principles instead of indulging in subjective individualism.

Austen was by no means unfamiliar with the proscription against women reading drama or attending the theatre in contemporary conduct books. Austen wrote to her sister Cassandra in 1805 after reading Thomas Gisborne's dour *Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* during a visit to Kent, "I am glad that you recommended Gisborne for having

begun, I am pleased with it, and I had quite determined not to read it” (*Letters* 111). Typical of late eighteenth-century works of instruction for women, Gisborne presents femaleness in its natural form as “at best an unsteady socializing force” (Armstrong 99) that would be further endangered by play-acting because it would encourage vanity and destroy diffidence “by the unrestrained familiarity with persons of the other sex, which inevitably results from being joined with them in the drama” (184). Gisborne’s *Enquiry* identifies the ills of the stage, warning,

He knows little of human nature, who thinks that the youthful mind will be secured from the infecting influence of a vicious character, adorned with polished manners, wit, fortitude, and generosity, by a frigid moral, delivered at the conclusion, or to be seduced from the events of the drama. (179)

Litvak argues that Gisborne’s conduct manual indicates an uncertainty characteristic of contemporary discussions of theatricality (7). Acting is seductive because it is imitation but when properly controlled, it can have a salutary effect by ensuring that latent theatricality of the female sex that is “implanted” in women by “Providence” will “conform to the wishes and examples” (Gisborne 122) of their male superiors. Austen disagreed with the restrictions and had no intention of putting Gisborne’s prescriptions against playacting into practice; her preference for theatre continued and she attended performances whenever opportunities arose. She continued her involvement with private theatricals and promoted them when she stayed with Edward Knight’s young family at Kent (Gay 9). Her use of dramatic techniques in her novels, however, draws from Gisborne’s assertion that the stage can be constructive if it assumes “a higher office” by “recommend[ing] itself as the nurse of virtue” (Gisborne 176). The theatre can be constructive to shape and encourage women’s natural “propensity to

imitation” (Gisborne 122) to conform to social protocol; however, women also need to be leery of acting that is morally inefficacious if performances are deliberately used to mask artificiality, anarchic desires, and challenges to the hierarchical and paternalistic structure of British society. Women can internalize conformity to decorum and rules of etiquette through emulation but they must also be careful to avoid and not to replicate deceptive conduct.

Austen’s conservatism presents feminine propriety based on adherence to Christian ideals that are comparable to most eighteenth-century conduct books that Mary Poovey points out admonish against finery in dress or the acquisition of feminine accomplishments and advocate religious principles instead. Like contemporary writers of feminine instruction manuals who “popularized, and sometimes frankly secularized, versions of the ideas more rigorously set out in sermons” (Poovey ix), Austen, I suggest, adjusts and adopts Christian ideals by dramatizing a model of acceptable behaviour, legitimate values, and permissible thoughts that cut across denominational lines and the infinitesimal strata of the middling classes but not by citing Scriptures for authority or emphasizing original sin and strict denial that made the attainment of virtue impractical and impossible. Austen’s heroines, as models of the feminine ideal, are innately virtuous, and learn to be self-critical and self-restraining. They are aware of the fallibility of the subjective life of the individual and are suspicious of emotions. Austen’s heroines reject the excessive sensibility often associated with Humean moral philosophy and embrace the distance, rather than the commonality, that separated individuals in Smith’s conception of sympathy and the operation of sentiments in society.

Humean and Smithian philosophies are part of the eighteenth century “bodily rhetoric,” Paul Goring suggests, that endowed bodies with the capacity to “express symbolically... a passionate, emotional language of the body” which the British esteemed as

“one of the key markers” of that period’s culture of sensibility (ix). Courtesy books provided models for women by prescribing educational regimes appropriate to the development of a bodily rhetoric that became increasingly invested with developing notions of politeness but the transformation of bodies into expressive and eloquent objects, I claim, turned the body into a dangerous site where meaning could be constructed and misconstrued from signs. The potential symbolism and malleability of the body promoted a physical language that permeated the literary milieu during which Austen wrote and dominated the genre of the sentimental novel. The somatic vocabulary grew out of the eighteenth century’s thinking about and representations of the body in the broader intellectual and social context of literary, philosophical, and medical discourse.¹ This essay argues that Austen’s feminine ideal critiques the sensibility and sympathy presented in Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. The uncontrollable free flow of passion and the irresistible power of passions to influence behaviour divert the appropriate ethical emphasis from rationality and self-restraint to individual subjectivity which often leads to indulgence in one’s feelings. The Humean stress on unwilled and unstoppable passion turns upon its preoccupation with the exterior and displaces reason as the guiding principle of propriety because individuals act as they feel not as they should by observing the proper social protocols. *Sense and Sensibility* investigates the mutual affinity between individuals in Humean philosophy that permits not only the feeling or the capacity for feeling but, more specifically, the capacity to feel the sentiments of

¹ Much work has been done to demonstrate the connections between sensibility’s emphasis on the body and the sentimental novel. In *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (1988), an excellent study on the implication of the body in the genre, John Mullan argues that “it is the body which acts out the powers of sentiment” (201) and he shows how the fiction of novelists such as Richardson, Sterne, and Henry Mackenzie promoted a physical language of feeling to forge sociability among lines of sympathy. Paul Goring’s *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture* (2005) also explores the genre’s embeddedness in eighteenth-century thinking about the body. Readers of sentimental fiction, Goring argues, “presented both opportunities for the assertion of polite identities and a language of polite self-representation” (14-15).

someone else and the ramifications the problem of sympathy creates, especially as it affects the sociability and social relations of characters. Austen is doubtful of the essentially frank interchange of passion that Hume imagined in *Treatise*; she explores the possibility for false sympathy when individuals feign passion. The volitionality of Willoughby's false sympathy with Marianne suggests the potential dangerousness that Humean sympathy presented to women if one is able to fabricate feelings to elicit a desired response. The discussions of Humean morality and feminine propriety in *Sense and Sensibility*, I argue, reveal an interplay between theatricality and sympathy that Austen critiques for its performative potential to manipulate others, dissemble subversive impulses, and, more seriously, obscure a character's genuine moral state through false sympathy.

The desirable features of the feminine ideal – conformity, modesty, and the development of self-control and self-knowledge – are possible instead through fellow feeling experienced by a disinterested, but not necessarily detached, observer that Austen models after the impartial spectator in Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. At its core, the impartial spectator, like Hume's spontaneous sympathy, allows individuals to change places with a sufferer and put his or her interests before one's own to act benevolently. The difference between sympathy and the impartial spectator affects the production of social harmony which, in Hume's theory, occurs when individuals feel, react, and suffer together. In Smith's philosophy, however, social accord is the result of judgements of propriety and merit produced by self-command and prudence. Morality is based on assessments of propriety when one considers whether an action is suitable or proportionate to the situation which occasions it and on assessments of merit or demerit whether the behaviour deserves reward or punishment, gratitude or resentment. Unlike the contagion of emotions, Smith argues for

scrutiny of moral judgements “by an implicit invocation of an individual’s notion of ideal propriety” (Haakonssen xviii) that carries with it a sense of obligation to act according to the decisions of the ideal impartial spectator. Smith does not specify a figure as the ideal impartial spectator but Austen, I shall argue, substitutes Christian principles as the source of the rules of morality and implicitly sets up a Christian evaluator as the impartial observer. Throughout *Sense and Sensibility* Elinor sympathizes with the moral viewpoint of the impartial spectator and reacts against the excessive sensibility of Marianne.

Austen most likely came in contact with the ideas of Smith and Hume from Samuel Johnson, whose writings had considerable moral influence on Austen, and her decision to engage in a formulation of feminine propriety using the moral theories of Hume and Smith seems a likely choice given the Presbyterian backgrounds of both philosophers. Presbyterianism ascribed to certain Calvinist teachings that were rejected by the Established Church in its preference of Arminian theology – the belief that the death of Christ made salvation possible to all people and not only the elect – over Calvin’s doctrine of predestination. My contention is that Austen’s peculiar decision to engage the two most prominent thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment in *Sense and Sensibility* stems, in part, from her interest in the debate on human nature that waged between the pessimistic view of the High Church which held human nature too corrupt, depraved, and self-seeking to be redeemed by his own unaided efforts, and the more optimistic view of the Broad Church that believed in man’s innate goodness and rationality. Marilyn Butler has shown how the Scottish Enlightenment philosophers worked ostensibly without theological prior assumptions (9), but their work was nonetheless claimed by the Broad Church because of

their compatibility with its insistence on the natural soundness and innate rationality of human nature.

Austen's focus on moral philosophy bespeaks an important concern she had with the state of the Established Church. I propose, like Roger Moore, that Austen's novels demonstrate an active, if subdued, interest in religion and the ideas, controversies, and events of the eighteenth-century English church. Archbishop Richard Whately observed that Austen "is 'not at all obtrusive'" (qtd. in Moore 314) about religion in the novels, but I contend that she did feel deeply about religion and that her works do in some ways disclose those feelings.

For the first twenty five years of her life, Austen lived in Steventon, a country parsonage where her father was rector. She belonged to the Church of England and knew a great deal about religion. Her brother, Henry, burnishing his sister's propriety, described the index of her Anglican nature in the Biographical Notice by attesting that "her opinions accorded strictly with those of our Established Church" (33). Although relatively little is certain about her spiritual life, Oliver MacDonagh argues that "Austen was a conscientious and believing churchwoman" (4) who accepted the theology and structure of the Anglican Church. She attended divine service regularly and her private correspondence suggests "religious seriousness [that] increased as she aged" (MacDonagh 4). In her formative years Austen would have witnessed the religious and political debates and discussions that, Gary Kelly points out, were "inextricably intertwined and of central ideological and material interest" ("Religion" 149) for her and the majority of her contemporaries.

Aware of the incipient church reform that spanned her life between the Tory High Church and the Low Church that rejected various aspects of the establishment and its theology thereby excluding them from certain civil rights (Kelly, "Religion," 149), Austen

responded to the social, cultural, and political tensions that reached a particular crisis in her day and threatened to tear the non-monolithic Church of England apart.² Much work has been done on Austen's response to these religious debates but I contend that Austen, cognizant of the struggle for and resistance against increased individual freedom in the Church, responds in *Sense and Sensibility* by using characterization to defend tradition and the status quo. Ideologies, Terry Eagleton argues, must distinguish between interests competing for power (10), and in *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen promotes a conservative ideology that reaffirms order by highlighting the dangers of individualism when excessive feelings are uncontrolled by reason or Christian standards. Ideologically linked to the established order, Austen's heroines in *Sense and Sensibility* conform to the prevailing system of values that protects the interests of Tory Anglicans. Consequently, her first novel supports the elite through defending tradition and promoting conformity as the preferred resolution in the "power conflicts" of ideology, which Eagleton identifies are "fairly central to a whole social order" (10). Austen, because of family connections and her own social position as well as her own intellectual investment, has an interest in the continuation of the existing social order and the investment of power in the hands of the establishment by ensuring that individuals follow Christian principles, namely the Pauline doctrine that Christians, under a divine command, obey the authority that God ordained (Brown 53).

² Austen's family were members of the High Church; her father and two brothers were clergymen who held various curacies. As High Churchmen, Austen belonged to a set of Anglicans who advocated alliance with government to suppress and denounce dissenting members of the Low, or Broad, Church who wanted to subordinate the Established Church to the state and push for more religious toleration. For more information on tension between the High and Broad churches, see William Gibson's *The Church of England, 1688-1832* (2001). Gibson's study presents a detailed history of the Church in the eighteenth century and the nature of Anglicanism and its role between the Glorious Revolution and the first Great Reform Bill. In "Religion" (*A Companion to Jane Austen* (2009), Eds. Claudia Johnson and Clara Tuite), Moore points out that throughout the eighteenth century, the Church of England became "a battleground between a liberal faction urging change and a conservative faction desperate to defend tradition" (314). Liberal reformers of the Broad Church "disdained the subscription to religious formulae and creeds" (Moore 314) and fought High Church Tories who were determined to preserve them.

Austen questions excessive sensibility and the indulgence of irrational subjectivity in *Sense and Sensibility*. Marianne's actions explore the anarchic dangers of following passion and allowing feelings to override reason. Austen supports social hierarchy and systems of appropriate social protocol, which Tory Anglicanism viewed as divinely ordained, by refusing to let Marianne continue her indulgence in Humean sympathy. Marianne's indulgence, Claudia Johnson claims, gives her the justification to defy notions of decorum as matters of principle (45). Marianne's sickness then, I contend, is Austen's censure of a moral philosophy that encourages sentiment unchecked by Christian principles and deliberately shuns etiquette. That Marianne's recovery is accompanied promptly by a realization of her previous errors and insensitivities, which she attributes to her youthful reliance on innate knowledge and indulgence in feelings, confirms Austen's didactic agenda that morality needs to be guided by objective Christian standards. In contrast to her sister, Elinor's dogged self-restraint from allowing her emotions to control her actions and her determined observation of manners and a conscientious effort to appear correct indicate Austen's support for a more detached view of human nature that distrusts the soundness of intuitive judgements and relies instead on objective truths. Elinor's self-command and subordination to the impartial strictures of absolute moral rules, I argue, is a mode of behaviour that Austen approves. Characterization within *Sense and Sensibility* reveals a conservative code of conduct based on moral laws and Christian tenets that attempt to secure Tory Anglicanism against the radical and unsettling changes brought about by religious dissent.³

³ Literary scholarship has produced a wide variety of different readings and approaches to Austen. Marilyn Butler has argued in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1978, 1987) that Austen is a Burkean Tory who shores up the traditional conservative sense of national and familial identity in direct reaction to the spread of Enlightenment and Jacobin thinking into English political discourse. Alistair Duckworth in *Improvement of the Estate* (1971) also reads Austen as a conservative who is committed to "a social morality and a continuous awareness and exposure of attitudes destructive of social continuity" (ix). Using similar critical-theoretical

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen engages with Hume and Smith's moral philosophy to describe a conservative model of the feminine ideal that is characterized by respect for established rules and adherence to Christian doctrine and principles. Her critique of Humean sympathy reveals the dangers of unrestrained individualism and a preference for femininity distinguished by introspection and a dependence on the judgement of a Christian and stoical judge modelled after Smith's impartial spectator to determine the propriety of all actions. Even though she does not specifically cite Scriptural authority to illustrate the kinds of preferred feminine behaviour, her heroines' actions suggest conscious conformity to reason and self-controlled prudence as subtly linked to the stability and wellbeing of society. Austen's conservatism takes notions of theatricality – particularly performance and artificiality – and notions of the bodily rhetoric of sensibility to make the ideological argument that sensibility's emphasis on the body and surfaces is potentially subversive. Acting that disguises anarchic impulses should be contained. Ideology establishes boundaries and defines perspectives in political and economic relations but social and even psychological relations as well. Understanding Austen's ideology in *Sense and Sensibility* enables readers to recognize her ideas and comprehend the responses delimited by her beliefs. Austen adored the theatre but she was wary of theatricality overstepping its institutional boundaries and impinging into private life. It is my aim to argue that off the stage theatricality allows Humean sympathy to make passions contaminating and beguiling but if individuals are aware of imitation, the stage can assume its "higher office... as the

approaches but arriving at a diametrically opposed conclusion, Claudia L. Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988) argues that Austen's writing displays undeniable, if not overt, marks of sympathy with Enlightenment feminist tenets and offers variously powerful critiques of contemporary English social and political institutions. In this paper, I will argue that the evidence supports Butler's and Duckworth's canonical construction of Austen as a Burkean Tory writer whose novels operate within a Christian moral framework and exhibit a scepticism for human nature and individual subjectivity that gives rationality ascendancy over irrationality.

nurse of virtue” (Gisborne 176) by alerting women to how in real life acting can be morally pernicious by concealing disingenuousness, anarchic impulses, and challenges to social stability.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen viewed Humean sympathy and its consequent interchange of passion and subjugation of reason as perilous to orthodoxy and the established social order because Hume’s ideas championed individual subjectivity; however, sympathizing with Smith’s impartial spectator, who Austen imbues with Christian doctrine and principles, through self-restraint and self-critical reflection checks the moral relativism that threatens to disrupt and endanger the maintenance and promulgation of a traditional hierarchical society. This essay should also involve some clarification of the words that I use to discuss emotions in Hume and Smith’s moral philosophies as well as Austen’s handling of these theories in *Sense and Sensibility*. The words “emotion,” “feeling,” and “passions” were used with remarkably fluidity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and for most writers, Adela Pinch argues, the “many names for emotion travel as freely as emotions themselves” (16). I try to stay close to the meanings that were generally associated with these words in the texts and periods that I discuss and I borrow from Pinch’s definitions when I use these terms (16). I refer to passion as the powerful force of the wandering and autonomous substances that exists outside of individuals and circulates among persons; on the other hand, I refer to feeling as the physical sensation produced within an individual that may or may not result in physical action.

2 Conduct Literature and Moral Philosophy: The Basis for the New Feminine Ideal

Conduct literature, especially after the mid-eighteenth-century, according to Armstrong, reached across a broad spectrum of female readers and disseminated a new female identity that “denigrated the ornamental body of the aristocrat to exalt the retiring and yet vigilant domestic woman” (71). Discretion and modesty became the defining features of the new desirable domestic woman and instruction manuals called for an educational program that discouraged women from displaying signs of wealth or status but valued them according to intrinsic personal qualities (Armstrong 74). Conduct books exhorted women to devote time towards moral development by prescribing an ideal program of education based on a system of female values which conscientiously rejected sensibility. In this section, I will argue that Austen reacts against the cult of sensibility’s celebration of unregulated emotions by advocating, as an alternative, the role of reason as the reliable guide for acceptable female conduct. She defines feminine propriety as based on objectivity grounded in Christian morals rather than subjective individuality ruled by passion. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen’s didactic characterization of Marianne and Elinor Dashwood demonstrates the influences of and her engagements with the moral philosophies of Adam Smith and David Hume, whom she encountered from her readings of Samuel Johnson.

In renaming her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen could hardly have chosen two words more weighted with accumulated cultural meaning to describe a narrative in which she interacts with contemporary moral philosophy to construct her definition of feminine propriety. These abstract nouns indexed a debate – political, aesthetic, religious, and philosophical – that began in the eighteenth century and continued in her own

contemporary world, especially in 1811 when the novel was published, because the semantic range of “sense” and “sensitivity” was rapidly becoming a shifting and contested ground as conduct books, the most popular form of literary discourse in the eighteenth century when the first draft of *Sense and Sensibility* was written in its epistolary form under the title *Elinor and Marianne*, actively reshaped desirable femininity in Britain. Conduct books associated sensitivity with aristocratic women and labelled them as “deficient in female qualities” (Armstrong 75) because they were accused of spending excessive amounts of time in idle amusements and placed value only on the surface. In its public discussion of private sentiment and derivation of morality from passions, sensitivity privileged the exterior and the body, in particular the female body, as an “ever visible corpus of signs given over to the practice of interpretation” (Mullan 221). The educational program designed in the conduct manuals starting in the mid-eighteenth century decidedly countered the “culture of sensitivity” (Barker-Benfield xviii) and emphasized that “the essence of the woman lay inside or underneath her surface” (Armstrong 75). Strongly influenced by these developments in conduct literature, Austen participates in the “invention of depths” (Armstrong 76) in *Sense and Sensibility* by exploring the moral and religious dimensions of the female self.

In the marked shift towards moral and religious conservatism in Britain in the 1790s, Austen was not calling for a public condemnation of the aristocracy or gentry, which Dror Wahrman argues the British public still saw as their best defence against the French Revolution (120), by joining the attack of conduct books on aristocratic female behaviour. Rather, Austen hoped to reinvigorate effete manners and shore up support for the conservative hierarchical structure of society, I argue, by enacting an exchange and mutual

modification of ideologies and social practices between the ruling elites and the professional and middling classes for whom the conduct books were written. Deeply affected by anti-sentimental developments within the conduct literature genre, Austen uses moral didacticism in *Sense and Sensibility* to illustrate an appropriate femininity rooted in Burkean principles against dissipated aristocratic behaviour. Austen found further impetus to reverse the superficiality of femininity and focus on the moral need for self-restraint because, according to Jenny Davidson, sensibility had, in the understanding of the middling classes, led to associations of insincerity, sexual deviance, and moral licentiousness that threatened to corrupt the moral character of the nation (1-11).

Geoffrey Sill points out that instruction manuals for women in the late eighteenth century routinely and increasingly prescribed “the ethical issues of behaviour in daily life” (1) by emphasizing the necessity to regulate the passions. Seventeenth-century discoveries and innovations in science, medicine, and religion unsettled many of the theories relating to the nature, function, and ends of the passions that had been previously determined by classical philosophers and physicians, particularly Galen. Uncertainties about the location, uses, and effects of the passions, and whether they may be a part of the mind, the body, or both, produced a “crisis of thought and opinion about the passions” (Sill 2) and a collective effort to subject the anarchic impulses of passion to the rule of reason. Isaac Watts’s *Doctrine of the Passions, Explain’d and Improv’d*, exemplary of the conduct book’s caveat on the passions, exhorted women to “improve” the emotions that are designed for “valuable Ends in Life, when put under due Government” (iii). Women were warned that “passion unbridled would violate all sacred Ties of Religion, and raise the Sons of Men in Arms against their Creator” (Watts iii). If passions “are let [to] run loose without controul, or if they are abused,

and employed to wrong Purposes, they become the Springs and occasions of much Mischief and Misery” (Watts iii). Uncontrolled passions would soon “break all the Bonds of human Society and Peace, and would change the Tribes of Mankind into brutal Herds, or make the World a mere Wilderness of Savages” (Watts iv). Where, however, “these vehement Powers of Nature are reduced to the Obedience of Reason,” they will “go a great way to procure our own Ease and Happiness, so far as ‘tis attainable in this Life,” and will “make our neighbours happy as ourselves” (Watts v). The debate about how and why to regulate the passions became a common and important theme for Austen and her contemporaries.

In the perceived crisis of the management of the passions and the emerging mission of the novel to find a “cure” for them (Sill 5), *Sense and Sensibility* enacts the dangers of sensibility and the need for a method to regulate passions by conforming to the status quo and tradition based on Christian principles. Austen’s “cure” is heavily nuanced by her rejection of Humean moral philosophy and the notion of vagrant passions that can cause individuals to feel, react, and suffer together. Assessments of propriety are no longer justified or explained by contagious passions but by the exercise of self-command and prudence when one considers whether an action is suitable or proportionate to the situation and on assessments of merit or demerit. Austen subscribes to Smith’s conception of an impartial spectator and sympathy with his judgements of propriety and merit. “The man within the breast” (Smith 150), who governs according to the Christian “commands and laws of the Deity” (Smith 192), supports Austen’s argument that desirable female behaviour is based on an objective external standard.

Austen was not alone in her intellectual engagement with Hume’s theory of the passions. Many writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also

interested in exploring the relationship between individuals and passions. By the second half of the eighteenth century, specific questions about how feelings confront society, gender, and subjectivity led to persistent murmurings that feelings were getting out of hand. Even the average late eighteenth-century woman “at her religious devotions had to be careful that her feelings for the deity did not exceed the mark” (Pinch 2). Because excessive feelings could account for the kindness of benevolence but also lead women to their ruin, attacks on emotional extravagance, sensibility, and the sentimental “came from a variety of positions, including conservatism and the fear of religious enthusiasm” (Pinch 2). From Hannah More and the Evangelicals, Austen read of the argument against sensibility and the criticism that it exposed women to strong and indecorous feelings that were highly dangerous to their virtue. Her novels reveal the influence of the need for “more decent and pious living and a stricter sense of social decorum” (Butler 163).

Although current scholarship cannot confirm how many of Hume’s works Austen had actually read, scholars agree that she was familiar with his *History of England* because she parodied it in 1791. Austen’s “History of England” is an amusing and partial work in which she caricatures a number of errors which, in less blatant form, historians had committed. As a historian whose literary sensitivities were shaped by a culture of sensibility, as well as a philosopher much concerned with the operations of sympathy, Mark Phillips argues that Hume constructed the historical narrative “to engage his readers’ attention with those elements of historical experience that lay closest to their own humanity” and this “widely acknowledged” polemic and theoretical point was certainly not lost to readers like Austen who recognized Hume’s attempt as “an opportunity to exercise the moral sentiments” (419). The characters in Austen’s minor work reflect a conscientious understanding and imitative

satire of Hume's historical portraits that, Phillips claims, Hume imbues with "much affective colouration" to use in his history as a pedagogical tool to teach and shape his readers' morality (418).

There is no doubt also that she would have come across Hume's other more contentious ideas through conversations with her Tory Anglican clerical father and brothers as well as from reading the works of contemporary novelists and writers, including her favourite moralist, Samuel Johnson. The publication of Hume's essay "Of the Immortality of the Soul" in 1757 and *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* posthumously in 1779 sealed his reputation as an atheist and made him an object of religious attack and ridicule from Christian writers and members of the clergy.⁴ Hume, along with Smith, dominated the Scottish Enlightenment in the early eighteenth century but Hume's ideological controversies about the overwhelming power of passions in his moral philosophy drew consistent criticism from political and religious critics, especially from the "swelling ranks of political and religious orthodoxy" who attacked sentimentalists as "moral relativists who threatened to undermine established religion and society... [by] implicitly putting the individual before the group" (Butler 8).

⁴ Scholars debate whether Hume was an atheist, an agnostic, or perhaps even a deist but agree that Hume was critical of religion. Even though Hume expressed his opinions on religion in guarded and indirect ways and chose not to publish his most important work on religion, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, during his lifetime, criticism of Hume's religious stance has focused on his philosophical arguments for skepticism and "the intellectual baselessness of faith" (Penelhum 323). Terence Penelhum in "Hume's Views on Religion: Intellectual and Cultural Influences" (2008) argues that "there can be no doubt that Hume is for the most part hostile to religion in general and to the Christian religion in particular" (323). According to Martin Bell in "Hume on the Nature and Existence of God" (2008), Hume rejected revealed religion and the belief that God communicated with people through divine revelations. Denying that Christian doctrines could be understood or made credible by human reason alone, Hume advocated the position that "philosophy gives no reason to believe in [the] existence of the providential God of Christianity" (Bell 339). Hume's essay "Of Miracles," Michael P. Levine suggests in "Hume on Miracles and Immortality" (2008), denigrates religious faith: "the reasons people believe in immortality has nothing to do with rational argument or experience... [but] wish fulfillment – with wanting and needing to believe" (367). Hume attributes faith and religion ultimately to the work of the passions of hope and fear over reason.

Although Austen “despised [the] extreme feminism” (Bradbrook 5) of Mary Wollstonecraft, the urban intellectual who had read all of Hume’s works and was familiar with them, she was aware of her argument that women had been made “slaves” of their senses and their passions, to be “blown about by every momentary gust of feeling” and plunged into a wide “variety of meanness, cares, and sorrows” (Wollstonecraft 60-61). From Wollstonecraft, Austen would have also learned about Adam Smith’s argument about sympathy because she invokes Smith’s judgements frequently and quotes from his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* extensively in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Davidson 91).

Aside from contemporary novelists, however, Austen’s most important contact with Hume’s ideas may have come from Samuel Johnson, Austen’s “favourite” moralist (Biographical Notice 482), whose influence on Austen should not be underestimated.⁵ Johnson’s dislike of Hume is recorded in James Boswell’s *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791), a creative representation of Johnson’s conversations of his last ten years in which the topic of Hume is frequently introduced. In Adam Potkay’s study of Hume and Johnson, he points out the overlap between the eighteenth century’s two leading men of letters: Hume’s personal library contained nine volumes of Johnson’s works and there is “ample evidence that Johnson knew at least parts of Hume’s *oeuvre*” (Potkay 3). Although the two men have

⁵ Since Austen’s brother, Henry Austen, and her nephew, James E. Austen-Leigh, first identified her favourite moral writer in prose as Johnson (Biographical Notice), the influence of Johnson on Austen has been well documented in existing scholarship. Mary Lascelles in *Jane Austen and Her Art* (1939) suggests that the gossip of Johnson’s letters to Mrs. Thrale was more congenial to Austen than “the anxious censor of his generation’s morals” (44) and had a direct impact on the development of her style. Frank Bradbrook in *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors* (1966) claims that the “fact that Jane Austen is known to have been influenced by Dr. Johnson has perhaps resulted in an underestimation of the range and profundity of her indebtedness to him” (10). Bradbrook believes that Johnson’s comments on style and his wit and seriousness can be seen in Austen’s novels: “the language of the two writers, the terminology that they use, is sometimes so close that one can hardly distinguish one from the other” (16-7). For a more recent study on the connection between Johnson and Austen, see Gloria Sybill Gross’s *In a Fast Coach with a Pretty Woman: Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson* (2002) who takes an innovative approach of tracing the process of influence rather than the product to evaluating the relationship between these two writers.

been viewed typically as antagonists, both share considerable similarities as moral philosophers interested in the eighteenth-century epistemological debate on the contested role of religion in practical morality. Whereas Hume disrupts the notion that religion is reasonable and assumes that morality is a matter of human sentiments communicated through sympathy, Johnson considered religion an “ethical code” necessary for “moral understanding” (Hudson 202-3). To Johnson, God desires the salvation and happiness of human beings, and provides them with a moral law by which they can live in obedience to his will, be happy in this life, and, through the salvation of Christ, be united to him in heaven. Ethics, therefore, rests on religion and it is the role of the writer to present

a life [lived] by the precepts of religion... to impress upon his [the reader's] mind so strong a sense of the importance of obedience to the divine will, of the value of the reward promised to virtue, and the terrors of the punishment denounced against crimes, as may overbear all the temptations which temporal hope or fear can bring in his way. (*The Rambler* vii, 10 April 1750)

Johnson bequeathed to writers, including Austen, the imperatives to create narratives of tempered and regulated passions and an understanding based on more concrete faculties than intuition or deduction. In *The Rambler*, Johnson encourages writers to teach readers “to bid equal defiance to joy and sorrow, to turn away at one time from the allurements of ambition, and push forward at another against the threats of calamity” (vii, 10 April 1750). As a moralist, Johnson endorses the use of the hope and fear of eternal rewards and punishments as “a social prophylactic” (Potkay 15) against worldly excess.

The call for overt “proselytizing” in novels was taken, Butler argues, “entirely seriously” (20) by writers against sentimentalism and Austen well understood her favourite

moralist's exhortation for writers to instruct rather than merely to entertain. Accordingly, she heeds Johnson's advice in *The Rambler* to craft narratives where is

exhibited the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability, for what we cannot credit, we shall never imitate, but the highest and purest that humanity can reach, which, exercised in such trials as the various revolutions of things shall bring upon it, may, by conquering some calamities, and enduring others, teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform. Vice, for vice is necessary to be shewn, should always disgust; nor should the graces of gaiety, or the dignity of courage, be so united with it, as to reconcile it to the mind. (iv, 31 March 1750)

Johnson's preference for exemplary characters whose "perfect idea" of commendable virtue is adherence to Christian morality rather than a subjectivity that separates reason from action had a considerable impact on the characterization of Marianne and Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*. Elinor is the character who most closely aligns with Johnson's articulation of a virtuous individual guided by reason based on Christian principles. Johnson's insistence on the regulation of passions, however, is rejected in Hume's moral philosophy. Marianne, as Elinor's foil, demonstrates, until her sickness, a life ruled by passions and its dangers.

Hume analyzes, as part of his science of man, the passions in Book Two of *A Treatise of Human Nature* and finds that volition and reasoning are directed by passions. Discounting physiological triggers, Hume locates the cause of a particular passion not in the private, inner lives of individuals but primarily in the ability for passions to flow freely between individuals. Feelings are caused by passions that are as "impersonal, and contagious, as viruses, visiting the breasts of men and women the way diseases visit the body" (Pinch 1).

They “are so contagious,” in fact, Hume declares, “that they pass with the greatest facility from one person to another” (386). Uncontained by boundaries, passions move with great fluidity and infect individuals, generating feelings and prompting physical actions, which Hume calls the “correspondent movements” (386), to propagate that same passion in others. The mobility of passions creates “agreeable movements” (Hume 386) through which passion is communicated to other human breasts so that they can also experience the passion. Hume describes his own mind being affected more by his surroundings than anything else: “Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth, and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition” (206). According to Hume, individuals cannot help themselves from being affected by passion, but this uncritical passivity, in Austen’s view, is dangerous because it connotes moral relativism. When an individual acts out of passion without first subjecting the impulse to Burkean principles for justification, such feelings and actions are self-indulgent and pose a threat to tradition and the status quo.

3 The Problem of Sympathy: The Dangers of a Performing Body

Foremost in Austen's assessment of the dangers in Hume's conception of the passions "as autonomous forms, stalking about as personifications, often in vexed and detached relations to the person presumed to be feeling them" (Pinch 1) are the ramifications that uncritical submission to the dictates of passion has on morality. Passions move wantonly around and individuals need to be careful not to indulge in feelings that are excited by passions or allow them to blind them to reality. *Sense and Sensibility's* "unremitting" (Butler 182) didacticism undermines Hume's hopes in the universal communication of sensibility to facilitate mutual understanding and the conformity of sentiment to produce social harmony. Social accord for Hume ultimately depends on sympathy – the physical transference of passion – in which impressions and ideas move between people to produce identical feelings. A common subjectivity produced by the unrestrained sharing and communication of transpersonal sentiments would permit the personal acquisition of the necessary social qualities. Raymond Williams describes the function of sympathy as the process by which an individual cultivated a sense of taste based on the possession, rather than lack, of passions (281). Sensibility, as the ability to feel the "agreeable movements" (Hume 386) of passions, thus ensures a harmonious society by binding its members together through shared feelings that transcended self-interest. *Sense and Sensibility*, however, deflates the benefits of sympathy by exploring the deleterious power of a performing body that acquiesces to passions.

In the beginning of the novel the three Dashwood sisters and their mother are in mourning when they are ousted from their home and are reluctantly forced to accept the help of a distant relation to move into his cottage in the West Country. Shedding tears as she bids

her “last adieus to a place so much beloved” (SS 64), Marianne – full of melancholy and intensity of feeling typical of a woman of sensibility – delivers elegiac apostrophes as she wanders the grounds of Norland on the eve of their departure: “Dear, dear Norland... when shall I cease to regret you! – when learn to feel at home elsewhere! – Oh! happy house, could you know what I suffer in now viewing you from this spot, from whence perhaps I may view you no more!” (SS 64). The frequent sighs and falling tears draw attention to her body, making it a more powerful signifier for the emotions that she feels than the words she expresses. As a woman of sensibility, Marianne uses the somatic gestures characteristic of sensibility such as “sighs, tears, and other physical signs” (Mullan 10) to demonstrate female propriety. Her banal manner of speaking relies on physical actions to display the true intensity of her feelings. Throughout the novel, her actions speak louder than her words. When Elinor recounts the contents of Willoughby’s confession after she recovers from her nearly fatal fever, Marianne is unable to speak but “unknowingly to herself” (SS 352) she presses her hand closely on Elinor’s while tears “covered her cheeks” and “she trembled, her eyes were fixed on the ground, and her lips became whiter than even sickness had left them” (SS 352). When she cannot speak articulately or at all, Marianne performs the inscribed system of gestures and expressions of sensibility.

The signs of sentiment that Marianne displays effectively transmit passions of sorrow and distress to those around her. Like a contagion, Marianne’s excessive grief affects Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood but the responses of the mother and her eldest daughter are utterly antithetical to each other. Completely uncritical of the feelings created by the infectious movement of passions, Mrs. Dashwood is overwhelmed by her sympathy to her younger daughter’s agony and becomes completely incapacitated. In the “violence of the affliction”

(SS 45) instigated by the unexpected arrival of Mrs. John Dashwood and the understanding that they would not be permitted to stay long at Norland, Marianne and her mother suffer “agony of grief” which “overpowered them at first” but when they recovered, they “voluntarily renewed” (SS 45) their sorrows. The pain is “sought for” and is “created again and again” (SS 45) to the point that it becomes mutually reinforcing and irresistible: both mother and daughter “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” (SS 45). Mrs. Dashwood’s susceptibility demonstrates the problem in Humean moral philosophy regarding individuality and an authentic sense of agency and self identity. When actions are responses to feelings prompted by wandering passions, they threaten to take away any sense of autonomy and personal integrity. The transmission of passions through sympathy takes away any control one has over one’s own feelings and makes people alike. The resemblance between mother and daughter, Austen notes, is “strikingly great” (SS 44). Looks can be infectious and allow passions to spread from face to face; but when the feelings produced by passions are not discriminately handled, differences between individuals become blurred.

Novels of sentiment, according to Pinch, frequently explored the origins and locations of feelings and often discovered that one’s feelings may not really be one’s own (5). The harm in locating subjectivity externally is that it dissolves the possibility of any internal integrity. Sensibility becomes doubly dangerous when it threatens to leave an individual as nothing more than an empty site for passions to invade. The effect of the movement of grief between Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood shows how sympathy can be mutually destructive by breaking down proper restraints and exceeding proper distinctions. Sensibility also leads to

potentially anarchic behaviour and completely invalidates an individual of any control over one's own responses to feelings. Johnson warned of the need to combat craven passions with "worthy" reason because "by every victory over appetite or passion, new strength is added to the mind" (*The Rambler* lvii, 2 October 1750). Mrs. Dashwood's "eagerness of mind" produced "feelings [that] were strong" but unlike Elinor who "knew how to govern them... it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn" (SS 45). Mrs. Dashwood's inability to resist acting on the feelings produced by passion "generally... led to imprudence" (SS 45). In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen argues that models of the feminine ideal are innately virtuous and learn to be self-critical and self-restraining. The knowledge that Mrs. Dashwood lacks is the awareness of the fallibility of the individual's subjective life and the need to be suspicious of emotions. Because she does not reject the excessive sensibility, she cannot embrace the distance, rather than the commonality, that separates individuals in Smith's conception of sympathy and the operation of sentiments in society. Mother and daughter feed off and increase each other's melancholia because their minds are only concerned with themselves. To avoid being overtaken easily by excessive external affections, Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne must learn the Smithean principle of seeing "with the eyes of other people or as other people are likely to view them" (128).

Marianne's performance of the physical code of sensibility fails to move Elinor. Elinor sees "with concern, the excess of her sister's sensibility" but her "strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment" (SS 45) prevent her from acting on her feelings. She feels what her sister feels: "[Elinor], too, was deeply afflicted" (SS 46). However, she "exerts herself" (SS46) to control the influence of passion and her confident sense of reason teaches her fortitude and the need to avoid being excited by feelings. Her characterization is

Johnsonian in “refusing those solicitations by which the young and vivacious are hourly assaulted” (*The Rambler* lvii, 2 October 1750) and Austen will, in the course of the novel, “set... [her] above the reach of extravagance and folly” (Johnson, lvii, 2 October 1750) as an example of the epistemology of individuality and femininity based on Christian principles.

The cultural investment in the body’s capacity to derive authority from expressions and at the same time manipulate and perform signs to convey meaning presented a disordering ability of sensibility to substantiate an individual’s clearly deficient interiority. Austen uses the episode in which Elinor and Marianne meet an anonymous gentleman, later identified as Robert Ferrars, and his histrionic selection of a toothpick case at Gray’s to indict sensibility’s power to disguise and, perhaps, even to permit socially disruptive activities. The focus of sensibility on the body’s ability to perform the correct set of signs can be manipulated, if needed, to provide a cover for serious aberrations, including deviations from heterosexual normativity. Assuming meaning and identity from signs by projecting meaning on otherwise empty forms allows Robert to evade the potentially contentious issue of homosexuality and pretend that the subversion homosexuality poses to marriage and the patriarchal establishment it maintains is really nonexistent. D. A. Miller points out that jewellery in Austen’s novels, though ubiquitous, are limited to two conditions: “it must always have been *given* to the wearer, and given *only* by a relative or lover, in token of union through marriage or common blood” (11, italics original). There is “no jewellery without donation, and no donation outside the prospect of alliance” (Miller 11). Robert’s toothpick-case, which falls clearly outside the semantic parameters Austen associates with jewellery, signals his departure from acceptable social alliances and homosexual unions.

Robert is ostentatious about his accessory and spends a considerable amount of time carefully considering “its size, shape, and ornaments... all of which, after examining and debating for a quarter of an hour over every toothpick-case in the shop, were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy” (SS 238). The object, despite the exorbitant amount of time Robert invests in selecting it, is trivial and hardly worthy of intricate inspection of its every detail but as a metonymic representation for the display and show that Robert puts on to hide his homosexuality.⁶ Austen links Robert’s flamboyant display, which hints of homosexuality, with her critique of Hume’s attention to display and the desire for decorum to be maintained by body language that discounts what is truly inside as long as the exterior is acceptable. Hume’s philosophy allows for the possibility of social approbation of dishonest performances and concealment of subversive interiority so long as the performance is satisfactory.

Already when Elinor first enters Gray’s she notes that the “correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste proved to be beyond his politeness” (SS 238). Davidson argues that Hume uses politeness to articulate ideas about dissimulation that fundamentally embrace morality as “chiefly a matter of *appearances*” (50, italics mine). That Robert is beyond polite, Miller contends, intimates an “unheterosexual” (16) foppishness further reinforced by his effeminacy. The inordinate amount of time that Robert spends on the trifle invites speculation about his sexuality and masculinity but they are never called in direct doubt

⁶ “Certainly,” Miller comments, “none will ever share with him the single toothpick, of ivory or gold, placed inside it.... Yet this paltry content... is precisely what intensifies our sense that the container contains *nothing*” (13). Miller argues that the bejewelled trinket “brings out the insistence of a self-containment where what is contained amounts to little more... than the container” (13). Living almost half a century before the epistemological discourse of homosexuality, and because Austen’s social position compelled her to appear ignorant, even if she was not, of certain matters, “the integral portrait of Robert confirms the utter unrepresentability of anything beyond the signs” (Miller 17). Robert displays what cannot be expressed; his presentation of heterosexuality is a front for the “proto-homosexuality [that] merely shades an all the more purely felt blankness” (Miller 17).

because he “does it with the cool, easy, altogether undisputed authority of a man... and imposes [it] on all around him” (Miller 19).

Hume’s insistence on appearances saves Robert; that “he has nonetheless retained the phallus... gives him their ideal form” (Miller 19) and protects him from social ostracization. Although Robert “reveals the Woman in him” (Miller 19), he is not robbed of the smallest bit of male entitlement and does not suffer the least ancillary social demotion. He is not socially diminished; he suffers no economic setbacks; his unrepresentability is unimportant because he later inherits the entire Ferrars estate. He escapes censure precisely because he performs the role of a male and fulfils masculine obligations by marrying Lucy Steele. The façade he effects, if unconvincing to the reader because the marriage is so obviously perfunctory as it is so rushed and brief that it easily elides into Lucy’s account, is sufficient for a society that is nothing if not obdurately fixated on surfaces. In fact, John Dashwood proclaims that between Robert and Edward “there can be no difference... they are both very agreeable young men” (SS 307). Despite having given up entirely his virility and the behaviours associated with masculine content, Robert “*gets away with it*” (Miller 19, italics original) because of his physical exterior. Robert reveals the immense power and inestimable value of sensibility and exteriority to impose acceptability and superficial masculinity on a “silly and a great coxcomb” (SS 174) who is unabashedly feminine and to discount devirilization and the threat it poses to patriarchal stability.

Sensibility, according to Burkean political formulations, should produce benevolence and inspire intuitive feelings of love and sympathy for the family, and by extension, the neighbourhood and nation; similarly, by natural association, the love shown to the head of the family should also be felt for the head of the state. Despite her conservatism, Austen

reveals the dangers of sensibility not only as threatening to women, but also as sources of moral contamination and political subversion for men. Heads of families are also at risk. John Dashwood is not immune to the vagaries of passion that distract him from proper paternal conduct. His body as a corpus for the infiltration and expression of feelings renders him vulnerable to benevolence as well as malevolence. Desirable selfless feelings are vulnerable to the invading passions. Sensibility turns individuals into the powerless victims of contagious passions that can overpower even well-intentioned feelings. John Dashwood, after taking possession of Norland, treats the Dashwood women “with as much kindness as he could feel towards any body” (SS 46) and his affection for his sisters prompts him to considerable generosity with a gift of three thousand pounds but his magnanimity is immediately checked by his wife’s churlish disbelief that he would take so considerable a sum “from the fortune of their dear little boy” (SS 47). She inflates the pecuniary harm and exaggerates how the financial assistance would “impoverish” and “rob his child” “to the most dreadful degree” (SS 47). An overflow of emotions, Austen demonstrates, is not necessarily beneficial and can be potentially disruptive by enabling dangerous and inhumane passions to override undeniably Christian values that originate within and endanger the most fundamental unit of conservative society.

Mrs. John Dashwood’s unchristian and ungenerous sentiment disregards Christ’s command to love one’s neighbour as one’s self and discounts the parable of the ineligibility of the man who hoards treasures in this world (or the woman who encourages him to do so) from getting into the kingdom of heaven (Poovey 184). Her parsimony suppresses her husband’s compassion and allows her to manipulate his charity by convincing him “a present of fifty pounds” is sufficient to “prevent their ever being distressed for money” (SS 48).

Nearly everything in the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* undermines the assumption in Humean philosophy that the transpersonal transmission of passions can bring social harmony because men and women are equally fallible to the risks of passions overpowering rational thinking. External passions can overwhelm feelings that originate within an individual. Without prudence and careful consideration of a feeling against Burkean moral principles, an individual who follows passions threatens to allow the invading passions to suppress even the most selfless of feelings. Mary Poovey argues that there is a tendency for the “individual will to triumph over principle and individual desire to prove more compelling than moral law” (Poovey 184) in *Sense and Sensibility*. John Dashwood wants to act generously towards his sisters but his compassion is overcome by passion.

A rational guide for the will based on Christian morality is needed to control potentially injurious impulses. Disputing with Burke’s faith in sensibility in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* for stability, Austen, like other writers in the aftermath of the French Revolution, nonetheless agrees with his argument about the stabilizing power of the Established Church as “the cornerstone of national unity” to “bolster hegemonic power” (Taylor 59). The church establishment, as “the first of our prejudices,” Burke writes, is “not a prejudice destitute of reason, but involving in it profound and extensive wisdom” (111). “The consecration of the state by a state religious establishment is necessary... to secure... freedom” because such an institution can “preserve the structure [of the state] from profanation and ruin” (Burke 111) by imposing order. Christianity as the “religion connected with the state” safeguards tradition in a society where citizens are entitled “to private sentiments and the management of their own family concerns” (Burke 111). In the face of instability and shifting subjectivities, Christian principles make all citizens accountable “for

their conduct... to the one great Master, Author, and Founder of society” (Burke 111) by providing an external symbol of national cohesion.

4 Marianne Dashwood and the Need for Control: Reason, Enthusiasm, and Passion

A moralist resembling Johnson in many ways, Austen agrees with him that the passions need to be “sufficiently regulated” (*The Rambler* vi, 7 April 1750) by Christian principles and tradition. The explicit ideological point Austen tries to impress on readers is a femininity that allows Christian principles to rule capricious passions. *Sense and Sensibility* is “consciously structured around a series of ironic oppositions, which work to deflate fixed notions” (Byrne 108) but she does not inveigh against sensibility senselessly. Austen balances her sympathies between the two heroines as they are played off against one another but ultimately recommends prudence over impulse and conformity to an objective code of behaviour over subjective legitimization that leaves out the role of reason.

“The fallacy,” argues Hume, “of... the greatest part of moral philosophy, antient and modern” is the assumption of the “suppos’d pre-eminence of reason above passion” (265). The “blindness, unconstancy, and deceitfulness” (Hume 265) of reason disqualifies it from moving humans to action and achievement: “reason alone can never by a motive to any action of the will” (265). Hume goes as far as to deny reason and passion from any contention for domination because “a passion can never, in any sense, be call’d unreasonable... ’tis impossible that reason and passion can ever oppose each other, or dispute for the government of the will and actions” (267). The critique of reason in Book Two of *Treatise* asserts the supremacy of passion: “reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them” (266). Hume’s polemic against reason rests on the explanation that the will is influenced by “calm and violent passions” (268). Calm passions, although they “produce little emotion in the

mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation” (Hume 267), are nonetheless “real passions” and should not be “confounded” (267) for reason. Any argument for reason in the government of the will is thus a mere “illusion” (Mullan 22); the very philosophical “foundation” of “morals” is and can only be an “account of the passions” (Hume 408). Austen is anxious to control the moral anarchy that is unleashed when reason is subjugated to strong appeals of passions. By bending the imaginative engagement of the reader to the service of moral education, she highlights the dangers of subjective impulse ungrounded in reason and unrestrained by prescribed Christian standards.

Elinor and Marianne’s relationships with Edward and Willoughby are compared expressly for the purpose of demonstrating each girls’ scale of values and to assert the need for reason to restrain passion. Marianne, already established in the opening chapter as the woman of sensibility and most representative of Humean moral philosophy, indicates her ethical position aesthetically. She has reservations about Edward as a lover. He lacks physical attractiveness and is “not recommended to their good opinion by any peculiar graces of person or address” because he is “not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing” (SS 53). Willoughby is, on the other hand, “uncommonly handsome” (SS 79) and his “so frank and so graceful” (SS 79) manner recommends him immediately to Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood. Marianne feels Edward lacks “fire and spirit” (Butler 185) and she complains of Edward’s tame and passionless temperament when he reads her favourite poet, Cowper: “To hear those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild, pronounced with such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference!” (SS 55). Only a short time after Marianne and Willoughby meet, however, the two develop an intensely

intimate bond where “the same books, the same passages were idolized by each” (SS 83). Hearing Edward read “with so little sensibility” (SS 55) because he does not “enter subjectively into the emotions of a writer” (Butler 185), Marianne protests to her mother that it “would have broke *my* heart had I loved him” (SS 55).

The two suitors and the sisters’ responses to them are carefully contrasted to situate the sisters on a moral plane that Austen is using to evaluate proper femininity. Elinor, following the Johnsonian prescription for rational characterization, loves Edward and overlooks his apparent aesthetic deficiencies because she espouses Johnson’s definition recorded in Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* that happiness is found in “being rational” (72). Marianne, in contrast, who cannot love a man who does not give free rein to the intuitive side of his nature, endorses Hume’s solution that happiness is found in a man of exquisite feeling capable of deriving one’s happiness or misery from “a comparison with other objects” as he “observe[s] a greater or less share of happiness or misery in others... [to] make an estimate... and feel a consequent pain or pleasure” (Hume 242). When individuals witness “the misery of another [it] gives us a more lively idea of our happiness, and his happiness of our misery” (Hume 242). The former, therefore, produces delight; and the latter uneasiness. Marianne is ruled by “an intuitive response... and whole-hearted impulsiveness” (Butler 186) that defies rationality. Elinor’s aesthetic tastes lead to a life of self-effacement, stability, consideration for the feelings of others, and, ultimately, conformity to social protocol that is independent of personal prejudice, but Marianne, who “could never love by halves” (SS 380), is swiftly consumed by the anarchic power of sensibility aroused by Willoughby’s charm, and begins to talk soon of marriage even before “her own family do know it” (SS 196).

Marianne subjects reason to passion because she is “confident” (Butler 188) of the natural benevolence of human nature but her misplaced faith leads to eventual heartache. Marianne is completely unaware of the duplicitous and venal habits of her suitor because she allows passions, mutually reinforced by Willoughby reciprocation, to motivate her actions. Willoughby, also guided by an equally inflated sense of self-worship that disdains to conform to the dictates of propriety and general civility, may have “thought the same [as Marianne]; and their behaviour, at all times, was an illustration of their opinions” (SS 88), but his behaviour is reprehensible because he is a liar and an actor who proceeds to bind himself to one woman no sooner than he proceeds to engage the heart of another. Willoughby’s actions exemplify the dangers of an individual who fabricates passions to influence another. Inverting the benevolence Hume thought sympathy produced and perpetuated, Willoughby’s volitionality manipulates Marianne, who is so easily affected by passion. His false sympathy shows how appearances can be profoundly deceiving. Austen is doubtful of the essentially frank interchange of passion that Hume imagined in *Treatise* and Willoughby’s feigned sentiments towards Marianne suggests the potential danger that Humean sympathy presented to women if one is able to make up feelings to elicit a desired response. Even though Willoughby, as the sisters later decide when they read his letters, perhaps “*did* feel the same... for weeks and weeks he felt it” (SS 210), scepticism is necessary if one is to avoid constant error. Without reason, Austen declares that “the imaginations” of some people “will carry them away to form wrong judgments of our conduct, and to decide on it by slight appearances” (SS 263). Elinor’s “fussy pedantry” (C. Johnson 63) and an allegiance to doctrines of propriety derive from a mistrust of her own passions and the need to protect herself from delusion and excess.

The characterization of Elinor and Marianne is also suggestive of the deeper religious struggle between the High Church and Methodism, among the various dissenting sects, that threatened the authority of the Established Church. Elinor, with her strong adherence to self-control and Christian principles, provides a solution to the problems posed by the loss of self-control produced by religious enthusiasm. Marianne, on the other hand, I argue, exhibits behaviours that suggest the enthusiasm found in critiques of Methodism because she exudes passion and is in danger of inappropriate femininity. Methodism is impassioned in the Humean sense of vagrant feelings. Marianne's behaviour, which resembles descriptions of Methodist preachers at times, I argue, is part of Austen's use of anti-Methodist rhetoric that criticised Methodist ministers for religious enthusiasm. Austen has a personal connection to the religious debates surrounding the development of Methodism, which began in eighteenth-century Britain. The preferment of lay preachers and disregard for parish boundaries of Methodism directly challenged the Anglican establishment; the controversy between founder John Wesley and the ordination of ministers, Jeremy Gregory argues, further proved that Methodists wanted to establish a rival church (150).

Dissenting groups presented a challenge to the authority of the confessional state and the integrity of the Anglican Church that, Mark Canuel claims, was enforced through oaths, tests, and penal laws over all aspects of British civil and political life; the challenge of Methodism and the different dissenting sects amounted to nothing less than the very survival of Britain's social body (Canuel 2-12). Austen was fully cognizant, from her family's connection to the High Church, that national unity was at stake and the status quo depended "upon a uniformity of belief, and supported by sanctions designed to enforce that uniformity.... Unsettling that uniformity by admitting adherents of nonconforming faiths

would endanger not only the ‘security of church and state’ but Britain’s ‘national humanity’” (Canuel 12). The Established Church was “less important for assuring the salvation of British souls than for procuring and extending the present social order” (Canuel 13). Shoring up support for Burke’s defence of the hegemony of the church as a vital part of the British nation, Austen defends the Established Church as crucial for national cohesion.

The dominance of the Anglican establishment, maintained to the exclusion of all other religious institutions, was required to protect the peace, order, and happiness of the nation. Elinor’s sense of prudence suggests Burke’s religious prejudice, significantly “not a prejudice destitute of reason, but involving in it profound and extensive wisdom” (Burke 72). Through Elinor’s behaviour, Austen expresses her recognition of Burke’s argument that the Church of England is the Anglican Church and as such is the “parent to the nation’s children and a repository of proper values and human affect” (Canuel 17-18). Anglicanism was part of the inherited tradition that the British must “preserve... from profanation and ruin” (Burke 72) and the “sacred temple” that they were to protect “from all... impurities” (Burke 72) including the exclusion of impious or nonconforming members of the national community. Acting as Burke’s “provident proprietor” (72), Austen is determined to safeguard and shore up support for Anglicanism.

The “frantic” (Goring 70) tirades and extravagant bodily expressions of Methodist preaching drew large followings, especially among the lower classes, and took root in areas where Anglicanism was weakest. Its vehement style of preaching and conspicuously powerful audience responses, that sometimes attracted as many as thirty thousand people (Goring 71), revealed the popularity Methodist preachers enjoyed and, by contrast, the very characteristics that Anglican priests lacked. Methodism presented a direct and obvious

challenge to the unemotive delivery associated with Anglican liturgy (Goring 70). The eccentricity of Methodist preaching, however, quickly became “apprehended as dangerous alternatives to all that was proper, intelligent, sociable, and truly religious” (Goring 61). In *The History of Modern Enthusiasm, from the Reformation to the Present Times*, Theophilus Evans provides an account of a Methodist meeting where the preacher’s manner of delivery

is generally very *boisterous* and *shocking*, and adapted to the best of their Skill, to alarm the Imagination, and to raise a Ferment in the Passions, often attended with screaming and trembling of the Body. The Preacher... grows more tempestuous and dreadful in his Manner of Address, stamps and shrieks, and endeavours all he can to increase the rising Consternation.... And to compleat the Work, the Preacher has his Recourse still to more frightful Representations; that *he sees Hell-flames flashing in their Faces*; and that *they are now! now! now! dropping into Hell! into the Bottom of Hell!* This boisterous Method seldom or never fails to set them screaming; and very often they grow distracted. (119)

Eccentric preaching was a hallmark of Methodist sermons and leaders frequently pushed the emphasis on the expressive potential of the body to an extreme that were deemed by many to “overstep the bounds of acceptable, sane behaviour” (Goring 61). In sermons by John “Orator” Henley, a prominent leader of the Methodist movement, attention was placed on the somatic elements of his performance and audiences who went to his Oratory were shocked by “a violent physical affront – an offensive, bodily assault... in which Henley’s every limb and feature is guilty of excessive gesture” (Goring 68). Although Henley died before Austen began writing, many of his followers continued his controversial fashion of delivering sermons and habitually demonstrated passions with their whole bodies and encouraged

bodily excess as indicators of “inspired” religious practice that prompted fierce backlash from the Anglican clergy against the spirit of enthusiasm that Methodists took as the sign of true faith.

Anti-Methodists associated Methodists as being tainted with enthusiasm, the religious error that made “equal the imaginations of men to the holy scripture of God, and think them as much the inspiration of God, as what was dictated as such, to the holy prophets, and apostles” (Mee 2). Enthusiasm became “a pejorative term describing an excess of religious zeal” that many Methodists believed could be used to draw man closer to God and justify “the belief in oneself to have an immediate relationship with one’s God, to believe oneself able to apprehend his will directly, or be his peculiar favourite” (Mee 9). Anglican reactions disputed the immediate apprehension of God’s will and even Johnson in his *Dictionary of the English Language* defined enthusiasm as “a vain belief of private revelation; a vain confidence of Divine favour or communication” related to a “violence of passion... [and an] elevation of fancy and exaltation of ideas” (120). Enthusiasm, then, was seen to be a type of “*destructive* passion that carried implications of mad behaviour and social disruption” (Goring 76, italics original). Jon Mee points out that members of the High Church frequently ridiculed Methodists’ ability to hear the voice of God as susceptibility to passion and impulses arising from excited feelings within the body because of the distinctive “shaking and quaking” (12) that characterized many Methodist meetings by believers as signs of the New Birth. The physical convulsions and “physical uncontrol,” Goring claims, were attributed by detractors to madness (73). Methodism became increasingly seen as “a religion that brought to the body a loss of control... celebrating and publicising uninhibited expressions of emotion” (Goring 73) that suggested to many contemporaries that Methodism

and sensibility were really one and the same, that Methodism was simply the religious form of sentimentalism because of the emphasis placed on passions as indicators of virtue.

Enthusiasm is “infectious” and spreads like passion “by a kind of electric communication everywhere” (Mee 91), and once infected, enthusiasm acts upon the individual in arrogantly anti-social ways that disregards proper etiquette. The feelings excited by enthusiasm blind individuals to reality and, as a result, individuals indulge in passion. Not long after Willoughby first rescues Marianne, they “converse with the familiarity of a long-established acquaintance” (SS 83) and the two develop quite an intimate bond: “the same books, the same passages were idolized by each – or, if any difference appeared, any objection arose, it lasted no longer than till the force of her arguments and the brightness of her eyes could be displayed. He acquiesced in all her decisions” (SS 83). Once she succumbs to the passion of enthusiasm, Marianne, grossly indulgent in her infatuation with Willoughby, is not concerned that she has no real access to any knowledge about her suitor’s past, and even worse, that she has “no grounds for even suspecting that they lack such knowledge” (C. Johnson 59). Everything they do “follows the same pattern of shared selfishness” (Butler 187) driven by passions. Hurrying forward with dauntless ardour and energized by sexual attraction, Marianne is “led away... to fancy and expect” (SS 370), absolutely uninhibited by the reason of conventional and moral restraints to ensure that her lover’s intentions are constant and that his character is trustworthy. Willoughby becomes “her alter ego” (Butler 187) without any justification of her complete trust in his innate goodness.

When Elinor chides her for speaking to Willoughby without reserve about all her favourite subjects, Marianne’s retort outlines the cramped boundaries of acceptable

conversation: “I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum! I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful. Had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared” (SS 83). Marianne, with mocking solicitousness, shows her disregard for proper social protocol. Enthusiasm for Willoughby, which “easily becomes obsessive once infatuation begins” leads to “mania which overrides any regard for decorum or established social protocol” (Mee 31). Concerns over the effects of enthusiasm and the dangers of Hume’s sympathy are played out in this short exchange. Marianne’s love for Willoughby gives sympathy the opportunity to pass his passions to her. His defiance of propriety, to pursue Marianne’s affections “without a thought of returning it” (SS 334) and authority, by offending Mrs. Smith, are transmitted to her and emboldens her defiance of commonplace notions of decorum, which Elinor reminds her of, as “a matter of principle” (C. Johnson 45) that she uses to justify her rejection of the arbitrariness and rationality of established standards. Her dismissal of established boundaries reveals the capacity of Hume’s sympathy to blind individuals from objectivity and accepted behaviours because sympathy thoroughly effaces difference by making individuals copies of each other. Sympathy enables the immediate creation within an individual of the “passions and sentiments of others” (Hume 208). The pleasure or pain of others becomes the individual’s own pleasure or pain; another’s passion and behaviour affects and becomes one’s own feeling and behaviour. Hume makes considerable effort in *Treatise* to emphasize the potential for the creation of positive social relationships and increased communication in sympathy: “nature has preserv’d a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may

not find a parallel in ourselves” (Hume 207). Through sympathy there is an “instantaneous” (Hume 207) transformation of an “idea” into an “impression” so as to become “the very passion itself and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection” (Hume 207). The reciprocal exchange of ideas and impressions, which can also be unidirectional as in this case, however, intensifies Marianne’s passions for Willoughby and she begins to act like him to the point where she is no longer acting rationally in her love for him.

When Marianne returns from her trip with Willoughby to Allenham, to see the property that he will inherit, Elinor censures her for having committed an act of gross indecency. When Mrs. Jennings mentions to Marianne that she knew where she had spent the morning, Marianne’s immediate response suggests implicit guilt: “Marianne coloured, and replied very hastily, ‘Where, pray?’” (SS 101). Marianne tries to defuse the tension by “turn[ing] away in great confusion” (SS 101) but her awkward reactions intimate illicit sexual behaviour, a topic always available to Austen but one which she refused to foreground in her works (C. Johnson 55). Marianne declines to explain further and Elinor, anxious to know, discovers that they had “spent a considerable time there in walking about the garden and going all over the house” (SS 101). Touring Allenham is innocuous but not when a couple in love visits an unoccupied house unattended. Elinor reprimands Marianne’s recalcitrance to acquiesce to her passions and ignore the established standards of socially acceptable behaviour: “‘I am afraid,’ replied Elinor, ‘that the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety’” (SS 102). More important than whether sexual seduction occurred is Marianne’s resolve to judge for herself and disregard Christian morality.

Anti-Methodists, Mee claims, thought enthusiasm rendered individuals “incapable of conforming to proper codes of behaviour” and deluded them into believing that they could be

“committed to [the] self-sufficiency of his or her persuasion” (14). Marianne’s behaviour resembles this anti-Methodist critique. Blithely unaware of any wrongdoing after returning from Allenham, Marianne insists on relying on her own intuition: “had there been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure” (SS 102). Marianne’s enthusiastic mind explains her denunciation of accepted norms and her insistence on “the inward monitor [that] causes her to ignore manners and protocols” (Moore 318). Her inability to see that virtuous conduct is an “arduous business, involving painful adjustments to the controlling forms of society, and unpleasant frustration of personal proclivities” (Tanner 97) is a further avowal of Mee’s point that enthusiasm is “violent and disruptive” (30) and its ecstasies often resist reason.

Marianne, lacking the wisdom and learning of her sister, is indifferent to external exigencies of female propriety, and adheres instead to the “Rousseauistic idea that innate human impulses are good and that it is society that obstructs or corrupts” (Tanner 98). Her guileless sincerity and faith in the innately moral that asserts for the right to spontaneous and unequivocal feelings which also legitimizes sympathy’s externalization of meaning by believing that the feelings that spontaneously well up within a person can only be honourable and good. Anglican criticism of enthusiasm claimed that enthusiasm obscures the mind and “threatens the foundations of objective knowledge” (Mee 40); in Marianne, enthusiasm clouds her ability to recognize the Christian perspective to which Austen subscribed that took a “gloomy view of man’s unredeemed nature” (Butler 183). Sympathy and enthusiasm replace the adequacies of reason or a religious moral standard against which to measure propriety.

Austen attacks the enthusiasm to which Marianne is susceptible because of her sensibility. Many of Marianne's actions indicate the cause in her susceptibility to the spirit of enthusiasm that is characterized by "obsession" and a "mania that allowed individuals to be swept up in a single idea" (Mee 52). Marianne's sensible nature is full of enthusiasm and because of the free flow of emotions and the body's natural susceptibility to passion, Willoughby catches "all her enthusiasm" (SS 83). He even shares her preference in everything including books and authors and they "speedily discovered that their enjoyment of dancing and music was mutual, and that it arose from a general conformity of judgment in all that related to either" (SS 83). But the excess of enthusiasm produces a "behaviour of deviance" that distances the individual from making rational decisions and enables the corrupted "imagination to be mistaken for external reality" (Mee 29). Passion takes over Marianne and she is unable to see the objective truth; she indulges in the passion of enthusiasm. Her enthusiastic mind subjects reason to her intuitive judgement and because she is unscrupulously abandoned to the inexplicable excess of love, she discards modesty – the only defence that Claudia Johnson argues "ostensibly protects women from the hazards of vulnerability, from avowing love without first securing a return" (59). Marianne's self-conscious irrationality hurts her later when she is deceived by Willoughby but her almost immediate senseless attachment to him demonstrates Austen's critique of the moral and emotional hazards involved in Hume's dismissal of reason to govern passion. Because she refuses to approach her relationship with Willoughby rationally and cautiously, her impulsiveness brings her eventual pain. Marianne's brash and subjective response to Willoughby "suggests all feeling, [and] little or no intellectual detachment" (Butler 186) that foreshadows physical harm that will be corrected, as Samuel Johnson suggests, by "trials...

[and] by conquering some calamities, and enduring others” (*The Rambler* iv, 31 March 1750)
such as devastating heartbreak and illness.

5 Restraint of Passion: Marianne's Illness as Cure

Marianne's optimism about human nature propagates an adverse view of both convention and the necessary drama that society requires of its members. Before her nearly fatal fever, Marianne wilfully disregards compulsory compliance to the rules of social etiquette; after her illness, however, her values are reformed and she learns to accept the inevitable theatricality of society. This ironic use of theatricality throughout *Sense and Sensibility* I argue is part of Austen's almost homeopathic use of theatre to accompany her criticism of the excess of passion in sensibility and to help contain it. Marianne, until her nearly fatal fever, abhors "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" (SS 88). She rejects conservative notions like the one recommending reserve and concealment to young ladies that generations have ratified by their wisdom and usefulness (C. Johnson 97). Marianne opposes the authority of customary practice and rational analysis; in her opinion, "restraint" (SS 88) in conduct with males is only necessary if the sentiments custom would have her conceal are "in themselves illaudible" (SS 88) and her infinite hope in the natural goodness of human nature precludes any doubt of disingenuous intentions. Hiding one's true feelings in order to conform to social expectations and play the part of a proper female produces false shame that arises from the judgements of censorious neighbours and are therefore categorically different from "real disgrace" (SS 88) and "real impropriety" (SS 102).

Until her illness, Marianne equates forms and conventions with falsity and she will not join in the social masquerade. Her "usual inattention to the forms of general civility" (SS

170), noted in a card game with Lady Middleton, is mentioned throughout the novel. Society and its rules are, for Marianne, as trivial as the endless whist that others delight to play; characteristically “she would never learn the game” (SS 190). A typical moment occurs when an insincere compliment to a cold lady invites corroboration: “‘What a sweet woman Lady Middleton is,’ said Lucy Steele. Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor, therefore, the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell” (SS 49). Marianne’s astringent view that society is indeed maintained by necessary lies and observance of the rules of propriety jars with her need for sincerity. Sympathy requires general resemblance between individuals to convert ideas into corresponding impressions. Marianne cannot tolerate lying because dissembling impedes frank and complete mutual understanding. Sympathy conflicts with the maintenance of civil society which Austen believes is based on conformity to appropriate manners and subjecting personal desires to abiding by the protocols of etiquette. Elinor, who understands and accepts social obligations, lies when necessary in order to preserve decorum.

Despite Marianne’s intractable disregard for politeness that is incongruous to Austen’s social vision and ultimately incompatible with her construction of feminine propriety that females must recognize and conform to social codes of behaviour, Austen nonetheless spares Marianne from any severe reprimand. Austen may be careful to subjugate passion but her principled treatment of Marianne shows a certain degree of latitude for passionate outbursts that decry social performances of etiquette when the aim of passion is not to achieve selfish desire but sincerity and truthfulness. Austen opposes performativity that deludes, as in the case of Robert Ferrars at Gray’s, but she can tolerate refusal, albeit only to a limited degree because Marianne does ultimately learn the “folly” and “error” (SS

355) of her impulsiveness to reject social protocol and “regrets” (SS 355) her imprudence when she recovers from her illness. While every individual may have a different inner world of feelings and thoughts, there is only one concrete external world in which all must cohabit. Austen, with unsparing clarity, sees that the theatricality of social conventions masks socially undesirable qualities such as cruelty, repression, and malice. In a world of complete sincerity where individuals always tell the truth for the sake of their own feelings and never any lies for the feelings of others, socially disruptive forces could potentially be unleashed. Marianne disparages conventions and, like Hume, desires society grounded in the constancy of individuals but complete honesty, Austen suggests, would be anarchic. A certain measure of theatricality is needed to maintain civility.

As a woman of sensibility, Marianne’s body is an “ever visible corpus of signs given over to the practice of interpretation” (Mullan 221). Humean sympathy allows a vocabulary of physical gestures to be read and displayed on the body. Instead of letting sensibility reveal exceptional virtue in Marianne as a “positive desocialisation too exalted and committed to exquisite emotional integrity” (Tanner 78), Austen chooses to make it a “negative desocialization” (Tanner 78) that often retreats into melancholy. Austen takes Marianne’s sensibility to the harmful extreme, where excess becomes self-destructive and produces sickness. Marianne’s sensibility that maintains a commitment to honesty and repudiates any form dissimulation and deception, even when they are required by social protocol, Austen shows is really a cause of serious disturbance. Instead of using sensibility to function as a token of Marianne’s refinement, Austen reverses the privilege accompanied by susceptibility to the powers of feeling. It is no accident that, of all poets, Marianne reads and adores Cowper but it is also her sensitivity to feeling that makes her susceptible to the poet’s

madness by enthusiasm (Mee 29) and lifelong struggle from “low spirits approaching to derangement” (Mullan 210). Cowper’s fate foreshadows Marianne’s nearly fatal fever in volume three and her precarious constitution that bordered on madness.

Extreme enthusiasm produces madness. Evidence of Marianne’s heightened sensitivity to feelings leading to the impairment of her health begins with Willoughby’s incomprehensibly cruel treatment of her after he first leaves and when he informs her a little later of his engagement to someone else. The unanticipated jilt and ensuing wretchedness become too much for the body that she uses as the expressive vehicle for emotions. After Willoughby leaves and even before she receives his heartbreaking letter, Marianne begins to suffer the privileged affliction of sensibility; she experiences “head-aches, low-spirits, and over-fatigues” (SS 187) which gradually worsens. Later, she is “wholly dispirited, careless of her appearance, and seeming equally indifferent whether she went or staid, prepared, without one look of hope, or one expression of pleasure” (SS 198). For a while she is almost catatonic: “without once stirring from her seat, or altering her attitude, lost in her own thoughts and insensible of her sister's presence” (SS 198). When she shows Elinor the letter which Willoughby sends disclaiming any understanding between them, she “covering her face with her handkerchief, almost screamed with agony” (SS 204). After this episode, Marianne’s condition deteriorates. “Faint and giddy from a long want of proper rest and food,” with an “aching head, a weakened stomach, and a general nervous faintness” (SS 206), Marianne mourns her loss but “no attitude could give her ease; and in restless pain of mind and body she moved from one posture to another, till growing more and more hysterical, her sister could with difficulty keep her on the bed at all” (SS 212). Her pathetic state continues at intervals until she contracts the fever which nearly kills her. Austen devotes an entire

chapter describing the course of the illness from the time the doctor pronounces “her disorder to have a putrid tendency” (SS 316), through the accelerations of her pulse, the incoherence of her mind, her “rapid decay” and “stupor” (SS 321), until the crisis is past, the pulse slows down, and Elinor, when “Marianne fixed her eyes on her” (SS 322) and knows her sister is better.

Marianne’s illness, “psychosomatic” because of her “incoherence of mind, the catatonic trances alternating with restless demands for ‘continual change of place,’ her periods of complete absence from and unawareness of the immediate world around her” (Tanner 82), shares much of the vocabulary characteristic of eighteenth-century descriptions of hysteria: “tenderness, sensibility, delicacy, disorder” (Mullan 218). Poised on the edge of moral danger and emotional excess, Marianne develops a physical illness that leads to her moral reformation and rehabilitation. After her fever abates, she is able to look at Elinor “with a *rational* though languid gaze” (SS 322, emphasis mine). Marianne “begins with the wrong ideology... learns the right one” (Butler 192). Along with her physical recovery, Marianne learns to undo the effects of enthusiasm by “applying her naturally strong feelings to objects outside herself and her intelligence to thorough self-criticism in the Christian spirit” (Butler 192). In essence, she learns the wisdom and self-restraint that has characterized Elinor’s actions throughout the novel. Austen impugns sensibility by exposing it as a deleterious form of feminine subjectivity. Marianne’s sickness deconstructs the myth of desirable feminine sensibility based on aristocratic preferences that privileged the exterior and susceptibility to sentiments as the signifier of taste and personal worth. Passion is not in itself a disease, but it can produce the body’s disorder; passion can become disease, so it must not be indulged too far. It must be not silenced but moderated and controlled by

Burkean moral principles and guided by a set of Christian rather than internal values.

Enthusiasm must be restrained by self-control.

Austen's characterization of Marianne also indicates the mutual influence that novels and anti-sentimental drama had on each other because in many ways Marianne's story and actions echo the influence of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's dramas and "[Sarah] Siddons-like embodiment of extreme and indecorous distress" (Gay 39). Siddons's usual dramatic trajectory as the heroine of "she-tragedies," according to Gay, anticipates tragic endings (40). Austen, aware that the theatrical characterization of Marianne portrays selfish, undesirable, and even potentially deadly behaviour, sets up readers to expect a Siddons-like ending; however, Marianne's excessive feelings and self-centered behaviour, prompted by self-absorbed individualism and is often harmful to others because it leaves them socially inoperable, is curtailed by an illness that only threatens her with death – as Elinor, Colonel Brandon, Mrs. Jennings, and the doctor expects – but she is able to recover to regret her previous absurdities. She ultimately improves both physically and morally to adhere to an objective standard that will not allow her to be swayed by emotions without subjecting her feelings to careful self-examination against objective Christian ethics. The development of polite discourse in the eighteenth century that produced the "positive valorization of somatically displayed passions" (Goring 60) and ironically resulted in the physical illness to which the body is in danger when passions are indulged excessively also highlights a religious critique closely associated with sensibility that Austen found threatening to Christian behaviour.

6 Elinor Dashwood and Sympathy with the Impartial Spectator: Reason, Self-Restraint, and Conformity

Elinor, who is in many ways antithetical to Marianne's excessive feelings, reflects an alternative moral philosophy to Hume's and one that doubts whether excessive feeling and unhindered transference of passions necessarily benefits society. Austen, at variance with Hume, shows that desirable femininity is possible through the work of Smith, Hume's friend and admirer. Austen's characterization of Elinor suggest a representation of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiment*, in which he proposes a moral theory of sympathy with an impartial spectator by dividing ourselves into both spectator and agent to judge, as an impartial spectator would, our own actions as well as those of others. Austen modifies Smith's theory and imbues the spectator with Christian principles as the standard by which all actions and individuals are measured.

In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith reformulates some of Hume's basic early ideas on sympathy and passion to emphasize distance and spectatorial aloofness in the operation of sympathy. Smith alters the Humean mechanics of sympathy and subjects the overflow of passion that operated like an emotional contagion to an inflexible rule of the presence of a witness separate from individual minds and stressed the distance and distinction between spectator and agent which are, Mullan claims, "neither equivalent nor opposite, for the 'spectator' must always know more than the 'agent'" (44). Instead of a direct reproduction of the passions of others, Smith believes that "the thought of his situation, in the breast of every attentive spectator" leads to "an analogous emotion" (12). The emotion can be produced as most accurately as "our imagination's copy" by "changing places in fancy" (Smith 12) but no longer can "the very passion itself" (Smith 12) be produced: "Our heart must adopt the

principles of the agent, and go along with all the affections which influenced his conduct, before it can entirely sympathize with, and beat time to, the gratitude of the person who has been benefited by his actions” (Smith 85). Sympathy is conditional on the spectator having the necessary information, and on his subsequent reflections and efforts.

Passions and sentiments do not flow freely as they do in Hume’s *Treatise* but are subjected to the controlling distinction between spectator and agent. Smith resists Hume’s sympathy that makes shared judgments without any absolutely disinterested imposition of moral criteria and introduces the figure of the spectator and the metaphor of spectatorial scrutiny that does not allow for the natural mutuality of passions and sentiments. Elinor is Austen’s model for feminine propriety based on Christian principles as her impartial spectator and guide. Her objectivity implies a cautious attention to Christian morality that demonstrates a suspicion of the passions as a reliable guide to conduct, mistrust of the self, doubt about one’s own desires, and reliance on the support of objective evidence over private intuition.

Austen literally makes the spectator by describing events largely through her consciousness. As a Smithean spectator she has willed uninvolvedness that is praised in the beginning of the novel: “Elinor... whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her... to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract... that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence” (SS 44). Later in the novel when they travel to London, Marianne sits “in silence almost all the way, wrapt in her own meditations, and scarcely ever voluntarily speaking” (SS 185), Elinor takes it upon herself “to atone for this conduct” by taking “immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned

herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could” (SS 185). As the impartial spectator, Elinor deems Marianne’s uncivil behaviour inappropriate and actively tries to compensate for her sister’s standoffishness by becoming even more sociable to their host. Elinor frequently removes herself from the realm of passions and interests to correct Marianne’s insensitivity. Later when Marianne leaves the room immediately after she sees that the visitor is Colonel Brandon rather than Willoughby, Elinor distances herself from the events and any concern she may have for her sister’s disappointment to pity Brandon. She “felt particularly hurt that a man so partial to her sister should perceive that she experienced nothing but grief and disappointment in seeing him” (SS 186). Elinor disinterests herself from the situation for the purposes of evaluating the actions of those around her. Alistair Duckworth notes that “it is clear... that Marianne’s vital and central position in the novel is in part accounted for by the fact that she is the object of Elinor’s observation” (110) and while it is Marianne’s actions that are described they are “frequently filtered through Elinor’s subjective experience of them” (110), giving readers access to the reserved and rational estimations of a spectator who is “against the private instinct of her sister... [and] the selfish motivations of those around her” (111).

Sympathy in Smith’s moral philosophy is contingent upon the spectator having all the necessary information and upon the spectator’s subsequent reflections and efforts. Feelings arise when an individual observes the “perfect coincidence” (Smith 60) between the sympathetic feeling in himself, and the original passion in “the person principally concerned” (Smith 60). When Lucy Steele first tells Elinor of her clandestine engagement to Edward, Elinor is able to keep the secret because she placed herself in Edward’s position and feels

pity for him: “as these considerations occurred to her in painful succession, she wept for him more than for herself” (SS 27). Sympathetic responses are possible in both pleasurable and painful situations – Elinor painfully keeps her enemy’s confidence when it might have benefited her to do otherwise – because sympathy depends on observation rather than any immediate action and is an imaginative identification with the situation occasioning the passion. When Mrs. Jennings returns home from a visit to Mrs. Palmer with the shocking news that Lucy and Edward have been engaged to one another for over a year, Elinor, upon hearing that their engagement has at last become public, is finally able to share the news with her sister who cannot believe that Elinor has known of Edward’s secret engagement for four months. Elinor explains that she has been able to keep the secret for so long and even pretend to be happy because she has understood the importance of doing her “duty” and fulfilling her “promise to Lucy” (SS 276).

Smith concedes that humans do experience “some correspondence of sentiments” because we are “naturally sympathetic” but the spectator must “endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other,” must “strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded” (26). When “obliged... to be secret” Elinor tells Marianne she felt that she “owed it to her, therefore, to avoid giving any hint of the truth” (SS 276) but she does so more for Edward. Immediately after learning of the distressing news, she reflects on the “difficulties... of family opposition and unkindness” that compelled him to keep the engagement private: “If, in the supposition of his seeking to marry herself, his difficulties from his mother had seemed great, how much greater were they now likely to be” (SS 276). While Hume compares sympathy in the “minds of all men” (27) as “strings equally wound up” which “communicate” their vibrations to each

other, Smith writes, “the great pleasure of conversation and society... arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain harmony of minds, which like so many musical instruments coincide and keep time with one another” (399). By deliberate acts of the imagination, Smith speculates the possibility of social unison; imaginary conceptions of another’s sensations, rather than the transmission of passion to produce like-minded individuals, can create social unanimity.

Appropriating Hume’s metaphor of “the minds of men” as “mirrors to one another” (27), Smith refers to society as a “mirror” (128). If a human being had no communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character, of the propriety or demerit of his own sentiments and conduct, of the beauty or deformity of his own mind, than of the beauty or deformity of his own face. All these are objects which he cannot easily see, which naturally he does not look at, and with regard to which he is provided with no mirror which can present them to his view. Bring him into society, and he is immediately provided with the mirror which he wanted before. (128)

The “mirror” of society “is placed in the countenance and behaviour of those he lives with” (Smith 129) and allows him to see whether there is a sympathy between his sentiments and those of others. Through others, the subject is “first views the propriety and impropriety of his own passions, the beauty and deformity of his own mind” (Smith 129). One’s mind “becomes both subject and object both ‘agent’ and ‘spectator’” (Mullan 47). Self-examination and introspection are possible when “we imagine ourselves not the actors, but the spectators of our own character and conduct” (Smith 130).

When Willoughby informs the Dashwood women that he has been sent on business for Mrs. Smith to London and that he does not expect to return to Barton Cottage for the rest of the year, the unexpected news and the disappointment it brings to Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne about the supposed engagement between her and Willoughby are too much for the widowed matron who “felt too much for speech, and instantly quitted the parlour” (SS 109). When her mother departs in sorrow, Elinor is left alone “to give way in solitude to the concern and alarm which this sudden departure occasioned” (SS 109). By herself she is able to consider “what had just passed” (SS 109) and place herself in Marianne’s position. Despite not knowing the “particulars of their separation” (SS 109), she is able to feel “her sister’s affliction” and think “with the tenderest compassion of that violent sorrow which Marianne was in all probability not merely giving way to as a relief, but feeding and encouraging as a duty” (SS 109). Rather than being affected by the “uncheerful” (SS 110) misery felt by Marianne and overflowing automatically to her mother who returns half an hour later with eyes red from crying, Elinor is able to suspend judgement about Willoughby’s reasons for leaving and her sister’s impending marriage while Mrs. Dashwood draws the obviously erroneous conclusion from feelings that Willoughby must have been ordered to leave because his aunt disapproves of the possible alliance. Elinor sympathizes with her mother and sister because she is able, as spectator, to impersonate the sufferer within the theatre of her own mind and not be overwhelmed by their passions.

Mullan notes that in editions published after 1761, Smith emended this idea to represent a process whereby “I divide myself, as it were, into two persons... the first is the spectator... the second is the agent” (Smith 131). Smith is concerned to demonstrate that “we examine” our conduct “as we image an impartial spectator would” (131) and Austen, like

many conservative writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in favour of reason and the Christian religion. Mullan contends that in the articulation of an impartial spectator that Smith encountered the ideological limitations of his theory because the language of sentiment and sympathy are insufficient to explain the arbiter of conduct in the game of human society (51). Austen overcomes this ideological restraint by turning the impartial spectator into the Christian God.

Elinor personifies many of the Christian attributes Austen desired to have, such as discipline, self-denial, and self-doubt, which she recorded in her prayers. “Bring to our knowledge every fault of Temper and every evil Habit in which we have indulged to the discomfort of our fellow-creatures and the danger of our own Souls,” Austen prays (*Prayers* 478). This self-reflection enacts sympathy’s imaginary identification with the impartial spectator to evaluate propriety and impropriety. Smith writes that when “we thoroughly enter into all the passions and motives” which influenced our actions, “we approve of it, by sympathy with the approbation of this supposed equitable judge. If otherwise, we enter into his disapprobation, and condemn it” (129). In order to “survey our own sentiments” we must “remove ourselves as it were, from our own natural station” (Smith 128) and become spectators. Austen’s prayer indicates a deliberate attempt to stand beyond herself in the position of God to judge her own actions and atone for any wrongdoing. She ends her prayer with the desire to “acquit” herself “of Evil” (*Prayers* 479) and a yearning for moral improvement.

Austen’s decision to place God as the ultimate impartial judge in *Sense and Sensibility* is a logical choice given Smith’s own emphasis on how moral laws should “come thus to be regarded as the laws of an All-powerful Being, who watches over our conduct, and

who in a life to come, will reward the observance, and punish the breach of them” (Smith 197). Smith’s configuration of moral laws with Christian tenets is quite similar to Johnson’s preference for narratives centered on Christian beliefs that include the hope and fear of eternal rewards and punishments as “a social prophylactic” (Potkay 15) against worldly excess. Austen’s own Christian faith provides another explanation for her association of the impartial observer with God because to become the spectator is not to be possessed by the passion of others but to be the arbiter of all sentiments.

In another of her recorded prayers, Austen examines her conduct as God would and judges herself according to his precepts: “Have we thought irreverently of Thee, have we disobeyed thy commandments, have we neglected any known duty, or willingly given pain to any human being? Incline us to ask our Hearts these questions Oh! God, and save us from deceiving ourselves” (*Prayers* 479). Self-judgment, a common theme in Austen’s religious devotions, is a major theme in Smith’s logic of sympathy. It is evident in the fervent longing and soul searching in this prayer that Austen ardently repents of any untoward behaviour that might have offended the Almighty. “Incline us oh God!” she beseeches, “to think humbly of ourselves, to be severe only in the examination of our own conduct, to consider our fellow-creatures with kindness, and to judge of all they say and do with that charity which we would desire from them ourselves” (*Prayers* 480). Where Smith replaces “conscience” with “the man within the breast,” Austen consciously identifies “the man” as the Christian God to construct the necessary fiction whereby “we conceive ourselves as acting in the presence of a person quite candid and equitable” (Smith 127). Elinor, like Austen, judges herself “from the place and with the eyes of a third person... who judges with impartiality” (Smith 156). Disparaging shared passions as a reliable guide for morality, Austen thus shifts the ethical

and moral emphasis within acceptable femininity onto the unvarying need to subject self-indulgent desires to self-restraint and the strictures of prudence that assume a vigilant and omniscient God is watching and judging.

Elinor's rationality, however, does not make her less dramatic for she understands the theatrical nature of society and accepts her participant role in the drama. Throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor performs the social roles required of her. Because Marianne disdains social decorum as hypocritical behaviour, Elinor is often left with the task of covering up for her. Elinor is the one who is unfailingly polite to the variously unattractive Middletons, Mrs. Jennings, Fanny and John Dashwood, Mrs. Ferrars, and the Steele sisters. It is unsurprising then that Elinor should be very good at screen-painting, according to Tony Tanner, for she is the one who is constantly trying to smooth and harmonize potentially abrasive and discordant occasions, giving the raw social realities "a veneer of art" (85). Hume wants sympathy to break down all barriers and unleash the fluid interrelatedness and unity of all our separate-seeming lives but the transpersonal power for feelings would erode any sense of self and utterly dissolve individuals by making separateness impossible. For Elinor, the screens are "necessary to conceal and mitigate some of the ugliness and abrasiveness of society. At its best screen-making was a form of social decorum... characters put up screens to preserve the self" (Tanner 86). Elinor paints and makes screens to preserve society and identity by shielding sensitive people from a more direct interchange of harmful and selfish sympathies, the corrupting and immobilizing effects Austen portrayed in the very beginning of the novel between Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood.

Elinor's rigorous Christian morality is jeopardized in only one scene in *Sense and Sensibility* where an exchange of confidences duplicitously set up by Lucy Steele. During the

conversation, in which Lucy loses no opportunity to speak to Elinor about her secret engagement, diplomacy enables Elinor to find out what she desperately needs to know from Lucy about her engagement with Edward. Although told much to her consternation, “Elinor was careful in guarding her countenance from every expression that could give her words a suspicious tendency” (SS 173). Her conscious performance here gives her both the power and the knowledge she desires but here Elinor, until now the paradigm of Christian virtue, seems to be an extension of her rival. Elinor is in danger of duplicitous and disingenuous behaviour. For Smith, the tendency of passion to act upon and overpower its subjects must be guarded against. Even “the man who acts according to the rules of perfect prudence, of strict justice, and of proper benevolence” (Smith 279) is subject to its blandishments: “the most perfect knowledge of those rules will not alone enable him to act in this manner: his own passions are very apt to mislead him; sometimes to drive him and sometimes to seduce him to violate all the rules which he himself, in all his sober and cool hours, approves of. The most perfect knowledge, if it is not supported by the most perfect self-command, will not always enable him to do his duty” (Smith 279). Elinor’s susceptibility to adopting and exploiting Lucy’s conniving and insidious methods is suggested but it is also quickly ameliorated when Elinor decides that she will never again participate in what is really an unpleasant and selfish social game: “from this time the subject was never revived by Elinor... it was treated by the former with calmness and caution, and dismissed as soon as civility would allow; for she felt such conversations to be an indulgence which Lucy did not deserve, and which *were dangerous to herself*” (SS 177, italics mine). At odds with the Christian qualities detailed in Austen’s prayers, especially the pious yearning to show kindness and spare others from hurt, Elinor chooses instead to be contrite and aware of the moral dangers of acting. Distinguishing

between performance in conformity to social protocol and the duplicitous manipulation of others for information, she refuses to commit the same offence again and remains an ardent model of female propriety whose true and practical piety produces self-restraint and acts as an antidote to the enthusiasm that pervades Marianne.

If Marianne's sensibility calls into question the basis of moral authority and the need for femininity to be based in the objective ethical code of orthodox religion because passions are unreliable, Elinor's dogged adherence to objective morality demonstrates the dangers of involuntary sympathy to manipulate feelings that might accept and even approve of morally inexcusable actions that result from rampant individualism in those who pursue selfish and sexual desires without the slightest compunction. Willoughby's melodramatic entrance into the drawing room at Cleveland after Marianne's fever recedes is an episode of dramatic recital so powerful that Elinor is temporarily captivated by Willoughby's "serious energy" and "warmth" (SS 335). She listens "in spite of herself" (SS 335) to the story of his passions, both honourable and ignoble. At the end of his monologue, Willoughby asks Elinor for pity, and even though she feels it is her Christian "duty" (SS 336) to check his outbursts, she cannot repress the "compassionate emotion" (SS 335) that infects her. It is this emotion that governs her judgement of Willoughby – a judgment, which Poovey notes, verges disconcertingly on rationalization (186).

Despite differences in the mechanisms of sympathy, Hume and Smith agree that reason is insufficient to govern passion. Against the inadequate capacities of reason, Smith endorses impartiality which Elinor is finding difficult here to show. The "fury of our own passions" is limited only by the prospect of entering "more coolly into the sentiments of the indifferent spectator" (Smith 183) but Elinor demonstrates the struggle to act as the impartial

spectator when passions are as intense as Willoughby's words because they "made her think him sincere" (SS 335). Willoughby's passion and sexual libertinism threaten to overrun Elinor's mind because, as Claudia Johnson asserts, Willoughby's words prompted remembrances of the rake's graces and aroused sexual attraction in her (60). Although the passion is ultimately repelled, Elinor's grappling with forgiving Willoughby demonstrates the overwhelming lure of sexual passion to imperil "the restraining and the interrogation of the passions" (Mullan 50) and threaten impartiality.

Elinor made no answer. Her thoughts were silently fixed on the irreparable injury which too early an independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury, had made in the mind, the character, the happiness, of a man who, to every advantage of person and talents, united a disposition naturally open and honest, and a feeling, affectionate temper. The world had made him extravagant and vain; extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish. (SS 335)

When Willoughby departs, he leaves Elinor in an even greater "agitation" (SS 336) of spirits, "too much oppressed by a croud of ideas... to think even of her sister" (SS 339).

Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of him as now separated for ever from her family with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as she soon acknowledged within herself to his wishes than to his merits. She felt that his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not in reason to have weight; by that person of uncommon attraction -- that open, affectionate, and lively manner which it was no merit to possess; and by that still ardent love for

Marianne, which it was not even innocent to indulge. But she felt that it was so, long, long before she could feel his influence less. (SS 339)

Elinor doubts herself after hearing Willoughby's confession. She is shaken by her feelings for she finds that she both pities him and has a renewed sense of his personal attractiveness.

On this point, Austen employs Smith's language of stoic philosophy and the stoic virtue of self-command, the answer to the riddle of seemingly limitless passions and desires in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Mullan 50). This philosophic emphasis has prompted Susan Manning to note that in *Sense and Sensibility* "truly moral sentiments involve strenuous stoicism" (85, italics original) and self-command in particular. Smith describes this stoic trait as "not only itself a great virtue, but from it all the other virtues seem to derive their principal lustre" (284) because self-command allows men the ability to keep their distances from "the great scramble of society" (284) by learning how to judge their own conduct from the vantage point of an impartial spectator. Self-command is Austen's preferred alternative to Humean sympathy. In *Sense and Sensibility*, the passions or sentiments of sociable individuals are no longer transmitted by the bond of sympathy but by the "regulation of behaviour according to an abstracted standard" (Duckworth 110). Elinor, as the impartial spectator imposes restraint, which has caused some critics to see her as cold and unfeeling, but without impartiality, Smith argues that "every passion would, upon most occasions, rush headlong, if I may say so, to its own gratification" (310). Assaulted by sympathy and the intense "degrees of force and liveliness" (Hume 7) of Willoughby's remorse, part of Elinor wants to excuse his injuries to Marianne and Miss Smith and forgive him but Austen will not allow her to do so because her ultimate goal is to propose a society of discriminating impartial spectators who view themselves and others "not so much

according to that light in which we may naturally appear to ourselves, [but] as according to that in which we naturally appear to others” (Smith 96). Sympathy with the impartial spectator requires a “necessarily hypothetical viewpoint” (Mullan 51) which Austen finds in self-command and Christian orthodoxy. Elinor’s sense, governed scrupulously by Christian self-examination, cannot justify Willoughby for tempting two young women despite his worldly education.

Elinor cannot absolve Willoughby and in this moment of hesitation, Austen’s skill as a writer invites readers to experience the same overwhelming power of sympathy brought on Elinor by the intensity and sincerity of Willoughby’s speech. Self-command requires the exercise of exceptional discipline but even the most self-controlled are liable to fail. In fact, even Smith concedes that “not all will be able to perform such calculations” (Mullan 50) to stand beside oneself in the position of the impartial judge. In her momentary wavering, readers, imaginatively identifying themselves as Elinor considering whether or not to forgive, are given an opportunity to be the impartial judge to evaluate Willoughby’s immoral and contemptible behaviour. His immediate appeal to readers’ imaginative and sympathetic engagement makes it difficult for readers not to feel, like Elinor, some leniency toward him. Elinor may temporize but she remains committed to an objective standard and is not moved by his display of “lively manners” (SS 339) to vindicate him despite the passion aroused by his pleading. Elinor’s behaviour may appear cold but she is not unfeeling; when faced with the natural human predisposition to err, she demonstrates the internal struggle one experiences while trying to hold oneself accountable to an ethical standard in order to control the moral anarchy that strong appeals to passion can unleash.

Sense is not all-powerful and even though Elinor has a strong sense of propriety, she is still liable to be swayed by powerful emotions making self-control and prudence all the more important. Austen projects Christian principles above the passions as the external and objective code of the impartial spectator to dominate what Smith calls “the game of human society” (275). This moral didacticism, which critiques Hume in favour of the philosophy of Smith, reveals Austen’s conservative aims, that I argue resemble those of the High Church, to use religion as the source of national unity and coherence. Smith’s ideas lend themselves naturally to Burkean conservatism, which Austen adapts to her ideological project of maintaining the hegemonic control of the confessional state by requiring individuals to conform to Christian principles personified as the impartial spectator within the breast. Smith explains that once an individual accepts, submits, and abides by sympathy with the impartial spectator, he can “pursue with more earnest assiduity, his own happiness than that of any other person... in the race for wealth, and honours, and preferments” (Smith 97) within the existing hierarchical structure of society. Austen agrees that the stoical effort of self-command and following Christian principles are the only guarantees of the status quo and the best way to ensure harmonious interactions between individuals in society.

Austen believes the passions that Hume and Smith describe should be considered from the distance of the impartial spectator and the position of universal standards. Unlike Hume who thought that sympathy can always invent or elaborate contact and transcend individual interests to render all passions intelligible, Smith neither trusts in sociability or the notion that the unhinderable flow of innately moral feelings and passions can tend toward a prevailing sense of benevolence and harmonized interest to guarantee an allegiance to justice. Emphasising the corruption of human nature and adapting Smith’s moral theory gives Austen

the necessary philosophical model to celebrate sympathy and insist that sentiments must be regulated and chastened from the eyes of a detached observer. *Sense and Sensibility* involves a prescription for appropriate feminine conduct to correct the Humean preference of justifying excessive feeling and actions by subjective impulse.

7 Conclusion

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen engages Hume and Smith's moral philosophies to consider the roles autonomous passions, sympathy, and the need to regulate feeling play in representing a conservative model of proper feminine conduct characterized by self-restraint and a morality defined by Christian principles. Her emphasis on a narrow definition of Christian virtues, protects and reinforces High Anglicanism against dissenting sects like Methodism by associating sensibility and religious enthusiasm with moral impropriety. Austen was critical of sensibility and the bodily rhetoric that Hume's moral philosophy espoused. She suggests through the characterization of the Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* that the Humean stress on unwilled and unstoppable passions beyond the control of reason or religion is morally reprehensible because it endorses a world of external display, forms, and theatricality that permits dissimulation.

Austen's Burkean conservatism presents feminine propriety based on adherence to Christian ideals that are comparable to most eighteenth-century conduct books that adjust and adopts Christian ideals by dramatizing a model of acceptable behaviour, legitimate values, and permissible thoughts. Models of the feminine ideal are innately virtuous, and learn to be self-critical and self-controlled. Elinor and Marianne are, or learn to be, aware of the fallibility of the subjective life of the individual and suspicious of emotions by rejecting the excessive sensibility. The feminine ideal according to Austen embraces the distance, rather than the commonality, that separates individuals described in Smith's conception of sympathy and the operation of sentiments in society.

Austen's characterization of Marianne demonstrates the implications for identity that can result when passions become, as Hume imagined, the currency of society. Sensibility's

focus on the exterior prevents interiority and collapses identity, robbing individuals like Mrs. Dashwood of autonomy and allowing them to be deceived by fraudulent exteriors, such as the heterosexual normative form imposed on and by Robert Ferrars. Humean sympathy's potential to impose interiority by exciting feelings effaces the differences that distinguish individuals and renders individuals vulnerable to deception and harm. When taken to the extreme, excessive feeling, especially in females, produces illness. Austen exploits this aspect of sensitivity to feeling not as a token of refinement but as a potential source of disease to highlight the need to subject passion to reason. The uncontrollable free flow of passion and the irresistible power of passions to influence behaviour divert the appropriate ethical emphasis from rationality and self-restraint to individual subjectivity which often leads to indulgence in one's feelings. The Humean stress on passion turns upon its preoccupation with the exterior and displaces reason as the guiding principle of propriety because individuals act as they feel not as they should by observing the proper social protocols. The desirable features of the feminine ideal – conformity, modesty, and the development of self-control and self-knowledge – are possible instead through fellow feeling experienced by a disinterested, but not necessarily detached, observer that Austen models after the impartial spectator in Smith's philosophy and which she constructs as the embodiment of Christian principles. Supporting a Johnsonian perspective about human nature that private interests and desires must be curtailed by religious beliefs, Austen stresses moral behaviour based on an objective rather than subjective ethical standard. Her Tory Anglican position considers the "autonomous and inward selfhood" (Kelly, *Fiction*, 15) encouraged and created by Humean moral philosophy as implicitly subversive to the ideas of status by ascription, tradition, and birth. Austen amends the moral threat of Hume by using

the theories of Smith to portray an acceptable form of femininity that upholds Burkean Toryism and preserves the well-being and stability of society by encouraging submission and self-restraint in women to protect tradition and maintaining the existing hierarchical model to support the importance of divisions of rank and class.

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