Adventures of a Female Werther: Jane Austen's Revision of Sensibility

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ABSTRACT

On the one hand it emphasizes quotidian virtues, accessible to all, such as seeing, feeling, and sympathizing, and on the other, rarity and heroism enter because people of sensibility are defined as being at odds with "men of the world" (Encyclopédie above). [...] as the passions and nerves grew reasonable and even moral, the need arose, within the cult of sensibility, to cultivate them rather than suppress them.

FULL TEXT

We were convinced he had no soul, that he had never read the Sorrows of Werter . . ., we were certain that Janetta could feel no affection for him

-"Love and Friendship"

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

-Sense and Sensibility

Out of the mid eighteenth-century movement called the "cult of sensibility," including the philosophic, linguistic, and aesthetic thought on which it is founded, emerges a new character. Shaftesbury's gentleman of taste, Hume and Smith's man of sympathy or moral sentiments, Rousseau, Voltaire, and Diderot's noble savage, Mackenzie's man of feeling, Sterne's sentimental traveler, and Goethe's Werther, all share certain essential attributes of the hero of sensibility: namely, unspoiled natural virtue, an unusually keen perception, and a deep capacity to feel. The entry for "Sensibilité (morale)" from Diderot's Encyclopédie (1755) 1 illustrates well what was comprised in this new ideal:

Tender and delicate disposition of the soul which renders it easy to be moved and touched. Sensibility of soul, which is rightly described as the source of morality, gives one a kind of wisdom concerning matters of virtue and is far more penetrating than the intellect alone. . . . Men of sensibility live more fully than others. . . . Reflection can produce a man of probity: but sensibility is the mother of humanity, of generosity; it is at the service of merit, lends its support to the intellect, and is the moving spirit which animates belief.

Sensibility's ideal, "far more penetrating than the intellect alone," portrays the dramatic fall of unaided or "disengaged" reason; reflection no longer has direct contact with the will, and the passions and nerves carry more potent (eventually even more accurate) information than reasoning. Mary Wollstonecraft describes sensibility as "the result of acute senses, finely-fashioned nerves, which vibrate at the slightest touch, and convey such clear intelligence to the brain, that it does not require to be arranged by the judgment." 2 Those who could feel most

deeply, who showed the greatest sensitivity to external behavior and sights, were thought also to be those most capable of sympathy for human suffering, and therefore capable of a kind of intimacy and soul-sharing unaccessible to the vast majority of humanity.

Frances Brooke, in her sentimental novel Emily Montague (1769), 3 displays the intimate connection between sensibility's psychology and its ethics: her characters do not achieve religion and virtue through "principles found on reason and argument," for example, but instead through "elegance of mind, delicacy of moral taste, and a certain quick perception of the beautiful and becoming in everything." As this passage suggests, there was some ambivalence within sensibility about whether it was profoundly "natural"-that is, defined in opposition to the corrupted, "artificial," cold ways of society-or whether it was a product of great aesthetic refinement. On the one hand it emphasizes quotidian virtues, accessible to all, such as seeing, feeling, and sympathizing, and on the other, rarity and heroism enter because people of sensibility are defined as being at odds with "men of the world" (Encyclopédie above). Therefore, as the passions and nerves grew reasonable and even moral, the need arose, within the cult of sensibility, to cultivate them rather than suppress them. On the one hand sensibility is a reaction against civilization, its unnatural hierarchies, and artificial aristocracy; on the other, it establishes a new, elaborate, exclusive aristocracy of its own.

Although it took different forms and pitches, sensibility's moral aesthetic carried definite implications for the speech of its ideal heroes and heroines as well. Fictional heroes and heroines from Diderot to Goethe tend also to share a great difficulty in expressing their deep, naturally virtuous feelings in the conventional language of society. In fact, their difficulty speaking becomes a measure of their sensibility. The "man of feeling" or the "woman of sensibility" has feelings so keen and delicate, that words inevitably fail to do them justice. As the internal narrator of Henry Mackenzie's Man of Feeling writes, "We would attempt to describe the joy which Harley felt on the occasion, did it not occur to us, that one half of the world could not understand it though we did; and the other half will, by this time have understood it without any description at all." 4 Therefore we can also have a character like the protagonist of Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther, 5 who complains repeatedly about his inability to express himself; however, what may at first sound modest, is actually self-congratulatory, for only one whose feelings are mercurial and bountiful, can "outrun" words and refuse to be constrained (and therefore) corrupted by the "artificial" language of society. 6 Thus it is that extremely popular novels influential in the cult of sensibility, like Sterne's A Sentimental Journey, 7 Mackenzie's The Man of Feeling, and Goethe's Werther use purposeful fragmentation to remind readers of the shortcomings of ordered, public speech, rational discourse, convention, and authority based on such criteria, establishing a feud between two familiar eighteenth-century characters: the man of feeling and the man of words.

I

At its most popular, novels with titles like The Delicate Distress, Excessive Sensibility, and The Curse of Sentiment began "to appear in the dozens." 8 However, as sensibility spread and eventually declined into cultish extremes, the adjectives popularly used to describe "sensibility" registered its gradual demotion: at its trendiest, it is "exquisite" in Addison, "delicate" in Hume, "sweet" in Cowper, and "dear" in Sterne; then, declining in fashion, it becomes "acute" and "excessive" in Austen, "trembling" in Hazlitt, "mawkish" in Coleridge, and "sickly" in Byron. 9 By 1790, the year when the fourteen-year-old Jane Austen finished her short burlesque of sensibility entitled "Love and Friendship," the novel of sensibility had reached its greatest popularity and its greatest absurdity.

In spite of Jane Austen's satirical contempt for sensibility's decadent excesses, imbedded in her works is a moral aesthetic reminiscent of the culture of sensibility. Austen's moral philosophy has been repeatedly misunderstood because her affinities with sensibility have either been ignored, or her rejection of the movement taken more

literally than her work warrants. 10 From her earliest juvenilia to her last unfinished novel, Austen was engaged with the culture of sensibility. 11 Recognizing its dangers and potential hypocrisy, she tried to revise it to accord with a sense of individual responsibility, an admiration of tranquility, and the possibility of community, all of which tended to be absent from its cultish extremes.

Within the brief pages of "Love and Friendship," Austen manages to satirize the key characteristics of the excesses to which sensibility had led, including its self-absorption, its emphasis on voyeuristic sympathy, and its utopian dream of the soulmate, as well as its disregard for artifice and convention, at the expense of community and conversation. One of the heroines, for example, alerts the reader to what she rather immodestly calls her "only fault": a sensibility "too tremblingly alive to every affliction of my Friends, my Acquaintance and particularly to every affliction of my own, was my only fault, if a fault it could be called" (MW, p. 78, italics added). Another passage reveals the same, self-congratulatory introspection, and its corollary trait, an emphasis on benevolent feeling at the expense of benevolent action and utility:

Amidst all my Lamentations for her (& violent you may suppose they were) I yet received some consolation in the reflection of my having paid every Attention to her, that could be offered, in her illness. I had wept over her every Day-had bathed her sweet face with my tears &had pressed her fair Hands continually in mine- (MW, p. 102)

In such humorous and economical passages, Austen parodies the substitution of sympathy for charity and the general insensibility to which the cultish forms of sensibility ultimately led. She reveals that a luxurious distrust of words, convention, and authority is irresponsible as well as impractical and eventually leads to hypocrisy-as the expression of disdain for these facets of society become themselves fixed conventions. 12 Other passages parody the over-codification and decay of sensibility-where it became an esoteric club and its members aesthetes who took Shaftesbury's equation of taste, feeling, and virtue as an excuse to indulge in feeling at the expense of any consideration of others.

In the same story, the heroine also assumes that another character's father must "have no soul" because "he had never read the Sorrows of Werter" (MW, p. 93). In this passage as well as others, Austen shows her awareness of Goethe's Werther as an icon of the cult of sensibility-an awareness, I will argue, she uses for her own subtler didactic purposes in her novel Sense and Sensibility. Although such passages from Austen's minor works have been taken by critics such as Marilyn Butler as a sign that Austen renounces sensibility, close attention to the themes presented in her novels tend rather to reveal not only her intimate and formative experience with the culture, literature, and moral aesthetic of sensibility, but also her complex and genuine attachment to many of its central tenets. The force and economy of her parody may be directly proportional to the attachment and acquaintance Austen had with the culture before it deteriorated to cultish extremes. In other words, Austen attacks only the sensibility which has become insensible to others, to nature, and even to oneself through excessive codification, elitism, or narcissism.

Austen's youthful novel Sense and Sensibility perhaps poses the problem most explicitly. By studying the two sisters' roles in this novel, as well as Austen's allusions to Werther, it is possible to come to a better understanding of Austen's revision of the moral aesthetic of sensibility and her didactic purpose. Strangely enough, despite the fact that Austen makes overt references to Werther in her writings, no one has pursued the role of this extremely popular novel in Austen's literary imagination. 13 I will argue that not only is Marianne Dashwood a female counterpart to Werther, but also that Austen's portrayal of Marianne will help us understand both her affinities with the culture of sensibility and her domestication of its extreme forms. Austen delineates explicit parallels between Werther and Marianne on the level of plot, in characterization, and in the structure of their respective novels.

Marianne's plotline in Sense and Sensibility bears a distinct resemblance to Werther's: in fact, hers falls naturally into two parts as well. In the first, we encounter Marianne absorbed in nature. We quickly learn that she is as proprietary of her trees at Norland as Werther is of what he calls "my forest." Both Werther and Marianne derive ownership according to sensibility: they own nature because only they can truly appreciate it. Marianne complains that "now there is no one to regard them," when she leaves her trees at Norland (SS, p. 88, my emphasis), suggesting that other viewers, who necessarily must lack her depth of feeling, are irrelevant. In the first part of her story, Marianne, like Werther, is loquacious; however, both stammer feelingly in their appreciation of nature, especially when they fall in love. She is wild in her enthusiasms and "excessive sensibility" (SS, p. 7). There are continual hints that Marianne is more taken with her conception of Willoughby, however, than with the real man, and that she forces him to conform to her ideal. Both Marianne and Werther reveal that their loves are narcissistic projections of themselves-as with Werther's exclamation, "How I worship myself since she loves me!" (W, p. 38). In the second half of Marianne's story, her beloved marries another, and, as with Werther, the result is isolation, increasing insensibility (blindness and deafness to others), growing self-isolation, silence, and (near) suicide: "Had I died, it would have been self-destruction" (SS, p. 345). As with Werther, Marianne's initial, self-conscious appreciation of nature in "Part One" eventually turns to something approaching misanthropy in "Part Two," and her self-nourished grief takes her, in Werther's footsteps, to illness and the brink of madness and death.

There are a number of significant traits that the two characters share as well. Werther constantly complains that he feels everything so deeply that the linearity of prose falls short of conveying his experiences. Only the greatest poet could make words convey the depth of his feelings, he says, somewhat ironically: "I would need the skill of the greatest poet . . ." (W, p. 18). The stronger his feelings, the more reluctant Werther is to express them: "Dear friend, I don't want to go into details about it; reciting would make it as dull as the original experience was exhilarating" (W, p. 73). Language flattens his emotional upheavals, with the sheer weight of its conventionality. Underlying his constant complaints, however, is a strain of pride.

Like Werther, Marianne's reluctance to write and speak grows as the novel progresses. She consistently seeks words that are worthy of the supposed sublimity of her feelings and when she finds none, chooses silence instead: "I detest jargon of every kind, and sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and meaning" (SS, p. 97). Her stance here again almost parodies that of the "man of feeling," for Mackenzie also uses silence to heighten the cruelty of the world that can force a man of such delicacy and promise to retreat from words. Harley, the protagonist, rather immodestly agrees with the narrative voice: "There are some feelings," admits Harley, "which perhaps are too tender to be suffered by the world . . ." which "throws the imputation of romance or melancholy on every temper more susceptible than its own" (MF, p. 128). The inexpressibility of her emotions is a source of pride for Marianne, as is her inability to be comforted.

Just as Werther narrates his choice between less "authentic" and therefore compromised survival within society and "authentic" expression which transgresses society's rules, Marianne also fancies herself in the same heroic struggle. Her thinking follows the same circuitous route as Werther's: the principle that to resist sorrow is to be inauthentic, leads to the idea that for sorrow to cease is inauthentic, and finally to the paradoxical moral obligation to nourish (artificially) her sorrow for the sake of its authenticity. When someone comes and interrupts Werther as he is writing an especially tearful passage of a letter, he is distraught (and enraged): "An intolerable person interrupted me. My tears have dried. I am all distracted. Adieu, my friend!" (W, p. 75). Werther cannot tolerate that even sorrow is ephemeral: ironically, he draws tragic implications even from its interruption. In Sense and Sensibility, the narrator makes it clear that not only would "Marianne . . . have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby," but she, like Werther, also chooses to "court . . . misery" (SS, p. 83) and "to augment and fix her sorrow by seeking silence, solitude, and idleness" (SS, p.

104).

Goethe's Werther, the predecessor of Marianne's proud helplessness, rebels against all implications of order, foresight, and intentionality. In fact, he frequently boasts about his inability to control himself. Over and over again, Werther displays his keen sensibility (his receptivity to nature) by emphasizing that he is physically drawn to Lotte like a piece of metal to a magnet: "I'm too close in the atmosphere-Zip! and there I am" (W, p. 41), and again: "Whoosh! and I'm outside" (W, p. 43). Using such onomatopoeic sucking and pulling sounds, Werther glories in his lack of control, which he takes as proof of his sensibility-that is, of the unusually keen emotions which lead him first in one direction and then in another following the dictates of his heart. According to his internal moral-aesthetic standards, to engage in planning or direct pursuit, or even to acknowledge agency, would inherently suggest a shallower love, a lesser sensibility. Just as Werther proclaimed his inability to resist his attraction to Lotte, Marianne (proudly) explains her slavish obedience to her passion and misery:

misery such as mine has no pride. I care not who knows that I am wretched. The triumph of seeing me so may be open to the world. Elinor, Elinor, they who suffer little may be proud and independent as they like . . . but I cannot. I must feel-I must be wretched-. . . . (SS, pp. 189-90, italics added)

She measures sensibility according to lack of self-control, missing the fact not only that deep feeling can (and must, in Austen's world) coexist with reason and "exertion," but also that self-control can be an expression of feeling.

Such an emphasis on helplessness, passivity, and resignation to fate poses important moral problems about responsibility and potential for action. As a result, it seems that in popular novels of sensibility, such as Werther, The Man of Feeling, and A Sentimental Journey, every man of sensibility must be protected and supported either by a woman of sense or by a Sancho Panza figure. 14 Werther's mother sends him money to feed and clothe him; others find him a job and protect him; yet another tells his story. This latter aspect of novels of sensibility is particularly interesting: the self-conscious narrator-protagonists are generally "men of feeling" who, although writers, self-consciously distinguish themselves from "men of letters," by exhibiting a distrust of discipline, plans, logic, grammar, straight lines, and virtue based on an obedience to law. Instead they admire the spontaneous overflow of extreme feelings and hide their own authorship and authority with an appropriate degree of confusion and fragmentation, creating a need for an additional frame of narration-a well-meaning fictional editor, who has discovered the manuscript in one way or another and appreciates it enough to publish it. We will see that Elinor fulfills this structural role as well-as protector, and in a sense, editor of her sister Marianne. However, this reliance upon others to achieve practical ends suggests the weaknesses inherent in sensibility as an aesthetic for the public world of decisions and action, and becomes part of Austen's critique of sensibility's excesses.

II

The irony, that the cult of sensibility in its extreme and popular manifestation (such as in Werther) actually opposed the social impulses upon which it was based, did not escape Jane Austen: sympathy becomes absorption in one's own feelings rather than in the one who suffers; keen observation of the world becomes obscured by narcissistic projections of one's own suffering; and feeling itself (particularly the expression of feeling) is codified to a degree where it involves as much artificiality and convention as those societal constrictions against which sensibility had originally rebelled. Within the pages of Sense and Sensibility, Elinor's prudence and adherence to the demands of propriety are useful weapons against the excesses of Marianne-and by implication, the excesses of Werther and the Cult of Sensibility he helped to inspire.

Through the contrast between Marianne and Elinor, the reader discovers that Marianne represents (at least in the early parts of the novel) an inversion of Sensibility's ideals of sympathy, keen observation, and even poignant feeling. That is, Marianne's strict adherence to certain literal codes of sensibility leads her to become insensible. Marianne, confident that her great sensibility lets her experience nature more directly and express it more freely and spiritedly, shows herself to be quite the reverse. 15 She is stubborn and fixed where she ought to be free; blind where she ought to perceive. The fixity of her rigid code of life keeps her from being open to experience and enables her to see only what fits into her pre-existing categories. Like Werther, Marianne strives against all odds to be "natural" and fails miserably. In the end, she, like Werther, is defeated by her own self-consciousness, for, like Werther and the heroines of Austen's juvenilia, Marianne is in love with her own grief. Marianne's rigidly codified conception of romance poses similar possibilities. Not only does she vehemently deny the authenticity of "second attachments," but from Marianne's first encounter with Willoughby, their entire relationship is governed by a code of sensibility: their kinship is as instantaneous as Werther's with Lotte, their degree of intimacy inversely proportional to the number of words they need to achieve it, and the conventional gauges of intimacy, such as time, are irrelevant to them. The affection between Marianne and Willoughby leads them to withdraw from others and think only of themselves: "When he was present she had no eyes for anyone else. . . . If dancing formed part of the amusement of the night, they were partners for half the time; and when obliged to separate for a couple of dances, were careful to stand together and scarcely spoke a word to anybody else" (SS, pp. 53-54). Not only does her single-mindedness resemble Yorick's, Harley's, and Werther's, but one cannot help but be reminded of the similar burlesque of "Love and Friendship":

Our time was most delightfully spent, in mutual Protestations of Friendship, and in view of unalterable Love, in which we were secure from being interrupted, by intruding &disagreeable Visitors, as Augustus &Sophia had on their first Entrance in the Neighbourhood, taken due care to inform the surrounding Families, that as their Happiness centered wholly in themselves, they wished for no other society. (MW, p. 87)

Far from becoming more generally observant and "sensible" in the proximity of her beloved, Willoughby, Marianne hears and sees less: "she had no eyes for anyone else" (SS, p. 53). Austen wants us to see that Marianne does not suffer from an excess of sensibility, but rather from the wrong kind. Marianne's selfish sensibility paradoxically leads to the dulling of her senses, whereas the Colonel's and Elinor's more social sensibility enables them to perceive more of their surroundings.

In contrast, the reader begins to see that, somewhat ironically, Elinor has greater powers of observation, more poignant feelings than Marianne, and according with Diderot's definition of sensibility, is also capable of greater humanity, generosity, and virtue, although unappreciated by the "men (and women) of the world." The complexity of Austen's response to sensibility's moral aesthetic reveals itself in Elinor's use of silence, for example. Elinor departs from Marianne, Werther, and other heroes of sensibility in that her heroism is expressed in her valiant attempts at speech as well as her painful restraint. In fact, Austen shows that silence can be indulgent, and speech the greater sign of feeling, the greater act of love. Elinor is forced to cover up Marianne's extremes, as in the scene where Lucy Steele ingenuously exclaims, "What a sweet woman Lady Middleton is!" The sisters' responses are characteristic: "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, p. 122).

The choice of the phrase "telling lies" in this passage has been made much of by critics tending towards a "darker," feminist reading of Austen. However, although the phrase suggests that Elinor's response is not ideal, it is not at all clear that the fault rests with Elinor. There may be a grain of truth to critic Angela Leighton's claim that Marianne's "long, if histrionic, misery challenges the conventions of polite lying." 16 Elinor's duty to abide by the

conventions of "polite lying" both stem from and emphasize the lack of real intimacy in the novel-and therefore Elinor's painful verbal isolation. The "lies" do reflect badly on the context which forces Elinor into such isolation; however, this context includes Marianne, whose "impolite silence" cannot be taken as heroism. Leighton's claim could equally well be reversed, and we could say that the "conventions of polite lying" challenge Marianne's "long, . . . histrionic, misery." In other words, it is Marianne's histrionic misery-far more than the conventions of polite lying-that alienates and isolates Elinor. For the sake of an unattainable ideal of universal sincerity, Marianne hampers intimacy where it naturally exists, between the two sisters. 17

The reader, privy to Elinor's thoughts through the narrative point of view, understands the pain which causes Elinor to seek the relief of silence and which her "exertions" towards speech seek to hide from view: when Lucy reveals that the lock of hair in Edward's possession is really hers, Elinor responds "with a composure of voice under which was concealed an emotion and distress beyond anything she could have felt before. She was mortified, shocked, confounded" (SS, p. 135). Circumstances and disappointments tempt Elinor, like Marianne, to indulge her grief, whether in silent brooding or in its public avowal, but Elinor consistently resists the temptation.

We should also note that Austen uses strikingly heroic and physical terms to convey Elinor's attempts at speech. Elinor, for example is "bound to silence," and the narrator frequently emphasizes her "exertion," a word that challenges sensibility's notion of heroism of feeling alone. After Lucy's shocking declaration of her engagement, for example, we witness Elinor's heroism: "Elinor for a few moments remained silent. Her astonishment at what she heard was at first too great for words; but at length forcing herself to speak," she showed "an exertion of spirits which increased with her increase of emotion" (SS, p. 130, italics added). This last phrase is crucial for Elinor's role as a heroine of Austen's "new," reformed sensibility. Elinor's restraint and silence do not result from apathy or cold-heartedness (SS, p. 21). Her self-control increases in proportion to her emotion; they do not indicate a lack of emotion, as Marianne mistakenly thinks.

While appropriate silence can, as the reader sees in Edward, Colonel Brandon, and Elinor, betoken greater depth of feeling, and while it is through their silent moments that we recognize these heroes and heroine, the primary locus of heroism in the novel is actually speech. 18 Just as Elinor's "exertions" to speak are portrayed as physical heroism, Marianne's final exertions toward public speech, and away from her shrieks of misery, are similarly praiseworthy. Marianne's movement from sickness to health is marked by a movement from "private inarticulateness" to "public speech" (Leighton, p. 138), as Marianne's statements near the end of the novel reveal: "'There, exactly there'-pointing with one hand, 'on that projecting mound,-there I fell; and there I first saw Willoughby. . . . I can talk of it now, I hope, as I ought to do'" (SS, p. 344). Marianne has resolved to speak, "not without effort" (SS, p. 349), to confide in Elinor, and to give up her narcissistic projections by allowing them to be tempered, by the process of converting them into rational statements, of being "rectified" through conversation. 19 The double meaning of the final "as" in the above passage is telling. Not only does Marianne learn to speak, but she learns to speak as she ought to: the prepositional phrase takes circumstance, community, context into account. One cannot speak "as one ought" without observing what-and who-is around. Speaking "as one ought" requires great sensibility and is itself an act of love. She has learned, we think, that words, like conventions, "need not be limitations: they are a resource, not a restraint, for the human spirit." 20

III

Is there a lingering feeling that something has been lost in the taming of Marianne-a loss which hampers the reader's full enjoyment of Elinor's final triumph? Many contemporary critics and general readers of Austen think so, calling Marianne the unequivocal woman of sensibility and accusing Austen of oppressively "censoring" her. Marvin Mudrick, for example, says that Austen commits the crime of burying her "burning heart" in the "coffin of

convention" (Mudrick, p. 91). And yet, while this is clearly overstated, is there perhaps something within the novel that trains the reader to depend upon Marianne's "wildness" and "violence" even for our enjoyment of Elinor?

The danger attached to Elinor's role in the novel is that in her verbal acts of heroism and perspicacity, Elinor risks seeming a woman of words. And, as we will see, this is in fact how Marianne (and many critics, for that matter) interpret her behavior. To counteract this impression, Austen gives the reader many clues that Elinor cannot speak freely either. At the moments of her most intense feeling, she, like the heroes and heroines of sensibility, grows speechless. When Edward arrives at Barton Cottage at the end of the novel, Elinor "saw her mother and Marianne change colour; saw them look at herself, and whisper a few sentences to each other. She would have given the world to be able to speak- . . . but she had no utterance" (SS, p. 358). Like a true "woman of feeling," Elinor loses her ability to speak when she feels most deeply. The depth of Elinor's emotions are revealed through a proliferation of dashes and suddenly more fragmented syntax of the narrative voice when it represents her point of view at especially poignant moments. 21 By the end, Elinor actually indulges in fancy, becomes speechless, and "almost runs out of the room"; as soon as the door closes, we learn that she "burst into tears of joy" (SS, p. 360). We need to consider the way in which Elinor acts as a frame for Marianne's "wildness," much in the way that the fictional editors of many novels of sensibility allow the liberation of men of feeling, and much as the picturesque enjoyment of wildness and irregularity depends on distance or separation from danger.

Time after time, we experience Marianne's (rigorously) ungoverned passion: she is attracted to "something more of wildness" (SS, pp. 305-6), and we experience the repeated "violence of her affliction," her "violent oppression of spirits," and so forth. This "violence" or "wildness" seems to equate Marianne, like Werther, with the Burkean sublime, by the anti-social, unruly nature of her passion. One of the ways Austen emphasizes this is through Marianne's fascination with the burning flames of the fireplace: Marianne "sat by the drawing-room fire . . . , without once stirring from her seat or altering her attitude, lost in her own thoughts and insensible to her sister's presence" (SS, p. 175). (The parallel in Werther is his attraction to Ossian's poetry and steep, jagged cliffs, as he approaches suicide.)

Meanwhile, the reader also learns of Elinor's favorite hobby: Elinor loves to paint screens-fire screens, appropriately enough-which allow for the fire to be enjoyed more indirectly, and prevent wax-based cosmetics from melting in public. Elinor paints screens both metaphorically and physically: the verb "screen" also reappears at least twice in her interactions with Marianne: Elinor attempts "to screen Marianne from particularity" (SS, p. 86) and again later tries "to screen her from the observation of others, while reviving her with lavender water" (SS, p. 177). "At such a moment" the narrator informs us, "to be composed . . . was not only beyond the reach of Marianne, it was beyond her wish" (SS, p. 176). Elinor, who has been forced to have restraint enough for two, spends most of her energy "composing" Marianne-arranging Marianne's representation to others, as well as her own, striving to retain-or achieve-surface order.

I mentioned earlier that the self-conscious narrator-protagonists of novels of sensibility required editors to fulfill the function of man of words, and publish their words, without impugning the protagonists' role as man of feeling. Just as the Herausgeber allows Werther to focus on and indulge in his solipsistic vision of the world, Elinor's framing and screening ironically allow Marianne to indulge in her "violent" excesses and selfish sensibility. Just as every "man of feeling" was protected by either a woman of sense or a Sancho Panza figure, Elinor protects and supports Marianne, who is (by her own inclination) helpless against her own inclinations. 22 Structurally, Elinor provides the "safe" distance from Marianne's "sublime" extremes that can allow, in Burke's terms, the opportunity for "delight." Elinor is, in effect, the editor, the "Herausgeber" of the public version of Marianne's and her own story. Unlike Werther and Werther's editor, however, Elinor does not write. 23 The pen is not in her hands; however, the paintbrush is, and she lovingly covers over as many as she can of her sister's flaws. Just as in the moral aesthetic

of sensibility, Elinor purposely obscures her own authority, and is more lovable for doing so: she desires order, but allows it to be, perhaps not quite as invisible as sensibility requires, but aesthetically pleasing nonetheless.

However, this strategy-a narrative structure common to novels of sensibility-raises problems of sympathy that arise elsewhere in the text. Just as, near the end of the novel, Elinor's forgiving, sympathetic reaction to Willoughby, "whom, only half an hour ago she had abhorred," 24 affirms the Burkean (and Smithian) principle that delight and sympathy come from the safe distance from peril, 25 Elinor's framing, screening, controlling presence heightens sympathy for Marianne, perhaps at Elinor's own expense. When Marianne grows ill, then subdued, and later chastened, the reader, like Elinor, forgives her for her past offenses and Marianne becomes dearer, almost, than she should. In other words, if Elinor's steadiness allows Marianne's wildness, does it also to some extent sacrifice Elinor's attractiveness as a character?

Critics like Angela Leighton who do not recognize the historically-based cultural criticism and the ironic element to the structure of the novel, also do not recognize the two layers of representation within the novel. Leighton, for example, tries to divorce Marianne's story from Elinor's-in order to gain access to the "authentic" Marianne, "uncensored" by either Elinor or the narrator; as a result, she presents a vastly oversimplified view of Elinor. As in Werther, the hero's own version of the story cannot be separated from the frame through which his story is presented. To make this mistake is to follow in the footsteps of both Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood, neither of whom, despite their protestations, understands either sensibility or the picturesque. Both mistake "Elinor's representation of herself" (SS, p. 355) for Elinor's actual internal state and mistake self-control for lack of real feeling. 26 Self-control, in their understanding, is necessarily opposed to strong feeling, just as artifice, propriety, and polite lies are anathema to authentic expression.

In this novel, Austen attempts to counter several notions associated with the cult of sensibility: she particularly attacks the notion that those who abide by customary rules of propriety must therefore be cold, rational, unfeeling, and devoid of all contact with nature, as Marianne thinks Elinor is: "Cold, cold Elinor." Austen shows that Elinor achieves closer contact to Nature than those around her who rebel more abrasively against society's constraints. Although Elinor is thought to be insensible to the charms of the picturesque and devoid of desires of rebellion-that is, a slave to convention and propriety-she shows herself to represent sensibility in its redeemed form, by avoiding the Scylla and Charybdis of hypocrisy or pure artifice on the one hand, and the single-minded submission to the sublime on the other. One of Austen's main points seems to be to refute the submission to the sublime that entails a loss of moral autonomy-and the relinquishing of responsibility for one's own actions. Clearly this seems to be how Austen understood the philosophical significance of Werther's eventual fate.

In these ways, Austen attempts to redeem sensibility (and the picturesque) from potentially hurtful political, moral, and psychological ramifications, and shows how self-control (or a degree of moral autonomy) can be compatible with the appreciation of nature. In addition, Austen suggests that society's constraints need stifle neither aesthetic enjoyment nor playful spirit: that is, if contingency forces upon us the need for firescreens, we can still decorate them lovingly. Austen rejects the sublime and unmediated quest for authenticity that eventually tempts both Werther and Marianne. Just as she reclaims sensibility for her own ethical and aesthetic purposes, Austen reclaims propriety, civility, and manners as contributors to individual happiness, as protectors of virtue, and even as picturesque adornments of the social landscape.

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Footnote

Notes

1. Denis Diderot, Oeuvres, ed. J. Assezat (Paris: 1875); quoted in R. F. Brissenden, Virtue in Distress (London: Macmillan, 1974), p. 115.
2. Quoted in Leland Warren, Sensibility in Transformation, ed. Syndy McMillen Conger (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1984), p. 31.
3. Francis Brooke, A History of Emily Montague (Dublin: Faulkner, 1769).
4. Henry Mackenzie, The Man of Feeling (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 69.
5. J. W. Goethe, "Die Leiden des jungen Werther," Goethes Werke (Hamburger Ausgabe), ed. Erich Trunz (München: C. H. Beck, 1989); hereafter abbreviated W; the translations are mine.
6. Consider also the following passage: "May I, can I express Heaven in words?-that she loves me!" (W, p. 38).
7. Laurence Sterne, A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
8. Brissenden, p. 115.
9. Based on list in Janet Todd, Sensibility: An Introduction (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 7.
10. See Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975), pp. 7-8; 194 for an example of the latter.
11. Jane Austen, The Novels of Jane Austen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Minor Works volume (including "Love and Friendship") is hereafter abbreviated MW; Sense and Sensibility as SS; Persuasion as P; and Mansfield Park as MP.
12. See Marvin Mudrick, Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp.1-36 in chapter 1, "Irony Versus Sentiment," for another discussion of Austen's attacks on sensibility in her Juvenilia.
13. We have no direct evidence that Austen read the English editions of Werther, so popular during her day; however, her allusions to the novel show a distinct familiarity with the plot. This could have been acquired a number of ways, since print-shops, too, were full of images of Werther and Lotte. The following passage from Charlotte Smith's Emmeline, ed. Anne Ehrenpreis (London: Oxford, 1971), pp. 506-7 (for which I am grateful to Albrecht Strauss), is an example of a reference to Werther's popularity that Austen most surely read. An offensive young woman is said to be "drest in the character of Charlotte in the Sorrows of Werter," and speaking of her and her equally objectionable sister, the narrator declares, "Their air and manner were adapted, as they believed, to the figures of those characters as they appear in the print shops; and their excessive affectation, together with the gaudy appearance of their mama, nearly conquered the gravity of Emmeline and of many in the company."
14. Lilian Furst also notices this trend in "The Man of Sensibility and the Woman of Sense," Jahrbuch für Internationale Germanistik 14 (1982): 13-26.
15. See Stuart Tave, Some Words of Jane Austen (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1973), pp. 90-91.
16. Angela Leighton, "Sense and Silences," Jane Austen: New Perspectives, ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983), p. 134.
17. It is also important to note that there are limits to Elinor's "polite lies," as we discover later in the novel in another conversation with Lucy. When Lucy insincerely remarks, "I wonder I should never hear you say how agreeable Mrs. Dashwood was!" the narrator informs us, "To this, Elinor had no answer to make, and did not attempt any" (SS, p. 239).
18. We find a similar theme in Persuasion, where Anne's utterances are announced with a degree of drama that hearkens back to Elinor's "heroic" exertions: "Here Anne spoke," and later: "She had spoken it; but she trembled when it was done" (pp. 24; 213).
19. See Hans Aarsleff's explanation of Destutt de Tracy's term in From Locke to Saussure (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 375-76: "In so far as words communicate adequately, they do so only because they are submitted to a constant process of 'rectification' in the social intercourse of speech." See also Eric Rothstein on "modification" in Systems of Order and Inquiry in Later Eighteenth Century Fiction (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 20ff.

20. Jan Fergus, "Pride and Prejudice: Critical Studies," Jane Austen: Modern Critical Views, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), p. 126.
21. Norman Page, The Language of Jane Austen (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), pp. 97-98.
22. Remember that Werther's mother feeds him, others protect him, and another tells his story. See Furst on this topic, passim.
23. Fergus's suggestion that the earliest forms of Sense and Sensibility were epistolary only emphasize my point. See his Jane Austen: A Literary Life (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 74.
24. Jean H. Hagstrum, Sex and Sensibility (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 273.
25. In an interesting passage on p. 86ff, Adam Smith in The Theory of Moral Sentiments (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1976) shows that a sense of injustice is "planted in the human breast" to the extent that everyone wants criminals to be captured and perhaps even put to death; however, then he says that as soon as the prisoner no longer threatens us, when he is behind bars, we begin to sympathize with him-we wish him well and do not want him to die. In other words, justice naturally transforms itself into benevolence when we can "afford" it.
26. Mrs. Dashwood, we learn, "had been misled by the careful, the considerate attention of her daughter, to think [her] attachment, . . . much slighter in reality than she had been wont to believe . . . under this persuasion she had been . . . almost unkind to Elinor" (SS, pp. 355-56). The narrator's description of Marianne's thoughts applies equally well to her mother: "The business of self-command she settled very easily: with strong affections it was impossible; with calm ones it could have no merit. That her sister's affections were calm, she dared not deny, though she blushed to acknowledge it" (SS, p. 104).

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