



## Making Sense of Sensibility

INGER SIGRUN BRODEY

Inger Sigrun Brodey, JASNA's North American Scholar for the 2015 AGM, is the Bank of America Distinguished Term Professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she teaches in English and Comparative Literature, Asian Studies, and Global Studies and is co-founder and director of the annual Jane Austen Summer Program. She frequently speaks to JASNA and to other international Jane Austen societies.

A FIRST-TIME READER OF *Sense and Sensibility* unconcerned with historical context and prompted by cover graphics depicting the head and the heart might assume the title reflects an easy dichotomy. In many ways, the novel supports such a dichotomy; however, the actual meaning of both the words themselves and their function in Austen's work is a little more complex. In fact, both qualities generate the same adjective: sensible. You can be "sensible" as in having sense, or "sensible" as in responding emotionally to something: therefore a "sensible reaction" could either exhibit common sense or deeply felt emotion.<sup>1</sup> If we look carefully at Austen's initial descriptions of Elinor and Marianne, the characters also begin to look less dichotomous. Each of the sisters has a mix of excellent reason and warm, feeling heart. Of Elinor we hear that she has "an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong." Of Marianne, that her "abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever" (6). So why is the dichotomous understanding of this novel so common? I'm going to argue that if we see the sisters as dichotomous, we fall into a trap Austen builds to ensnare us and, ultimately, to teach us about sensibility. In other words, Austen plays with the cultural assumptions and intellectual fashions of the time for didactic as well as comedic purposes. And some of her jokes are not readily accessible without the historical context.<sup>2</sup>

The culture of sensibility was a pan-European intellectual fashion that demoted the importance of "disengaged reason" in moral life and championed

sensibility and natural goodness in its stead. This movement both flourished and decayed during Austen's years as a young reader and author at Steventon parsonage in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. I would argue that the culture of sensibility shaped her thought and many choices in *all* of her mature novels, even if it is most apparent in her juvenilia and early works. In her work, Austen describes the dangerous pleasures associated with sensibility in order to both critique and affirm it. Austen ultimately uses her own narrative techniques to rehabilitate sensibility to its original philanthropic purposes and to teach her readers lessons about sympathy.

#### SELFISHNESS AND SYMPATHY

The cultural history of sensibility, which flourished in the second half of the eighteenth century, is even richer (and perhaps more comprehensible) than the concept's etymology. Sensibility, as a human faculty, becomes the name for a deep and untaught capacity to feel emotion, to perceive beauty, and especially to sympathize with others' sufferings. It associates virtue with the nervous system: the individuals most easily stirred are the most capable of sympathy and love. Sensibility as a concept grew to help resolve deeply troubling observations about humanity. It expresses a hope for goodness and virtue despite (ample) evidence of worldly corruption.

In the background of this optimism hovers the specter of Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century philosopher whom so many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors loved to refute. In his *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes offers a chilling description of our natural state when we are left to face one another without a common authority to hold us "in awe." Without a common authority to enforce contracts, we must reconcile ourselves to "continuall feare and danger of violent death" (Hobbes 88, 89). Without such a supreme power to hold us accountable, we cannot escape perpetual mistrust, competing desires, fear, isolation, and civil war.

In contrast to Hobbes's recommendations, the political, moral, and aesthetic goals of the culture of sensibility coalesce in the desire for *weaker* central government, *liberation* from social conventions, and *release* from ineffective education and ethical norms. Writers and other artists in the culture of sensibility affirmed *spontaneity* over planning, *song* over reasoned argument, *English gardens* over French, and *wildflowers* over cultivated plants, etc.<sup>3</sup> What Hobbes found dangerously delusional, sensibility embraced—at least on the surface.<sup>4</sup> Two very different illustrations are entitled "Sensibility": while one is an anonymous girl noticing a snail on a dead branch and the other a grown Emma



*Sensibility* (1787), after Richard Morton Payne. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Hart Hamilton observing the emblematic mimosa plant, both show sensibility in action. Such iconic figures of sensibility are capable of noticing what others would ignore, caring for that which society does not value, feeling deeply the suffering of others. That was sensibility's great ambition—to achieve this natural goodness without recourse to governmental power, law, or other external authorities: to overcome feeling with feeling internally, rather than to shape feeling through reason or education.



*Sensibility* (1789), after George Romney. © Trustees of the British Museum.

Philosophers offered numerous sources and arguments for natural goodness and ways in which human beings could achieve community, mutual transparency, and mutual sympathy without needing a supreme power to keep them in awe (whether that supreme power were monarch, God, or parent).

Authors such as Rousseau, Shaftesbury, Hume, and Adam Smith, who respond to Hobbes in their own ways, all assert a hope in such selfless goodness upon which human community can be built. Belief in the human faculty of sensibility grounded this hope for humanity, liberalism, self-regulation, tolerance, and natural goodness.

In the *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (1751–1765), the monumental mid-century achievement, the authors equate the ability to feel deeply with a virtue surpassing any achieved through discipline or reason.<sup>5</sup> Sensibility is described as something very natural, and yet it is also weak or ridiculed, often defeated by forces such as the “men of the world.” The man of feeling’s moral superiority is defined in opposition to more traditional mores and concerns of society. The definition thus relies on an opposition to “men of the world” and their successes. Meanwhile, the medical entry suggests a physical basis for sensibility: one might have a good “sense of sensibility” just like a good sense of hearing or smell (*Encyclopédie* 15:38, 52).

It was in this human trait that people found hope of escaping the selfishness that Hobbes predicted. Parson Yorick in Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* demonstrates this conviction in a quasi-divine faculty imbedded firmly in human emotions:

Dear sensibility! source inexhausted of all that’s precious in our joys, or costly in our sorrows! . . . Eternal fountain of our feelings!—this is thy divinity which stirs within me—that I feel some generous joys and generous cares *beyond myself*—all comes from thee, great—great **SENSORIUM** of the world!— (155, my emphasis)

Trust in sensibility was, using Erwin Panofsky’s term, a “mental habit” that united many aspects of this particular moment in Western history. Not all thinkers and authors at the time agreed with Diderot’s aspirational hope in sensibility as a human faculty (or even in the existence of sensibility, or natural goodness, or natural human sympathy), but even those who disagreed tended to use the same concepts and questions in their disagreements.

Popular literature, whether in France, England, or Germany, helped to establish a new kind of hero according to these standards and a shifting understanding of what constitutes virtue. The characteristics of the man of feeling can be summarized: unspoiled natural virtue, unusually deep capacity to feel, susceptibility to sights of beauty or suffering, lack of worldly success or recognition, sense of isolation, insufficiency of conventional language to convey emotions, and allergy to artificial restraints of convention and propriety. The man of feeling is, in short, a Shaftesburian soul in a Hobbesian universe.

His nemesis, the smooth-speaking, physically robust, financially successful, selfish rake or businessman, seems to combine all aspects of worldly success. Linguistic, social, physical, and financial (and generally romantic) failure is requisite for the man of feeling. Such heroes are, in fact, often martyrs to sensibility. One of the earliest wildly successful martyrs was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Werther. In addition to the traits listed above, Werther epitomized the attachment to nature, interest in children and outcasts, and deeply felt loves that distinguish the hero of sensibility. He is understood only by a rare kindred spirit, is necessarily misunderstood by the rest of the world, and, when thwarted, has a tendency towards self-destruction. In this list, you may also recognize several of Marianne Dashwood's traits. Most seriously, Marianne like Werther "court[s] . . . misery" and chooses "to augment and fix her sorrow by seeking silence, solitude, and idleness." Austen's female incarnation of Goethe's Werther risks "self-destruction" through this strict and self-justified adherence to sensibility's ideals: "[T]hey who suffer little may be proud and independent as they like— . . . but I cannot. I must feel—I must be wretched" (189–90). Marianne measures sensibility according to lack of control: she misses that deep feeling can coexist with reason and "exertion" and also that self-control can be an expression of feeling.<sup>6</sup> By giving Marianne many of Werther's traits and alluding to Goethe's work within *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen sends a complex message regarding her novel's role in relation to the culture of sensibility. Are we to understand *Sense and Sensibility* as a critique of the novel of sensibility or as an example of it?

These philosophical disputes, based on tenets of the culture of sensibility, help us understand some of the early disputes between Marianne and Elinor. When Elinor complains about Marianne's impropriety in driving alone with Willoughby and stealthily visiting Allenhurst, Marianne justifies the propriety through her enjoyment of the event: "if there had 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" (68). Marianne's response reads like a claim out of Shaftesbury, who argued that virtue was as simple as digestion. Of course Marianne refuses to resist pleasure, as she refuses to resist misery above. The danger with Marianne's approach is that if we make assumptions that others are naturally good, then we become vulnerable to the good actors among us. And one of the jokes is that a faith in natural goodness paradoxically leads characters like Werther and Marianne to self-consciousness and artifice in pursuit of authenticity.



Sensibility as a moral faculty served as an antidote to the fears of human selfishness and isolation. The litmus test regarding sensibility and human selfishness comes down to something we will all recognize: curiosity about others' suffering. Whereas today, we might think of "rubbernecking" on the highway or the enjoyment of tragedies (not to mention soap operas), authors during Austen's life framed the discussion in relation to debates surrounding sensibility and natural sympathy. Adam Smith, for example, takes up this question in his hugely successful first work, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), which opens with a consideration of the limits to our ability to feel another's pain: "Though our brother is on the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations" (9). In response to our inability to share in others' feelings Smith's remarkable solution is to elevate our *imagination*. The separation from others actually stirs our imagination, and without imagination we cannot feel sympathy with others. According to Smith's theory, the better our imagination, the better we can sympathize and the more capable we are of morality. This hopeful view was so stirring that it made Smith famous across Europe long before he wrote his *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Smith goes even further by emphasizing the telling of the sufferer's tales. Partly through his influence, the narrative of distress becomes the locus of sympathy and an emblem of virtue.

Sympathy . . . alleviates grief by insinuating into the heart [of the sufferer] almost the only agreeable sensation which it is at that time capable of receiving. . . . By relating their misfortunes, they in some measure renew their grief. . . . Their tears accordingly flow faster than before, and they are apt to abandon themselves to all the weakness of sorrow. They take pleasure, however, in all of this, and, it is evident, are sensibly relieved by it. (14–15)

Tales of distress are thus therapeutic for both teller and listener in this economy of sympathy. This model for moral philosophy places heavy emphasis on the role of narrative in society and gives new importance to the novel as a fledgling genre particularly well suited to the culture of sensibility. The novel of sensibility is shaped around this central idea of vicarious experiences of tales of suffering and virtue, and the desire to make the feeling as direct as possible may well underlie the significance of epistolary fiction at the time.

There are also many dangers associated with this model of gaining or displaying sympathy through narratives of distress. Attraction to a suffering beloved has many problematic benefits—among them pleasure and prestige. Within the culture of sensibility, weeping at another's grief displays one's aesthetic and moral status as a man or woman of feeling. Storytelling reenacts the emotions, but often at a great distance from the initial stimulus. Another problem is simply that this model requires a victim. We can see some of the difficulties in the following passages:

With what a moral delight will it crown my journey, in sharing  
in the sickening incidents of a tale of misery told to me by such a  
sufferer? To see her weep! (Sterne 57)

She wep't.—Life's purple tide began to flow  
In languid streams through every thrilling vein;  
Dim were my swimming eyes—my pulse beat slow,  
And my full heart was swell'd to dear delicious pain. (Wordsworth)

Both Sterne's Parson Yorick and William Wordsworth comply with the tendency to eroticize "dear delicious pain," describing the pleasure of witnessing virtue in distress, a human tableau both unencumbered by traditional decorum or reserve and also necessarily involving suffering. The trajectory of the cult of feeling described here culminates in sadistic tendencies, literally distributed in the narrative fiction of the Marquis de Sade, whose work grows directly out of the culture of sensibility.

The novel of sensibility's structure is thus dependent on other people's suffering as well as on a potentially narcissistic self-consciousness. And indeed toward the end of the eighteenth century, sensibility becomes increasingly amenable to ridicule. In a lovely list of adjectives collected by Janet Todd, sensibility is "exquisite" in Addison, "delicate" in Hume, "sweet" in Cowper, "dear" in Sterne, (and then somewhat falling in esteem) "acute" in Austen, "trembling" in Hazlitt, "mawkish" in Coleridge, and "sickly" in Byron (Todd 7). The apex of sensibility's glory, then, is the radical idea that through human imagination we can overcome our separation from one another and approximate others' feelings. In feeling sympathy for the suffering of others we are pulled out of our self-absorption and into community and fellowship. The nadir is when sensibility becomes a hypocritical excuse to relish stories of others' suffering for the purpose of enhancing our social status, satisfying our vanity, or indulging our darkest sexual fantasies.

Austen's youthful "Love and Freindship" (1790) is actually one of the first parodies of the culture of sensibility, even though it was not published until



much later. In it she provides a powerful attack on the paradoxically *selfish* excesses of sensibility. Laura, for example, writes:

“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—.”  
(*Minor Works* 102)

Here Austen exposes the extremes of the culture of sensibility, in which self-conscious displays of feeling become more important than actual help or charity, when chicken soup or running for the apothecary would be much more helpful than showering tears upon the face of the patient. A misguided adherence to authenticity (defined in a certain narrow way) paradoxically leads to disturbing degrees of artifice.<sup>7</sup> In general, it may be easier to recognize Austen’s critique of sensibility than to recognize the ways in which she adheres to it.

In Austen’s writings, we can see some of these same concerns about our ultimately Hobbesian fallen and selfish nature. “Dear Self,” as she calls it, is a constant weight, hampering flights of idealism in her work. From the juvenilia to *Sanditon*, Austen explores the ways in which our own biases and preferences influence our judgments. Our own self-absorption is so difficult to escape that it is a challenge to ascertain where self-interest ends and sympathy for others begins. As Austen writes in one of her letters, “For one’s own *dear Self*, one ascertains & remembers everything” (30 January 1809, my emphasis). In her novels she echoes these thoughts in the internal musings of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*: “What wild imaginations one forms, where *dear self* is concerned! How sure to be mistaken!” (201, my emphasis). And to turn from one of Austen’s noblest heroines to one of her most selfish characters, Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park* appeals, “Selfishness must always be forgiven you know, because there is no hope of a cure” (68). There is perhaps more truth to Mary’s claim than even Austen would like.

Sensibility rejects the traditional “cures” for selfishness: obedience, discipline, education, reason, penitence, or law. Consider the masterful second chapter of *Sense and Sensibility*, in which Fanny Dashwood talks John Dashwood out of his sacred deathbed promise to his father to support his sisters. Certainly Fanny is the epitome of selfish manipulation, but what makes John so susceptible? Love for Fanny? jealousy of his half-sisters? weak principle? When we return to the descriptions of the Dashwood siblings, we will recall that “Mr. John Dashwood had not the strong feelings of the rest of the family. . . . He was not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted, and

rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed: but he was, in general, well respected" (5). Austen seems to suggest that strong feeling might be a stronger guide to moral virtue than strong principle and that perhaps one trains feelings through other feelings. Ultimately, this idea may give us a key to why Austen places her didactic character developments within a setting of romantic courtship and empathic friendship.

Regardless of her solutions, Austen shares in some of the general concerns or questions of the period: How natural is human sympathy? Does imagination separate us or join us closer together? Can we ever escape selfish concerns? Can we truly sympathize with others? Is self-regard a means or an obstacle to virtue? How do we keep from projecting ourselves, our tastes, and our wishes onto others? Can such self-absorbed creatures (as we are) even be said to love others?

#### OBJECTS OF INTEREST

Philosophers and moralists writing within the culture of sensibility speculated about what exactly spurs a viewer to sympathy or pity. What forms of suffering spur us more than others, and what are the sights from which we would prefer to turn away? In Anna Laetitia Barbauld's *An Inquiry into those Kinds of Distress which Excite Agreeable Sensations* (1773), her example for the successful portrayal of suffering is a literary one: Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. While I have heretofore focused on the "man of feeling," the female heroines of sensibility tend to have a somewhat different fate. There is a tendency to eroticize, to sexualize the suffering and often death of the woman of sensibility. Classic icons of female sensibility in literature, such as *Clarissa* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Julie, die as a result of their sufferings and the tension between their natural goodness and the sexual norms of their societies.

A visual example of the eroticized woman of feeling can be found in the portrait of the protagonist of Hugh Kelly's *Memoirs of a Magdalen: Or, the History of Louisa Mildmay* (1767). Louisa Mildmay's chaste and vulnerable sensibility is described in erotic terms in the caption: "The delicious sensibility that swam in her charming black eyes gave her an air which rendered her wholly irresistible" (1:46). Her fate in the story is almost identical to that of Agatha in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows*, who is also seduced by her fiancé and then cast off for being too amorous to befit a wife. Both suffer extreme poverty before eventually being rescued by their former fiancés, who are somewhat belatedly aware of their actual worth as women of sensibility.

The culture of sensibility indulges in a morbid fascination with the suffering and, often, the death of these heroines. Austen makes Marianne similar to Werther in plot and tendencies—partly jokingly at first—but when by the



Louisa  
Mildmay  
(1787).  
© Trustees  
of the British  
Museum.

middle of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne seems near death, Austen also invokes the fate of the female icons of sensibility and, indeed, according to Colonel Brandon's report, also of the first Eliza.

The role of enjoyment in the spectacle of another's distress is distinctly problematic, and yet the absence of interest in another's suffering equally so. How does one ensure sympathy with a sufferer? Barbauld provides an answer: "When in common language we say *a miserable object*, we mean an object of distress which, if we relieve, we turn away from at the same time. To make pity pleasing, the object of it must not in any view be disagreeable to the imagination" (223). Here we have a difficulty that could send shock waves into the foundations of sensibility's hopes for humanity. Could there be prerequisites for pity? And yet nothing better reveals the hypocrisy of its extremes.

Another key word that Austen uses in her writing can help us distinguish

objects that invite sympathy from those that make us wish to turn away. The word *interesting* changed meanings in the last quarter of the eighteenth century from an older meaning, “of importance” (to pique the intellect), to a new meaning, “adapted to excite interest, having the qualities which rouse curiosity . . . or appeal to the emotions” (to stimulate subjective emotions) (*Oxford English Dictionary*). The earliest occurrence of the new meaning is in Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). For Austen *interest* is a code word for conformity to the *aesthetic* requirements of sensibility. She uses it as shorthand to satirize times when, rather than leading to greater human empathy or universal brotherhood, sensibility leads to a cold elitism, an insensitivity to others who don’t meet aesthetic requirements.

It is also very convenient if the interesting sufferer happens to be young and beautiful. Consider this episode from Austen’s “Jack and Alice”:

A lovely young Woman lying apparently in great pain beneath a Citron-tree, was an object too interesting not to attract their notice. Forgetting their own dispute they both with sympathizing tenderness advanced towards her & accosted her in these terms.

“You seem fair Nymph to be labouring under some misfortune which we shall be happy to relieve if you will inform us what it is. Will you favour us with your Life & adventures?”

“Willingly Ladies, if you will be so kind as to be seated.”

(*MW* 20)

She proceeds with her lengthy history of woes, but neither does the narrator mention, nor do the characters seem to notice, that she has a bloody, broken leg, “caught in one of the steel traps so common in gentlemen’s grounds” (22). One whole chapter later, in other words, we learn that she has been screaming at the top of her lungs until a servant released her from the trap, and she is still lying on the ground with her bloody and “entirely broken” leg while recounting several pages’ worth of life-adventures (22). The steel traps intended for human poachers vividly suggest a callous, Hobbesian world, yet human suffering is treated slightly by the interlocutors in the passage. The phrase “Life & adventures,” reminiscent of a subtitle of an eighteenth-century novel, suggests also the entertainment value of the lady’s narrative—and thereby of her distress: “At this melancholy recital the fair eyes of Lady Williams, were suffused with tears” (22).

Finally, however, Lady Williams thinks to set the leg, which she does with great dexterity “the more wonderfull on account of her having never performed such a one before” (22). The explicit delay in providing medical attention emphasizes the fact that narrative impulses are stronger than the desire to relieve pain. Experiencing the stranger’s self-narrated past distress is more

pressing than eliminating her present distress. It is also unclear what bearing her physical appearance has on the degree to which her story “interests” her interviewers/spectators. She is a “fair Nymph,” “lovely,” and picturesque, lying under a citron tree—portrayed detachedly, as a picture. Austen’s implication seems to be that her situation “interests” the viewers only because of a combination of beauty, vulnerability, and distress, and this “interest” piques the desire for immersion in a narrative.

While Marianne’s sprained ankle might initially present her as a similarly “interesting” object to Willoughby, the narrative quickly turns this situation around. Austen emphasizes the *Dashwoods* as spectators and *Willoughby* as the interesting object: “he then departed, to make himself *still more interesting*, in the midst of an heavy rain” (42, my emphasis). Rather than ask him to tell his history, Marianne rapidly conjures him into the hero of her own tale:

His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for *the hero of a favourite story*; and in his carrying her into the house with so little previous formality, there was a rapidity of thought which particularly recommended the action to her. *Every circumstance belonging to him was interesting*. His name was good, his residence was in their favourite village, and she soon found out that of all manly dresses a shooting-jacket was the most becoming. Her imagination was busy, her reflections were pleasant, and the pain of a sprained ankle was disregarded. (43, my emphasis)

Subsequently, Marianne asserts her authorship even further by teaching him what opinions he should espouse during their conversations about literature. Thus, Willoughby is “interesting” because of his conformity with her own romantic expectations, based on very little actual evidence from Willoughby himself.

Mrs. Dashwood, Marianne’s twin in sensibility, finds Willoughby’s entrance equally “interesting”:

[Willoughby] apologized for his intrusion by relating its cause, in a manner so frank and so graceful, that his person, which was uncommonly handsome, received additional charms from his voice and expression. Had he been even old, ugly, and vulgar, the gratitude and kindness of Mrs. Dashwood would have been secured by any act of attention to her child; but *the influence of youth, beauty, and elegance, gave an interest* to the action which came home to her feelings. (42, my emphasis)

Again, interest is earned, not merely through a virtuous act but particularly through “youth, beauty, and elegance.” Austen exposes the degree of selec-

tion that is involved in responding to others and their distress—the moral responsibility involved in determining who is “interesting” and who deserves sympathy or love.

There can also be something beautiful about this partiality, as one can see in the passage where Mrs. Dashwood finally finds some interest in Edward:

Mrs. Dashwood now took pains to get acquainted with him. . . . She speedily comprehended all his merits; the persuasion of his regard for Elinor perhaps assisted her penetration; . . . even that quietness of manner which militated against all her established ideas of what a young man’s address ought to be, was *no longer uninteresting when she knew his heart to be warm and his temper affectionate.* (16–17, my emphasis)

When is the attraction to the “interesting” something beautiful, and when is it dangerous? I think the juxtaposition of these two examples is instructive. The “interesting” is dangerous when one is constructing one’s own novel starring oneself, and it is less dangerous and more beautiful when one is thinking of others. The “interesting” can reveal selfish or social tendencies, one of the distinctions about sensibility that Austen wants us to remember.

Occurring in the middle of volume three, Marianne’s illness and near death become a central tableau of the novel and raise a number of difficult questions. It seems that Marianne, modeled after Werther in some ways, is being punished for her excessive (and very literal) conformity to the culture of sensibility. The reader might think that she will perish in a beautiful tableau as Werther has. This performance minimizes the suffering of Eliza, the woman who has actually been violated and impregnated by Willoughby, an off-stage foil for Marianne’s relatively self-imposed suffering. In terms of tone, there seems to be a conflict between the initial teasing of Marianne by Elinor, Edward, and the narrator in the first half of the novel and then this dramatic turn of plot, with its explicitly life or death stakes. By building Marianne up as a suffering spectacle on her deathbed, does Austen allow her to fulfill the plot trajectory of the woman of sensibility, like a Clarissa or a Julie? The image that Ang Lee so lovingly frames of this scene in his 1995 film *Sense and Sensibility* nicely epitomizes the tendency to eroticize Marianne’s “dear delicious pain.” Ang Lee’s framing, lighting, and high-angle perspective make Marianne “interesting” to the viewer of the film while also attributing this feeling to Elinor’s point of view by including her as spectator. But ultimately Lee’s film is not successful in capturing the dramatic irony involved in Austen’s treatment of this scene.





*Sense and Sensibility* (1995). © Columbia Pictures.

#### REFRAMING SENSIBILITY

Austen is having another joke on us: there is a secret drama of feeling going on within the novel. In fact, Austen embeds a novel of sensibility *within* a novel critiquing sensibility. Ultimately the two sisters undergo very similar plot lines: everything happens to Elinor first, although Marianne does not know it. They both fall in love, experience unexpected separation, are saddened by sudden departures, hear news of betrayal, and (after a few twists) experience eventual marriages. These parallel plots also make it more problematic to avoid a competition between what sympathy each sister deserves (both from the other sister and from the reader). Sympathy is the “currency” of the culture of sensibility: the question of who receives it and who pays it is of paramount importance. Austen involves her reader in similar decisions in her economy of emotion.

The dichotomy between the sisters exists only from the perspective of the “romantic” Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood, particularly in the first half of the novel. If we allow our empathy to be dictated by theatricals or by the code of sensibility, then Marianne is the center of the novel. Austen teases us

to find Marianne more “interesting” than Elinor. If we allow ourselves to see beyond Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne’s perspectives of Elinor, and therefore beyond how Elinor is forced to represent herself to them, then we can establish Elinor in the position she deserves, as the heroine of *her own* novel. Consider the following passage near the end of the novel, where Mrs. Dashwood recognizes the errors she has made in reading the situation of her daughters and the injustice in her metering of sympathy.

She now found that she had erred in relying on Elinor’s representation of herself. . . . She found that she had been misled by the careful, the considerate attention of her daughter, to think the attachment, which once she had so well understood, much slighter in reality, than she had been wont to believe, or than it was now proved to be. She feared that under this persuasion she had been unjust, inattentive, nay, almost unkind, to her Elinor;—that Marianne’s affliction, because more acknowledged, more immediately before her, had too much engrossed her tenderness, and led her away to forget that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation, and greater fortitude. (355–56)

My argument is that Austen also throws the reader into the same error. To two characters in particular, we may discover that we have been unjust.

In revealing another novel of sensibility embedded inside the more obvious one, Austen forces us to reconsider our sentiments toward Colonel Brandon. For example, in revisiting the novel, one can detect any number of clues to the fact that Colonel Brandon is the male character who most closely conforms to romantic stereotypes: not only has Colonel Brandon loved passionately, attempted an elopement, and suffered grievously, but he has also been wrongly disinherited, been self-exiled, and fought a duel because of his strong feelings of honor. Should there be doubt of his conforming to a romantic ideal, Austen completes his character with details such as a yew arbor, a canal, and a dove-cote at Delaford. Austen has her joke on us readers, who may initially find Brandon insufficiently romantic for Marianne.

A change in our frame of reference allows us to see Elinor’s suffering and her role as a heroine of sensibility in a new light. Consider, for example, which characters in the novel have a “second attachment”: upon reflection, nearly every character except Elinor has more than one love. Elinor is the only character to reach the romantic ideal of staying true to her first attachment; she suffers silently, and she loves strongly. Elinor is wronged in love and attacked by worldly enemies; she cannot speak of her suffering and eventually even stammers in her passion. Austen shows us that the problems of self-representation

are indeed real. So little are our feelings and internal lives transparent to one another (as the culture of sensibility hoped) that even our loved ones frequently judge us by how we present ourselves, rather than attempting to look beyond the self-representation.

Austen also teaches us something about the role of laughter or comedy in this novel. Just as Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood, and perhaps the reader need to learn that exertion can be a result of feeling—even an expression of feeling—the same individuals also need a lesson about humor. Austen teaches us that humor is indeed compatible with feeling and with love. The culture of sensibility, after its amusing beginnings in Laurence Sterne's work, quickly loses its sense of humor. Few novels of sensibility can bear humor, or even irony, without imploding. Austen uses humor or laughter as a comic corrective in her juvenilia, of course, with her hysterically funny excesses, but this kind of parodic hilarity doesn't accord with her more realist goals for her novel. The comic corrective in *Sense and Sensibility* involves both the strategic use of teasing to escape the clichés of sensibility and tempting readers to misjudge who deserves their sympathy.

On a narrative plane, we first experience the teasing of Marianne in her very literal and humorless applications of codes of moral and aesthetic conduct (dead leaves, reading aloud, loud proclamations of feeling, etc.). This form of humor disappears with Edward's departure from Norland Park. After that, Elinor's burdens are so great that she cannot afford humor in the economy of emotions; thus it would be counter to Austen's purposes to continue the teasing role of laughter. Elinor is a character who gets such a firm grounding in prudence that, like Anne Elliot, she "had been forced into prudence in her youth . . . [and] learned romance as she grew older" (*P* 30). As the novel progresses, Marianne's interiority begins to leave us, also drawing away from Elinor as Marianne retreats into herself. Meanwhile, Elinor's interiority grows to the point that Austen can't afford to give Marianne a bigger role at the end.

Austen reintroduces laughter and irony into the novel of sensibility. Like Mr. Darcy, sensibility and its adherents need to "learn to be laughed at" (*PP* 371). Additionally we learn that sense and sensibility are not opposed; the real distinction here is between social and selfish sensibilities. Austen teaches us to appreciate the hidden novel of sensibility within the critique of sensibility, to appreciate Elinor's sensibility that is social and not selfish, hidden rather than demanding central stage. Austen is not immune to the arguments of Hobbes on our innate selfishness, yet she also cherishes hope for human sympathy, along with Smith and others. Austen manipulates her readers to teach lessons about the dangers of the culture of sensibility and the temptation of "fashions"

in ethics. It is really *she* who is making sense of sensibility for the rest of us, and converting this understanding into art.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Parts of this paper are derived from my earlier projects on the culture and literature of sensibility. Please see the Works Cited for full references. I would like to thank Debra Romanick Baldwin and James Thompson, both of whom have been very supportive of this project. In addition, my thanks to the steering committee of JASNA's Louisville Region, the faculty of Centre College in Kentucky, the attendees of the Jane Austen Summer Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and the members of the JASNA–NC Region for listening to and providing feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

#### NOTES

1. These three words are in fact members of a family of words from the Latin *sentio*—a family that also includes cousin-words like *sentiment*, *sentimentality*, *sensation*, and *sensitive*. These words have been studied by Erik Erämetsä, and at root they all refer to physical stimuli that garner internal response, whether through the nerves, thought, or feeling.
2. In choosing to name her first published novel using this potent and provocative word, Austen explicitly engages and critiques this pan-European fashion. While *Sense and Sensibility* is her most direct and complex interaction with the culture of sensibility, it is also very influential in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* as well as the unfinished *Sanditon*. This essay, however, focuses on the juvenilia and *Sense and Sensibility*, suggesting a different way to read *Sense and Sensibility*, keeping in mind her response to this historical context and “mental habit” of the second half of the eighteenth century.
3. For discussions of these other aspects of the culture of sensibility, see my *Ruined by Design*.
4. This characteristic ambivalence is the topic of my essay “Defining Ambivalence.”
5. Diderot included two definitions of sensibility—one medical and one moral. Together they continue for fifteen pages. Here is an excerpt from each:

*Sensibility, Sentiment (Medicine)*, The faculty of sensing, the cause of feeling, or feeling itself in the organs of the body, the basis of life and what assures its continuance, animality *par excellence*, the finest, the most singular phenomenon of nature. (*Encyclopédie*, 15:38)

*Sensibility (Moral)*, 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. People of sensibility because of their liveliness can fall into errors which Men of the world would not commit; but these are greatly outweighed by the amount of good that they do. 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. (*Encyclopédie* 15:52)

6. For more on Marianne as a female version of Werther, please see my “Adventures of a Female

Werther"; for more on gender relations in the culture of sensibility, I recommend G. J. Barker-Benfield's *The Culture of Sensibility* and Janet Todd's *Sensibility: An Introduction*.

7. David Marshall's *Surprising Effects of Sympathy* is an excellent exploration of this paradox.

#### WORKS CITED

- Austen, Jane. *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. 4th ed. Oxford: OUP, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Works of Jane Austen*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1933–69.
- Barbauld, Anna Laetitia. *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld with a Memoir by Lucy Aikin*. 2 vols. London: Longman, 1825. Vol. 2.
- Barker-Benfield, G. J. *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: UCP, 1992.
- Brodey, Inger Sigrun. "The Adventures of a Female Werther: Austen's Revision of Sensibility." *Philosophy and Literature* 23.1 (Apr. 1999): 110–26.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Preromanticism, or Sensibility: Defining Ambivalences." *Companion to European Romanticism*. Ed. Michael Ferber. London: Blackwell, 2005. 10–28.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ruined by Design: Shaping Novels and Gardens in the Culture of Sensibility*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Diderot, Denis, and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, etc.* Ed. Robert Morrissey. Chicago: U of Chicago ARTFL Encyclopédie Project. Spr. 2013. <http://encyclopedia.uchicago.edu/lib-proxy.lib.unc.edu/>.
- Erämetsä, Erik. *A Study of the Word "Sentimental" and of Other Linguistic Characteristics of 18th-Century Sentimentalism in England*. Helsinki: Helsingin Liikekirjapaino, 1951.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*. Ed. Richard Tuck. Cambridge: CUP, 1996.
- Inchbald, Elizabeth. *Lovers' Vows*. 5th ed. London, 1798. *Mansfield Park*. Ed. R. W. Chapman. 3rd ed. Oxford: OUP, 1934. 475–538.
- "Interesting, adj." *OED Online*. Oxford UP. Sept. 2015. 6 Oct. 2015.
- Kelly, Hugh. *Memoirs of a Magdalen: Or, the History of Louisa Mildmay*. 2 vols. London, 1767.
- Marshall, David. *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley*. Chicago: UCP, 1988.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*. New York: Meridian, 1985.
- Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*. Harmondsworth: Viking, 1985.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. Paris: Hachette, 1925.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sense and Sensibility*. Dir. Ang Lee. Columbia Pictures, 1995.
- Smith, Adam. *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund P, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund P, 1985.
- Sterne, Laurence. *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick*. Ed. Melvyn New and W. G. Gay. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 2002.
- Todd, Janet. *Sensibility: An Introduction*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- [Wordsworth, William]. "Sonnet on Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress." *European Magazine* 40 (1787): 202.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.