

JANE AUSTEN'S CONCERNS WITH HEALTH AND MORAL THOUGHTS: THE DASHWOOD SISTERS AND THE SUCCESSFUL REGULATION OF SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

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Abstract

According to Cartesian principles, in the seventeenth century the body was thought to be subordinated to the mind. Later in the eighteenth-century male authors of medical treatises supported the idea that the interaction of body and mind produced passion and could dangerously turn into mental breakdown. In all her novels Jane Austen showed an enormous interest in all matters concerning medical treatment. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen emphasized illness and suffering by mixing physical health and mental disease with moral and philosophical doctrines. My contention in this article is that moralists, philosophers and thinkers such as Dr Johnson, William Blake, William Godwin, and Adam Smith collaborated with Austen to shape the idea that sensibility was no disease and sense no virtue; instead they propose that human beings, especially women, can obtain individual and collective profit and promote changes not only in the past but also in the present if they regulate their reason and feeling with a practical mindset.

Key words: physical health, mental breakdown, medicine, moral thoughts, regulation of feelings.

Resumen

Según los principios del cartesianismo, en el siglo diecisiete se pensaba que el cuerpo estaba subordinado a la mente. Más tarde, en el siglo dieciocho autores masculinos de tratados médicos apoyaban la idea de que la interacción de cuerpo y mente producía pasiones y éstas podían transformarse peligrosamente en enfermedades mentales. En todas sus novelas Jane Austen siempre muestra un enorme interés por todo lo relacionado con los tratamientos médicos. En *Sentido y Sensibilidad* (1811) la autora se concentra mayormente en la enfermedad y el sufrimiento mezclando la salud física y mental con doctrinas morales y filosóficas. La finalidad de este artículo es demostrar como moralistas, filósofos y pensadores como el Dr Johnson, William Blake, William Godwin y Adam Smith

colaboraron con Austen para forjar la idea de que la sensibilidad no era una enfermedad y el sentido una virtud sino que, los seres humanos, especialmente las mujeres, pueden obtener provecho individual y colectivo y promover cambios no solo en el pasado sino también en el presente, si regulan razón y sentimientos desde un punto de vista práctico.

Palabras clave: salud física, crisis nerviosa, medicina, pensamiento moral, regulación de los sentimientos.

Contrary to the hierarchical Cartesian subordination of the body to the mind, in the eighteenth-century medical theorists posited that the interaction of body and mind produces passion. But what happens when passion is excessive and so physically painful that it turns into mental breakdown? In the nineteenth century, when sensibility or sentimentalism was almost a virtue, male authors of medical treatises connected sensibility to over-taxed nerves and female hysteria.¹ Male writers of the time said that the incontrollable fusion between feeling and reason could be bad for women's health and had to be restrained through much mental effort. Jane Austen, who was always interested in medicine, then believed that sensibility and a kind of mental breakdown—what we know as depression—were not the product of an unstable femininity but rather an idealistic person's refined response to the world, and a way of being critical, and a revealing symptom of women's "own feelings of entrapment and oppression" (Goodman 116).²

Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* is her most doctrinaire novel and one of the most famous examples of women's writing. Laurie and Richard Kaplan say that it is a novel about illness and suffering (2).³ On one hand, an anti-romantic Austen thought that "sensibility would founder if it were not directed by sense, because its course would take no account of what she thought were the actual [...] configurations of society" (Watt 55). That is the reason why she depicts thoughtful, "silent and strong" Elinor Dashwood as an example to follow, as the

¹ In every one of her novels Jane Austen depicted illness and invalids—Mr Woodhouse's dyspepsia in *Emma*, Jane Bennet's bad cold and Mrs Bennet's nerves in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Bertram's self-indulgence and Fanny Price's anemia in *Mansfield Park*. *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*, which Austen began writing when she herself was already ill, demonstrate her familiarity with the illnesses that were prevalent during her lifetime. *Sandition* is about a group of hypochondriacs.

² Austen died, aged 42, slowly and painfully of Addison's disease. Today the disease is treated successfully with hydrocortisone, a steroid hormone.

³ In 1811, the year of its publication, the madness of King George had deemed so severe that the Prince of Wales had formally become the Prince Regent.

epitome of heroic mental suffering and rewards her at the end of the novel (*Sense* 215). But, on the other, unconsciously, or perhaps cunningly, she singles out Marianne Dashwood, along with her hysterical outbursts of desperation, and innate sense of ethics, as the life and centre of the book with her idea of an innate and ethical sense.⁴ No doubt, the anti-revolutionary Austen was the poster child of the eighteenth century—the age of prose and reason—and inescapably belonged to the field of anti-sensibility. However, she assimilated knowledge from the pre-Romantic period and unavoidably took Marianne, “with her impetuous feelings and varying opinions,” as seriously as Elinor (*Sense* 134). A Tory reactionary, as Marilyn Butler defines her in *Jane Austen: The War of Ideas*, Austen grapples how the new age questions the human beings’ perception of themselves and of their personal and social relationships. In this article, I demonstrate that Austen, influenced by moralists and philosophers such as Dr Johnson, William Blake and Adam Smith, neither stigmatizes sensibility as a disease nor highlights sense as a virtue. Instead, by saving Marianne from excessive emotions and Elinor from extreme rationality, she dignifies them as a double-faced mechanism that demonstrates that rational passion is not a contradiction but a way to improve human beings and their view of the world, obtaining profit in almost every sense in an era of drastic innovation that affected every aspect of daily life. In order to do that, I discuss the ethical, moral, and philosophical background of the novel and its multifaceted characters—sisters, lovers, relatives. In doing so, I illustrate—to show the tactics Austen uses to regulate sense and sensibility and obtain profit for women in a male world.

Sensibility was an eighteenth-century movement that stressed the importance of emotions and feelings in human relationships. According to Graham Barker-Benfield, it “signified revolution, promised freedom, threatened subversion and become convention” (xvii). Sensibility referred to the nervous system and to consciousness. Heroes and heroines of sensibility “could be further sensitized in order to be more accurately responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body” (Barker-Benfield xvii). They possessed an extreme ability to feel, to the point in which passions are the source of decision making—a task usually delegated to sense. Sense is a realistic attitude to situations and problems and a reasonable and comprehensive belief. From the 1740s onward, John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and others argued that humans possessed an innate moral sensibility which manifested itself through the emotions in feelings of sympathy and benevolence for others. They generated the trait as female property because women were claimed to possess of a more delicate constitution and therefore to be more susceptible to emotion. In Peter Kitson’s words, “Too

⁴ John Willoughby describes Marianne’s mind as “infinitely superior” (*Sense* 220).

much sensibility might lead to hysteria and disorder; it might lead to men behaving like women.” Even more perniciously, “Following one’s feeling might lead to sexual impropriety and ruin” (330, 332). The culture of sensibility was connected to the rise of the middle classes in the eighteenth century and their concern with the reformation of manners. By the 1770s the “emotional volatility of sensibility” (Byrne 66) had become politicized by its association with radical and reformist politics, especially with the violence of the French revolution, and thus identified with a potentially dangerous way of life. Austen’s satiric treatment of the trend in the aftermath of the Revolution has been connected to Anti-Jacobin satirists and who, according to Janet Todd, bound sensibility to radicalism (130).

Viewed by Butler as a reactionary and “an Anglican Erasmian” (93-99), Austen resembles William Godwin because she, like the philosopher, assumes that sensibility and subjectivity are synonyms of radicalism. However, Adam Smith is a more persistent background in *Sense and Sensibility*. During Austen’s lifetime both Hume’s *History* and *Essays* were widely recommended for educational purposes, and the same holds true for Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, echoes of which are also found in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Austen takes up and develops Smith’s understanding of sympathetic imagination and twists it in the “altered” and rambunctious seventeen-year-old Marianne (*Sense* 134). Smith stresses the idea of different kinds of social order and insists on the need for periods of radical innovation. For Butler, Smith symbolizes the spirit of intellectual independence which a young Austen is completely determined to oppose (33); for Alistair Duckworth, he is the source of the sensibility she refutes (in Byrne 107). For most of Austen’s heroines moral progress and modernization consist of submitting to the demands of society around them. No doubt, Rousseau’s ideals will influence Elinor—the eldest of the Misses Dashwood—when she protests to her younger sister that she is guided not by the judgment of society but by her understanding and remarks that her attitude should be regulated “by religion, by reason, by constant employment” (*Sense* 238). Dr Johnson— “the supplier of maxims to the Elinors of this world” (Neill 41)—provides her with the idea that anything vulgar must be supplied or repressed with the sublimely metaphysical.

Even early in her career, Austen writes about sisters who are often friends before they are siblings. In *Sense and Sensibility*, she depicts three pairs of sisters—the Dashwoods, the Steeles, and the Jenningses. The Dashwoods “are fond of each other” (*Sense* 253), both fool for love. Abandoned by two men who loved them and with whom they were compatible, the sisters suffer from broken hearts—Marianne’s fixation on John Willoughby thus parallels Elinor’s on Edward Ferrars. Even their inefficient mother Mrs Dashwood notices that “she

might have a daughter suffering almost as much, certainly with less self-provocation and greater fortitude” referring to Elinor (*Sense* 243). Paula Byrne points out that “the wiser, calmer, exquisitely well-mannered and more cautious elder sisters have been compared to Cassandra, Austen’s elder sister” (103). When she revised the manuscript of her novel, Jane was bold and practical; she gave good advice to her sister, who was devastated after the loss of her fiancé, by telling her that she could fall in love again.

As Edward Neill notes, it seems that “the Marianne role looks more likely for [the writer] than the Elinor one” (38). In reality, Marianne has lots of sense and Elinor is everything but cold-hearted. The difference is that the first inflicts her suffering on the people around her. She is a hypersensitive, passionate, secluded, young woman whose hysteria might be “the fruit of a sexual awakening emotionally overwhelming” (Neill 43). Marianne assumes that first impressions are generally true, second attachments in love are impossible, and the individual prevails over the communal, and therefore suffers tragic consequences that many critics say were brought on by Freudian repression. However, a subversive, reactionary Austen finds strong hints of rationality in her ethic, “the violence of her passions” and “the weakness of her understanding” to eventually save the young girl from a sensibility that bordered lunacy.

This article was intended to focus on Marianne. But, reviewing notes and reading new material, one might ask if the young girl could be mad all by herself; if it were not, at some point in the novel, Elinor’s moment to be crazy; if her head was not stuck onto a more aching heart than her sister’s; if these young women all by themselves were totally responsible for their madness; if the Willoughbys and the Ferrarses of this world were not the real *agent provocateurs*. After the exhibitions in London about the Brontës at Sir John Soane’s Museum and the National Portrait Gallery and reflecting on Bertha Mason and Jane Eyre, one begins to wonder if Elinor and Marianne are not exactly the same woman, if they might be what Peter Knox-Shaw calls “an agent and a spectator of the other, and for each of them, the special endowment is complemented by its contrary” (146). Although *Sense and Sensibility* explores the relationship of two sisters in distress, I think it also delves beyond the emotional lives of two ladies. Austen deeply valued the loyalty and companionship between younger and older women. At the same time, she grappled with the ways in which women behaved badly toward other women and collapse emotionally. Marianne’s hysteria is a reflection of the problem of the impoverished female Dashwoods,⁵ as it is Lucy Steele’s—Elinor’s

⁵ Kaplan and Kaplan note that *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel about illness and suffering shaped by financial, material, emotional, and moral responses to illness and death (4).

rival—materialistic behaviour. Her sham sensibility is the mirror of her looking for an eligible bachelor to improve her status. Watching how Fanny Dashwood—their half-brother John’s ambitious wife—defrauds her sisters-in-law of houses that should by inheritance be theirs, we realize that the book is also concerned with evil social and economic matters that make, as Neill notes, “sensibility ... an indispensable weapon against what the novel defines as really ‘evil’” (32). Austen does not ridicule sensibility or stigmatize it as a disease. Instead she criticizes it when it causes suffering to others. “Had I died, in what peculiar misery should I have left you, my nurse, my friend, my sister!,” exclaims Marianne when she is aware of her irresponsible behavior towards those who care for her (*Sense* 237). In that vein, she also shows that sense can be misapplied and is more destructive than sensibility in its social effects—Elinor’s submission and need for approbation as well as the endemic idle life style of the landed classes emerge as unfair social instruments in the novel.

Elinor and Marianne are well-educated sisters whose feelings are equally deep and authentic. They are elegant, refined and witty, and skillful in conversation. However, they employ these qualities in different ways. While Marianne uses them as a means of discriminating against those who are not like her, Elinor is very severe with her own sex but—unlike her sister—without drawing a line of demarcation between herself and other classes of people. While Marianne is crazed with her feelings, Elinor knows how to behave even if overwhelmed with grief. Although her conversation sometimes sounds like a lecture or even a homily, Elinor also trembles with desire, with suffering, with indignation. She shares her sister’s tastes but with a lesser intensity because she is the result of the judicious control of sensibility. *Sense and Sensibility* was drafted contemporaneously with *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. Its author, William Blake, affirmed that without foils there is no progression and that a contrary is not a negation. In my view, if Austen were asked if head and heart are antagonists, she would adopt a politically correct attitude and reply affirmatively. But, when it comes to Elinor, the answer would be certainly no. It is the tactics the Dashwood women use and the different degrees of sensibility they apply to everyday events that disconcert readers who perceive these characters as diametrically opposed. Thus, when Edward Ferrars is disinherited by her mother, only Elinor and Marianne understand his conduct,

They only knew how little he had to tempt him to be disobedient, and how small was the consolation, beyond the consciousness of doing right, that could remain to him in the loss of friends and fortune. Elinor gloried in his integrity; and Marianne forgave all his offences in compassion for his punishment (*Sense* 184).

Austen qualifies Elinor as an intellectual and a moralist but her wit is, no doubt, “scarcely social” (Perkins 13). Marianne believes nothing except that Elinor’s feelings are weak and often classifies her sister as defective in sensibility. In her view, Elinor can only feel when she bursts into tears like her younger sister. To some extent, although the eldest of the Dashwoods shares Marianne’s “adolescent sensibility,” “she seems to show a deficient [one] because she is forced to take over the unpleasant tasks of practical life and because [her sister’s] selfish indulgence of her own feelings makes her insensitive to Elinor’s” (Watt 52). Elinor tackles sensibility directly and worries about preserving her family’s status by smoothing away every possible offence they commit. So pragmatic and prudent is her approach that her mother’s “romantic impracticality” cannot cope (Neill 33).

By contrast, although Marianne is aware that a family cannot survive on less than two thousand pounds a year, she attacks her sister for saying that wealth has a lot to do with happiness.⁶ Neill states that “it is impossible to conceive of Marianne as one person” by the time Austen has finished the novel (47). To “individualistic, emotional, impatient, rude, indiscreet, passionate, indulgent and enthusiastic” (Kitson 379), I would add the adjective “inconsiderate” as, “with her usual inattention to the forms of general civility,” she says shocking things to her elders, especially to Fanny and the extravagant, herself impolite Mrs. Jennings (*Sense* 97).⁷ Marianne does this simply because she believes she is above everyone in that “metamorphic context” in which she and her sister have “a variable function” (Neill 47). The younger Dashwood stands out among the people around her because Austen matches her qualities against deficiencies of it. As Gilbert Ryle points out “her ecstatic emotionality” contrasts “the sham, the shallow, the inarticulate and the controlled feelings of Lucy Steele, Willoughby, Edward and Elinor” (108).

The unstable, changing world of sense and sensibility favoured competitiveness between women. Austen is brilliant when she describes women attacking other women. She sends men to London on mysterious missions and makes female characters appear, disappear, reappear—first in the confined space of the country, then in London, and finally, again in the country. On the other hand, Austen depicts women’s private sphere as dominated by concern about male

⁶ Fanny Dashwood is cold-hearted but also capable of terrible fits of hysterics when she feels her own economic interests threatened. The disclosure of the destitute Lucy’s engagement to her brother Edward is an example of such fits.

⁷ Marianne regrets her behaviour when she recovers from her illness and then adds, “the kindness, the unceasing kindness of Mrs Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt” (*Sense* 237).

speech, as the women hysterically puzzle for weeks over what was said or was not said. While Elinor assists Brandon to enable Edward to marry her fair rival Lucy Steele, Marianne renders her allure to men around her. As I see it, the least interesting thing about Marianne is her beauty; what matters is her intelligence, her generosity, and the intensity with which she projects her public humiliation and her frightening mental and physical breakdown. After Willoughby's violent desertion, Marianne's heart and mind find themselves paralyzed in a social context which has been deprived of all meaning despite the large and lively number of family interconnections in Devon. It is true that Marianne and Willoughby's special compatibility and his haunting presence keep resonating till the end of the book.

That said, from the very moment Willoughby rescues her when she sprains her ankle, the supposed villain contributes to her increasingly dangerous condition, hysteria and physical deterioration. The dashing young man—handsome, egocentric and cynical⁸— is one of the sharks the Dashwood sisters must confront in their fight with other women to win men and money in that oppressive social code that forced them to matrimonial arrangements and to produce babies before the biological clock struck midnight. Marianne stands in the marriage market with only five or six hundred pounds a year and—although Willoughby lets economic sense dominate the dictates of sensibility—one might suspect that he dumps Marianne because she overtly shows that she loves him. He just wished “to make himself pleasing to her, without any design of returning her affection” (*Sense* 219). In my view, Willoughby's taste for the natural world coincides with Marianne's, who compares him to the shy and dutiful Edward Ferrars—her sister's secret choice—so unfavourably that the reader feels that Elinor is also in danger of succumbing to Willoughby's charms. Ferrars is a self-deprecating decent man who, like Elinor, is deficient in sensibility but “quiet and unobtrusive and she like[s] him for that” (*Sense* 10). Perhaps Edward's defective sensibility has been “exhaustively diagnosed by Marianne” (Watt 51), who only sees how “spiritless” and “tame” Edward's manner is when reading to them (*Sense* 11). In truth he has an “open affectionate heart” and “greatness of soul” (*Sense* 15, 61) that make him adorable. Unhesitatingly, he endures being dispossessed of everything by her mother so that he can marry for love.

⁸ In Knox-Shaw's words, Willoughby is viewed by Colonel Brandon as “the typically demonized rake of the eighteenth-century novel” (135). However, Daragh Downes highlights that “Willoughby and Marianne have indeed been prey to a vicious campaign of sabotage and misinformation by his rival, Colonel Brandon” and that the stories and the claims made by him “are exposed as a nefarious confection of truths, half-truths, and lies” (7 web).

Dr Johnson regarded idleness as a major sin against God which could only lead to melancholy and madness. Willoughby's and Ferrars' particular sensibilities were surely provoked by the idleness of the upper classes and the affluent gentry. These two disintegrators of women's feelings have nothing to pass their time. "I returned home to be completely idle," remarks Edward (*Sense* 248). Although Edward is morally superior to Willoughby because he does not break his engagement with Lucy Steele, both are "punished for their idleness" (Pellérdi 3). Incurable Willoughby never marries the woman he loves and Edward, who eventually does, must suffer first. In this respect, Austen has been sometimes regarded as weaving the normative claims of the Protestant work ethic into her characters' lives.⁹ Elinor struggles "to control the anguish of disappointed love so that she can fulfill her obligations [...] as a member of society" (Watt 54) and avoids melancholy by being constantly busy "so that her sorrow remains undetected by others around her" (Pellérdi 5). At the end of the novel, her industrious behaviour is finally rewarded as she fulfills her duties as a member of society.

Marianne's sensibility is particularly self-indulgent, menacing, and problematic to others. That is why Austen never romanticizes it and its hazardous effects. As I see it, she criticizes the excess of sensibility of the time at its most elevated level through Marianne's suicide attempt. It is here "genuine and false sensibility become blurred" (Owaga 1). In turn, Austen prioritizes Elinor because she insists on the fact that reason cannot be left aside. In the enlightened and rational age in which Austen lived, suicide was clearly a salient issue. By the late eighteenth century Britain had become as the centre of suicide in the civilized world; in fact, the suicide rate was so high that the Methodist preacher John Wesley recommended the Prime Minister William Pitt take measures to curb the trend. In the literature of the time, suicide was sometimes seen as the final expression of extreme sensibility. Austen had, no doubt, heard about suicides for love in her favourite novels, the day's newspapers, and Mary Wollstonecraft's own attempt in the Thames. Most of Marianne's sensibility comes from books, and one might erroneously think that Austen just follows the models of sentimental literature in the belief that Marianne's near suicidal behaviour is the only appropriate response for a young woman jilted by her lover. In general, characters in sentimental novels are often fragile, hyper-sensitive individuals in distress who kill themselves because of unrequited love.¹⁰ Through Elinor's

⁹ In the eighteenth century Christians—especially Protestants—considered useful employment a duty that would prevent the terrible effects of idleness.

¹⁰ Paula Byrne states that "it was said that every teenager in the country identified with the hero and shed tears when reading Goethe's [*The Sorrows of Young Werther*], some even going so far to commit copycat suicide" (66).

realistic views and strength of understanding, the author proves how alarmed Austen was a nervous irritability that brought about suicidal inclinations. Through Elinor, we see how ridiculous Austen thought sentimental novels were. According to the law, suicide was a crime against the king and God. I would thus contend that, apart from unconditional love for her sister, that is the reason why Marianne was always shielded from too much public notice by her sister's care who "wished to avoid any survey of the past that might weaken her ... spirits" (*Sense* 241). Unfortunately, though, nothing she could say brought peace to her. In avoiding her death, Austen attacks the pernicious effects that those sentimental novels could have on the mind of a sensitive and impractical romantic woman.

Balancing different degrees of sensibility, perhaps Austen's centrist view is exemplified in the uncultivated Mrs Jennings. Watt says that "she has the essence of what really matters as regards both sense and sensibility" (53). Mixing her own judgments and feelings, she acts disinterestedly and actively, backing Elinor and Marianne up against the wealth and the want of well-off family connections of the Ferrarses. Individual experience plus a code of values remove the difference between sense and sensibility to assist people in need.

Rereading a pretty unbelievable book entitled *Pride and Promiscuity*, I realized that Elinor experienced dramatic inner turmoil even more than her sister. The cause is simple: the man she loves was bound to another, that deceitful Lucy Steele. This might be the reason why she is so tolerant of Willoughby's weaknesses. To love a man engaged to another woman, after all, was only one step away from loving a married man and adultery. Elinor tries to repress her desire for him by combating "her own affection for [him] and [seeing] him as little as possible" (*Sense* 95). But does Elinor not allow room for sensibility? In fact, she does. But she does so while going through self-control, striving to be better than those who cannot control themselves.

There are a couple of key scenes that I would define as Elinor's *time to be mad*. Her emotions are shown in that room where she breaks down and her family knows about her secret torment. When their servant says that Mr Ferrars is married, "Marianne gave a violent start, fixed her eyes upon Elinor, sees her turning pale, and falls back in her chair in hysterics" (*Sense* 242). Elinor is distinctive in that she is not explosive; the reader just feels those emotions when poor Marianne is horrified and desperately cries. Thanks to Marianne's "remedial" function (Neill 40), Mrs Dashwood "was shocked to perceive by Elinor's countenance how much she really suffered" (*Sense* 242). It was then when Elinor showed physical evidence of her disease by losing her appetite till the day Edward materialized at Barton Cottage and disclosed the truth. The elder Dashwood turned

into “a state of such agitation” that could sit no longer. Instead “she almost ran out of the room”—although she knew well that ladies did not run (*Sense* 246). Then, “as soon as the door was closed, [she] burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease” (*Sense* 46). Amazingly, “it required several hours to give sedateness to her spirits, or any degree of tranquility to her heart” (*Sense* 248). Finally, she pulled herself together and behaved sensibly again.

Austen practically has to whip a rabbit out of a hat to make Marianne and Colonel Brandon get married.¹¹ The heroine of sensibility has now become an escape goat who has been betrayed not only by Willoughby but by Austen herself. In my opinion, her suicide attempt portrays her attitude as unchristian; her unconvincing wedding to Brandon then shows a spiritual transformation.¹² That self-indulgent egocentric Marianne is not very different from the other women in the book. All of them epitomize a sick fashion that is not simply the silly affectation of a seventeen-year-old girl but a philosophy that challenged the very basis of British government and society in a new world full of mistakes. As Karen Gevirtz remarks, the innovative mercantile society excluded women from economy and public activities, thereby increasing their anxiety (141).

Taking into account Tony Tanner's introduction to the Penguin edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, it is true that Elinor noticeably pathologizes Marianne's relationship with Willoughby, describing passions in terms of their physical effects (13). Maybe that is a way for Elinor to show her longing for romance but, in the novel, real sickness is brought about by real causes and hysterical sickness by sensibility. Marianne, for example, develops psychosomatic symptoms of illness when she reacts hysterically to Willoughby's departure to London and when he publically rejects her. Like many people today, Marianne has a stomachache, a fever, and lack of sleep.¹³ Even while structural development of the book is too static to charm many modern readers, the relationship between sensibility and depression has endured. It parallels contemporary physical and mental illness, particularly among teenage girls and with respect to disorders such as bulimia or anorexia. Indeed, as Kaplan and Kaplan point out, many of the symptoms of her illness fit the description of a popular illness of the 1980s: Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Chronic Mononucleosis, Chronic Epstein-Barr Disease, or “Yuppie Flu” (8).

¹¹ “Time, a very little time, [...], will do everything,” Mrs Dashwood answered Colonel Brandon when he asked for her daughter's hand (*Sense* 231).

¹² The characters seem to be always punished by their good qualities (Neill 38).

¹³ The official explanation was that “Marianne Dashwood was dying of a putrid fever at Cleveland” (*Sense* 226).

Anthony Burgess describes Dickens' characters as "humours"—exaggerations of one human quality to the point of caricature (183). By contrast, real people are neither exactly good nor evil; we are most often something in between. In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen asks us readers if deep feeling is compatible with being reasonable; if tenderness of heart equals strong understanding; if women's financial, social and emotional insecurity can undermine their health. It is obvious that the writer warns us about sensibility but, when Elinor runs out of that room, she is positively sensible. When Marianne recognizes the importance of community and collectivity, she personifies sense. When both sisters love and respect Mrs Jennings, they expel the "humours" from their minds and bodies. These terms express two different ways of perceiving the world around us but they are not incompatible. If there is something the Dashwood sisters learn from their half-brother John's family, it is practicality. In the last chapters of the novel, a woman of honour and a woman of passion learn how to regulate their feelings by adopting a multidimensional, flexible, adaptable and practical attitude. They successfully acquire what Gilbert Ryle calls a "prevailing correlation between sense of duty, sense of propriety and aesthetic taste" (117). I strongly believe that Austen supports the theory that controlled sensibility could be the basis of a more generous, humanitarian and helpful person. She also knew that coming up against obstacles with cunning tactics was effective and claimed that irony and self-control were not only restricted to men. Thanks to knowledge, women in the novel demonstrate that they are not hysterical and unreliable types but rather the trigger for the awakening of a new social order, which disrupted their subordination to men, that still has remarkable parallels with our contemporary world.

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