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In Pursuit of Virtue:

A Vindication of Reason and Sensibility in Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft

Melissa Deneufbourg, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ABSTRACT

Jane Austen holds a distinguished role in modern society as a heritage author, whose novels depict proper ladies with excellent manners. While critics have often characterized Austen's works as conservative, others have more recently established the connection between Austen's novels, specifically her first published work *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and Mary Wollstonecraft's radical treatise, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). However, previous analyses have failed to place reason and sensibility at the center of Wollstonecraft's influence on Austen's writing. In this essay, I argue that *Sense and Sensibility* builds on Wollstonecraft's criticism of women's under-education, which informs and guides her radical critique of sensibility. A close examination of Wollstonecraft helps the reader to see that both Wollstonecraft and Austen contend that reason and sensibility are essential in constituting women's agency and distinguishing themselves as virtuous individuals.

KEYWORDS

Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft, Reason, Sensibility, Virtue, Women's Education, Agency

Jane Austen holds a distinguished role in modern society as a heritage author whose novels depict proper ladies with excellent manners. In her first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen positions two female heroines, the Dashwood sisters, at the center of her narrative. Elinor Dashwood is a nineteen-year-old woman characterized by her extremely good manners, who serves as a model for her younger sister Marianne Dashwood, a seventeen-year-old girl overrun by her subscription to the cult of sensibility. Marianne matures over the course of her narrative, becoming ‘sensible’ like her sister, and ultimately marries a man who by no means conforms to her former ideal of a romantic hero. *Sense and Sensibility* is oftentimes described as Austen’s most conservative work because it is interpreted as ‘disciplining’ Marianne Dashwood—teaching her to conform to society’s values and propriety, and to give up her own sensibility.

The charge of conservatism was forwarded prominently by Marilyn Butler in her 1975 book, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Butler argues, “The crucial actions of her [Austen’s] novels is in itself expressive of the conservative side of an active war of ideas” (Butler 294). This “war of ideas” is the eighteenth century ideological clash between the Jacobins and Anti-Jacobins in Great Britain. Jacobin novels were written by eighteenth century British radicals who supported the ideals of the French revolution, especially its individualism. In reaction to the Jacobins, the Anti-Jacobin novelists created satires of Jacobin novels and asserted the power of community over the individual. Butler contends that Austen is the same kind of Anti-Jacobin, participating in conservative satire against sensibility. Jane Austen’s works belong to “a movement of that defines itself in opposition to revolution,” which maintains conservative ideals (Butler 123).¹

Few critics have challenged Butler’s characterization, with the notable exceptions of Claudia L. Johnson, Margaret Kirkham, and, more recently, Peter Knox-Shaw and Hina Nazar. Knox-Shaw and Nazar, in response to Butler’s assertion that Austen is an Anti-Jacobin committed conservative, argue that the politics of the novel are instead derived from Enlightenment ideals (Knox-Shaw 5). Kirkham and Johnson further distinguish Austen apart from conservative

ideologies, drawing important comparisons between Austen and radical women authors of the 1790s. Johnson argues, “Progressive women novelists urge a rationality, usefulness, and fortitude...For them, cultural injunctions about female manners are subjected to radical social criticism. They attack education practices promoting women’s self-immolating enslavement to their own passions” (Johnson 67-68). Kirkham draws a specific comparison between the works of Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft, arguing that “Austen’s...viewpoint on the moral nature and status of women, female education, marriage, authority and the family, and the representation of women in literature is strikingly similar to that shown by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*” (Kirkham xi). These rebuttals of Butler’s depiction of Austen’s conservatism identify crucial gaps in Butler’s argument. However, these analyses fail to place reason and sensibility at the center of Wollstonecraft’s influence on Austen’s writing. The common opposition of “reason” and “sensibility” in Wollstonecraft and “sense” and “sensibility” in Austen is representative of the chief way in which the radical Wollstonecraft influenced Austen.

When Austen’s work is considered in the context of Mary Wollstonecraft’s pioneering feminist treatise *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), her critique of sensibility does not seem conservative. In this essay, I argue that *Sense and Sensibility* builds on Wollstonecraft’s criticism of female education, which informs and guides her radical critique of sensibility. The feminine experiences documented in Austen’s novels of social pursuits and marriages closely resemble the educational experiences of socialization that Wollstonecraft describes. Wollstonecraft and Austen craft critiques of sensibility in which female education is scrutinized and found to foster sensibility in women without cultivating their sense or reason. Neither Wollstonecraft nor Austen suggest that sensibility is valueless in their extreme assessments. Both see the cooperation of head and heart as crucial to female agency and argue that it is important for women to promote a personal balance of reason and sensibility, not just attending to one or the other as the more essential faculty. The writings of these authors provide not a vindication of reason over sensibility, but a

vindication of reason and then sensibility. A close examination of Wollstonecraft helps the reader to see that both Wollstonecraft and Austen contend that reason and sensibility are essential in constituting women's agency and distinguishing themselves as virtuous individuals.

Wollstonecraft's Critique in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft criticizes the eighteenth century main model of education that women receive which only cultivates their sensibilities without attending to reason. Women, she argues, have been deprived of the right to be virtuous people by being educated to foster only their emotions. Enlightenment men are expected to pursue higher forms of education and develop their reason, which they then use to write, vote, hold office, and participate in the public sphere. However, women are not legally able to participate in those social roles and thus are not educated to attain the same level of reason (Wollstonecraft).

Wollstonecraft finds females to be the same as males "in all the most important aspects...possessing the same souls, the same mental capacities, and thus the same human rights" (Mellor 141). These rights make it "morally requisite" that women's education undergoes reforms and that women are allowed to pursue greater intellectual enrichment (Nazar 83). As Barbara Taylor observes, Wollstonecraft's program of education asks women to "abandon false femininity for the 'practical virtues' of rationality, independence, self-reliance" (Taylor 141). This, Wollstonecraft argues, can only be successfully achieved through the exercise of reason in balance with sensibility.

Wollstonecraft defines sensibility as "quickness of sensation; quickness of perception; delicacy," and an "exquisitely polished instinct" (Wollstonecraft 133).

² Wollstonecraft disputes female education that encourages women to become fine ladies, to read nothing serious, and to spend time only contemplating how to secure a husband. This education develops only sensibility and leaves no room for reason. When overcome by sensibility, women become "prey to their senses...and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling" (VRW 130). In this way, women are bound to act on their "faculties of perception or sensation" instead of

their faculties of reason and intellect (“sense, n”). When women are thus affected by sensibility, “their understandings are neglected” and women are unable to cultivate their faculties and form reasonable thoughts (VRW 130). Reason is set against sensibility in Wollstonecraft’s treatise as, “the simple power of improvement; or, more properly speaking, of discerning truth” (VRW 122). Wollstonecraft indicates the importance of reason as it relates to virtue and independence. She argues that reason is essential to virtue and autonomy because both require careful meditation on one’s actions and motives. Strength of mind is measured by “the degree to which it [the mind] can *independently* reach its own conclusions through the force of thinking and observation” (Sapiro 55). Wollstonecraft contends, “Virtue can be built on no other foundation” than “female understanding” (VRW 124).

The overemphasis on sensibility is used to perpetuate a system of subordination, one that keeps women in a persistent “state of childhood” and prevents them from social advancement or attainment of the same virtues as men (VRW 131). Wollstonecraft says, “This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain to render a rational creature useful to others” (VRW 131). In the current social and political system governed by Enlightenment ideals, only “negative virtues” are expected from women (if any at all), namely “patience, docility good-humour, and flexibility” (VRW 138). Wollstonecraft claims that these types of virtues are “incompatible with any exertion or intellect” and prevent women from reaching their true potential as rational, moral human beings. Wollstonecraft contends that, “if woman be allowed to have an immortal soul, she must have, as employment of life, an understanding to improve” (VRW 133).

According to Wollstonecraft, not only does an education in sensibility alone reinforce women’s dependence on men but it also, potentially, damages their psychic and physical health. Sensibility makes women victims of themselves if they lose self-control and it makes them victims of men as well. She argues that:

Civilized women are, therefore, so weakened by false refinement...Ever restless and anxious, their over exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome...to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering...A distinction should be made between inflaming and strengthening them [passions]. The passions thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed, what can be expected to ensue? —Undoubtedly, a mixture of madness and folly! (VRW 131)

Overindulgence of sensibility weakens women, making them victims to themselves and to men, as it only provides them with the superficial means of exciting emotion and feeling. Wollstonecraft's efforts to overturn this idea would provide women with greater personal autonomy and allow them to become more rational, independent beings. This cult of sensibility, the eighteenth century social conventions which promote exaggerated expressions of emotion, "inflames" the senses, and the "madness and folly" that women exhibit makes them victims to their "passions," emotions, and senses. Additionally, men have used this argument of madness to continually subjugate women. Wollstonecraft observes that, "Men complain, and with reason, of the follies and caprices of our sex, when they do not keenly satirize our headstrong passions and groveling vice" (VRW 84). Wollstonecraft argues that the victimization of women can be avoided, however, by "strengthening" the passions through the cultivation of judgment in conjunction with sensibility.

While Wollstonecraft's critique of sensibility is thoroughgoing, it does not imply that sensibility has no value in women's lives. She is critical of the ways in which education promotes sensibility in women, but does not disavow the importance of both reason and sensibility to female virtue and agency. She does not call for women to abandon all traces of sensibility, but to use their understanding to protect against flighty and thoughtless emotions. Indeed, for Wollstonecraft, the strongest passions require a blending of sense and sensibility. As she puts it, "it is not against strong, persevering passions; but romantic wavering feelings that I wish to guard the female heart by exercising the understanding" (VRW 146). The use of reason can strengthen and give force to the

affections: “the heart, as well as the understanding, is opened by cultivation” (VRW 136). Catriona Mackenzie argues for a similar claim, noting that for Wollstonecraft, “in a well-balanced, virtuous character, reason and sensibility should mutually strengthen and support each other rather than either dominating the other” (Mackenzie 44).

Wollstonecraft’s argument that both reason and sensibility are important to female virtue is developed through her discussion of the two most significant feminine vocations of eighteenth-century, middle-class women: marriage and motherhood. Wollstonecraft criticizes men who have considered women to be something “other than human creatures” and chosen to make them “alluring mistresses [rather] than affectionate wives and rational mothers” (VRW 71). Virginia Sapiro argues that Wollstonecraft “worried that in a world not governed by reason most parents were not equipped to teach their children reason, therefore good habits of mind” (Sapiro 67). The importance assigned to reason in the feminine roles of “affectionate wife” and “rational mother” cannot be fully realized until women are given the opportunity to enhance their faculties. Wollstonecraft argues that, “in the regulation of a family, in the education of children, understanding...is particularly required: strength both of body and mind” (VRW 134). Additionally, she contends that that if a woman is not “prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue” (VRW 66). This ascribes crucial influence to women in the management of a family and upbringing of children, and Wollstonecraft notes that those women “whose minds are not enlarged by cultivation, or the natural selfishness of sensibility expanded by reflection, are very unfit to manage a family” (VRW 137). Both reason and sensibility are requisite female attributes in women’s social roles as wives and mothers.

The reflections that Wollstonecraft provides on marriage also communicate the importance of both reason and sensibility in the lives of women. This balance of faculties is crucial for women to have a happy marriage. Wollstonecraft claims that a successful and fulfilling marriage is not based simply on love or lust, but on companionship. She says, “Friendship or indifference

inevitably succeeds love” (VRW 96). She contends that if women are unable to use their powers of reason in marriage, they are unable to build a strong foundation of friendship upon which a lasting marriage can be established. She indicates that, “the woman who strengthens her body and exercises her mind will...become the friend, and not the humble dependent of her husband” (VRW 95). Lust and passion will fade, and when it does only those couples that have developed a warm and deep friendship first will enjoy the greater pleasures of marriage. Wollstonecraft maintains that, “When the husband ceases to be a lover—and the time will inevitably come, her desire of pleasing will then grow languid, or become a spring of bitterness; and love, perhaps, the most evanescent of all passions, gives place to jealousy or vanity” (VRW 93). The cult of sensibility, which female education encouraged women to promote, creates marriages based on lust, love, and fondness, which are “poor substitutes for friendship” (VRW 95). Wollstonecraft’s affirmation of the happy marriage confirms that both reason and sensibility have an essential role if one hopes to maintain a supportive union based on not just lust and passions alone, but on sincere love and friendship as well.

While Wollstonecraft foregrounds women’s traditional roles as wives and mothers, she is also interested in women’s ability to be self-governing agents. This, too, requires a combination of sense and sensibility. Wollstonecraft contends that she “does not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves” (VRW 133). Furthermore, she argues that women cannot obtain virtue until “they are, in some degree, independent of men” (VRW 221). This divergent view distinguishes Wollstonecraft as a radical writer of her time. She concedes that “reason is the proper work of the head, sensibility is the proper work of the heart” and women need a balance of both qualities to become well-rounded, virtuous individuals (Sapiro 65). She argues that, “the most perfect education...is such an exercise of the understanding as it is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart” (VRW 86). The ladylike Austen, whose novels often feature female heroines who focus solely on marriage and propriety, in reality crafts complex characters who reveal that she shares Wollstonecraft’s beliefs.

Both Wollstonecraft and Austen believe that women reach their highest potential when they are allowed to become rational individuals, strengthening both their head and heart. Women need both of these qualities, reason and sensibility, to acquire virtue and achieve their highest potential.

Austen's Critique in *Sense and Sensibility*

Austen and Wollstonecraft bear many similarities when closely examined. Wollstonecraft's "affectionate wife" and "rational mother," closely parallels Marianne Dashwood's final position as a woman with a "new attachment, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village." (SS 288). Instead of continuing to act on the whims of her emotions and sensibility, "instead of falling sacrifice to an irresistible passions," she learns to relieve the tension between her sense and sensibility (SS 288). Like Wollstonecraft advocates in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Marianne does not abandon all sensibility, but moderates it in conjunction with rational thought to become a virtuous woman, wife, and eventual mother. Wollstonecraft and Austen demonstrate through different means not the value of one attribute over the other, but the importance of developing both reason and sensibility in moderation to assert female agency and realize personal autonomy previously unavailable to women. If women are proven to be just as mentally capable as men, and equally esteemed in the eyes of God as human beings, then it is morally requisite that they be educated and able to attain both reason and sensibility to become virtuous human beings.

Like Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Austen's novels are centrally concerned with education in the broad sense of upbringing and socialization. They often portray bildungsroman, a process of growing up or gaining greater emotional and moral maturity in a young female protagonist of marriageable age. Of all of Austen's novels, however, *Sense and Sensibility* reflects Wollstonecraft's first published work most closely through its central themes of reason (or sense) and sensibility. Originally drafted as an epistolary novel titled *Elinor and Marianne*, Austen wrote *Sense and Sensibility* in the midst

of the revolutionary controversy of the 1790s, when many British conservatives mocked the radicals' interest in sensibility. However, the association of radicalism and a belief in sensibility established by Marilyn Butler is inaccurate. Radicals did not value only sensibility; in fact, most, like Wollstonecraft, argued for the importance of *rational* agency.

When introducing Marianne, the Austen's narrator says, "She was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was...every thing but prudent" (Austen 6).³ This would initially lead the reader to believe that Marianne is the antithesis of her sister Elinor, and represents only sensibility in the novel. Although in continuing her characterization of Marianne, Austen goes on to counteract that assumption, as the narrator states that, "Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's" (SS 6). Johnson claims, "A close examination of Elinor and Marianne does not permit us to conclude that they represent antithetical modes of behavior...But the differences between them are nevertheless significant" (Johnson 64). Austen asserts that Marianne has both reason and sensibility, but suggests that she cultivates one at the expense of the other.

Marianne's initial encounters with Willoughby are indicative of the problems with her sensibility. When she first meets him, she immediately falls in love without even knowing him. While Marianne is walking through the country she trips and falls, and is then literally swept off her feet and carried away by a handsome, mysterious stranger—Willoughby. Marianne is led by her sensibility, unchecked by reason, to believe in love at first sight, and this unfounded attachment, which she makes so suddenly, continues to plague her throughout the novel. When recounting the incident that creates the circumstance for Marianne and Willoughby's meeting, the narrator says:

His manly beauty and more than common gracefulness were instantly the themes of general admiration, and...his gallantry raised against Marianne...Marianne herself had seen less of his person than the rest...But she had seen enough of him to join in the admiration of all the others, and with an energy which always adorned her praise. His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story. (SS 33)

The narrator accounts for the “gallantry” of Willoughby’s actions in this moment, and how it aligns with Marianne’s ideas of a romantic, heroic figure. Her deficient powers of reason do not lead her to question these feelings and assumptions, even though she has seen less of him than anyone else. Her love is fueled by “energy,” not true acquaintance or rational thought. This immediate and unsubstantiated attachment that she forms to Willoughby so early on only causes her pain as the narrative continues.

Marianne and Willoughby later find time to converse in more detail, when they meet at dinner at Barton Park. Marianne is so consumed and enthralled by her sensibilities in this moment, however, that she is unable to identify their incompatible traits. When speaking with Willoughby, she finds that their tastes in music, dance, and books are “strikingly alike,” however the narrator notes that Willoughby “acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm” (SS 36). Marianne is so affected by her sensibilities and baseless love for Willoughby that she does not bother to question Willoughby’s answers. Instead of realizing that he is simply agreeing with her to please her, Marianne is too easily carried away and led to believe that the two are such a well-matched pair that after one conversation they are as familiar with each other as one is with a “long-established acquaintance” (SS 36).

Marianne becomes a victim of herself by cause of the intense emotions, love, and attachment she feels and internalizes towards Willoughby. Marianne’s senses are so entirely inflamed that these feelings consume her entirely and make her incapable of any other employment. When waiting in London, Marianne is anxious to see Willoughby and cannot sit still because her senses become aroused and demand her full attention. Marianne’s “spirits still continued very high, but there was a flutter in them...and this agitation increased as the evening drew on. She could scarcely eat any dinner, and when they afterwards returned to the drawing room, seemed anxiously listening to the sound of every carriage” (SS 120). Marianne is so absorbed by her senses that she abandons rational behavior and neglects all other events happening around her.

Similarly, Marianne becomes a victim to sensibility when Willoughby suddenly leaves Barton Park for London and the physical reactions to her overwhelming sadness prevent her from doing anything productive. After the loss of Willoughby, Marianne “was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with a headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough!” (SS 63). Marianne makes herself victim to her sensibilities and is thoughtless about the pain she is inflicting on others as she becomes physically ill from the overindulgence of her passions. Marianne makes herself sick once again in Cleveland after returning from London with a “heart swelling with emotion” (SS 228). Completely preoccupied by her “invaluable misery” and “tears of agony,” she “resolves to spend almost every hour of every day...in the indulgence of such solitary rambles” (SS 229). However, her solitary walks reveal her thoughtless actions informed by passion instead of reason, which make her ill once again. After walking through long, wet grasses on the grounds, with the “great imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and stockings,” Marianne catches “a cold so violent” that it “forced itself by increasing ailments, on the concern of every body, and the notice of herself” (SS 231). This severe illness, caused by neglect and indulgence of her misery and sorrow, is representative of the “mixture of madness and folly” that ensues when women’s “passions are thus pampered, whilst the judgment is left unformed” (VRW 131). Austen’s narrator in *Sense and Sensibility* loves Marianne in some ways, but does not refrain from highlighting her subscription to the fad of cultivating sensibility.

Marianne learns to utilize a combination of sense and sensibility by the end of the novel, developing both capabilities as a result of her experiences and the reformed education she receives. She does begin the narrative possessing both sense and sensibility, but she subscribes to the trend of cultivating sensibility alone. She is misled into thinking that sensibility alone constitutes agency because it resists conformity to societally accepted ideas about propriety. Marianne begins the novel as an unreasonable and distraught individual. In one of her most

illuminating emotional outbursts, she laments to Elinor after being chastised for her dramatic response to Willoughby's rejection. Marianne responds to Elinor saying, "I cannot, I cannot...leave me, leave me, if I distress you; leave me, hate me, forget me! but do not torture me so. Oh! how easy for those who have no sorrow of their own to talk of exertion! Happy, happy Elinor, *you* cannot have an idea of what I suffer" (SS 138). This outburst is again representative of the dangers of sensibility that Wollstonecraft warns against.

Austen argues that this overindulgence results not from a natural feminine characteristic, but from misinformation and faulty education. When Marianne experiences an outburst and cannot remain composed, it is not only because it is not "beyond the reach of Marianne," but mostly because, "it was beyond her wish" (SS 131). The narrator admits early on that, "She was without any desire of command over herself" (SS 63). What occurs over the course of the novel, then, is not an abandonment of sensibility, but an education reform that convinces Marianne that the link between reason and propriety is not contradictory. As Marianne and Willoughby continue to become acquainted, Marianne makes her affections for him openly clear. Elinor suggests to Marianne that she should be more discreet about her feelings, as they are not wholly proper for a woman who has only just met a man (and is not yet engaged to him). Elinor insists that "the pleasantness of an employment does not always evince its propriety," and that an open show of such affections will only expose Marianne to "some very impertinent remarks" (SS 52). The narrator explains Marianne's motives for this refusal to conceal her sentiments, saying:

[Elinor] did venture to suggest the propriety of some self-command to Marianne. But Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserved; and to aim at the restraint of sentiments which were not in themselves illaudable, appeared to her not merely an unnecessary effort, but a disgraceful subjection of reason to commonplace and mistaken notions. (SS 41)

Marianne does not employ restraint because she is unable to do so, or has been instructed otherwise, but rather feels that the "restraint of sentiments" is akin to

enforced control and “subjection of reason.” This type of restraint submits to an ideology based on societal ideas of propriety that she finds to be unfounded and she is unwilling to submit to them. Johnson argues that, “Marianne advocates self-expression unhampered by conventional restraints...Far from basing her actions on impulsive, purely subjective feelings, Marianne employs a rational argument to justify her behavior, one that illuminates the essential arbitrariness of established standards” (Johnson 60).

Susan Morgan also identifies this initial misconception in Marianne’s logic. She argues, “Not only does Marianne want to trust feelings as the guides to truth and goodness, she does this by collapsing the distinction between feeling and expression, thus making expression spontaneous and inevitable. The world becomes a simpler place if there is a direct correspondence between our emotions and their expressions in words and actions” (Morgan 120-121). Marianne’s refusal to submit to established codes of convention of propriety is an attempt to maintain the simplicity of a life in which one can say and so precisely what they feel without repercussions. The contrast between Marianne’s obvious outbursts and her more subtle hints at the convictions that drive them emphasizes the complexity of her character and prevents the reader from completely discrediting her as a woman overrun by sensibility and in need of reform. Marianne acknowledges her transformation near the end of the novel, as she joins her older sister Elinor as a female embodiment of both sense and sensibility in cooperation. She says, “I have not a doubt of it...and I have nothing to regret—nothing but my own folly” (SS 267). Marianne is represented not as a frivolous lady ruled by emotion, but as an intelligent young woman whose intelligence is obscured by her subscription to the fad of sensibility.

Marianne’s transformation at the end of the novel proves troubling for some critics. Butler and others take Marianne’s “extraordinary fate” as a clear example of Austen’s committed conservatism. The narrator says, “She [Marianne] was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims” (SS 288). Critics see Marianne’s fate as a rebirth into a new self, after her sensibilities and subsequent illnesses almost kill

her. However, I argue that Marianne is not reborn into sense alone, but into both sense and sensibility. She does not completely abandon her former self, but brings a piece of her sensational tendencies into her new roles as a wife and future mother. Even though Austen concludes Marianne's education somewhat abruptly, with a reformed Marianne who vows that her "feelings shall be governed and...temper improved," the reader is left not with a heroine who has grown out of sensibility into sense, but who has instead learned to combine and utilize both in cooperation (SS 263).

In spite of Marianne's role as a warning against the dangers of cultivating sensibility alone, Austen is not opposing Elinor's sense to Marianne's sensibility. Elinor possesses *both* sense and sensibility herself, and in combining both qualities she is a representative figure of the type of female education that Wollstonecraft advocates. Knox-Shaw, who provides a rebuttal of Butler's preeminent assertion that Austen is a political conservative, identifies the ways in which Elinor and Marianne combine the traits of reason and sensibility instead of possessing one or the other in isolation. He observes,

"We hear almost as much of Elinor's self-command as we do of Marianne's sensibility. But the plot works in such a way as to complicate and test these attributes. Each sister is...both an agent and a spectator of the other, and for each of them, the special endowment is complemented by its contrary, so that Marianne is 'sensible' as well as amiable, and Elinor has 'good heart' in addition to her sense" (Knox-Shaw 146).

Both characters work to balance both traits, which reveals that strength of head and heart are equally important to Austen (and Wollstonecraft). The narrator indicates at the start of the novel that, "Elinor...possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment" (SS 5-6). However, she also "had an excellent heart; —her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them" (SS 6). Austen begins by avoiding a strict alignment of Elinor with sense, also commenting on the strengths of her "affections" and "feelings" which are often properly governed. It is clear that Elinor *does* feel and is affected by her own sensibilities just as Marianne is, but

her proportionally balanced reason in comparison with Marianne's sometimes obscures this fact.

Elinor exposes both her sense and sensibility after learning of Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele. Reeling from this news, Elinor experiences a variety of emotions, including "resentment" and "indignation" among others (SS 103). She begins to question everything she had once assumed about Edward. She muses, "Had Edward been intentionally deceiving her? Had he feigned a regard for her which he did not feel? Was his engagement to Lucy an engagement of the heart?" (SS 103). This display of doubt and feeling exhibits Elinor's possession of sensibility. However, her ability to stop these feelings in their tracks and redirect them also illustrates the power of her personal sense. She says, "No; whatever it might once have been, she could not believe it such at present. His affection was all her own. She could not be deceived in that... What a softener of the heart was this persuasion!" (SS 103). Elinor's acknowledgement of her feelings in this moment, then her quick reining in of those feelings before they get the best of her, illuminates both her reason and sensibility.

Elinor's possession of both sense and sensibility sets her apart as a representative female character, modeled after Wollstonecraft's ideas in *Vindication*. After Elinor learns that Edward is no longer engaged to Lucy Steele but is free to marry her, she "could sit no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease" (SS 273). In this episode the rational Elinor is gone for a moment and, overcome by emotion, she has to flee the room because she cannot control her sensibilities with her sense. Elinor possesses both sense and sensibility in this moment because, while her sensibilities are uncontrolled and run wild, she does have enough sense to leave the room and not betray what she feels to everyone present at the party. She finds that, "in spite of herself," in spite of her best sense of reason, "she had always admitted a hope" that Edward would return (SS 270).

When Elinor speaks with Willoughby, her emotions oftentimes get the best of her. When first speaking with him, Marianne is completely enthralled and

jumps into a conversation with him. Elinor, however, “was robbed of all presence of mind by such an address, and was unable to say a word” (SS 131). Elinor is so shocked and taken aback by his manner that she is unable to continue to carry a conversation, to compensate for her feelings with her sense, as she normally does. Indeed, when speaking to Willoughby again after his return, and after the havoc that he has wreaked on the life of her sister Marianne, “her voice, in spite of herself, betrayed her compassionate emotion” (SS 249). While speaking with Willoughby, “Elinor’s heart, which had undergone many changes in the course of this extraordinary conversation, was now softened again; —yet she felt it her duty to check such ideas in her companion as the last” (SS 246). Elinor exhibits both her sense and sensibility in these moments, in which she is overcome by emotions that she realizes should not rule her, but struggles to maintain personal autonomy by employing the use of her reason and keeping her emotions in check and under control. If she does become “prey to her senses,” she maintains an equal share of reason to offset its ill effect (VRW 130). Elinor also explicitly denies any accusation that she does not feel. After Marianne discovers that Elinor has kept information from her for months, she defends herself and identifies her own feelings. She says:

You do not suppose that I have ever felt much. —For four months, Marianne, I have had all this hanging on my mind, without being at liberty to speak of it to a single creature; knowing that it would make you and my mother most unhappy...If you can think me capable of ever feeling—surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now*. (SS 198)

Marianne, who previously criticizes her sister for not feeling at all, comes to realize through this confession that Elinor does indeed bear strong feelings. Unlike Marianne, though, Elinor is able to conceal or control them in the interests of protecting others.

Through Elinor’s character and Marianne’s character transformation as she follows in the steps of her older sister, Austen, like Wollstonecraft, contends that sensibility is not completely unimportant. Elinor’s self-control in restraining her emotions is one indication of the importance of acquiring both characteristics

in equilibrium. For example, Elinor often conceals her feelings in order to promote the well being of others; these are not indications that she does not feel at all. When Edward leaves, she does not make an outward exhibition of her emotions, not seeking to “augment and fix her sorrow by seeking silence, solitude, and idleness,” as her sister Marianne “judiciously” decides to do (SS 78). Instead, she:

busily employed herself the whole day, neither sought nor avoided the mention of his [Edward’s] name, appeared to interest herself almost as much as ever in the general concern of the family, and if, by this conduct, she did not lessen her own grief, it was at least prevented from unnecessary increase. (SS 79)

Elinor’s methods for coping with her sorrow demonstrate that one has to think rationally to be sensitive to the feelings of others (in this case, her mother and sisters). Elinor obviously suffers a great deal when Edward leaves Morton and she is still emotional in this moment, but uses reason to process those emotions in a way that gives her increased power over her personal being and enables her to be caring toward others. Elinor’s kindness to Mrs. Jennings is another example of her ability to use both reason and sensibility for the good of others. Although Mrs. Jennings is nosy and constantly inserting herself into affairs that do not concern her, she is kind to both Elinor and Marianne and Elinor seeks to return that kindness. When they are riding together, “Elinor took immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could; and Mrs. Jennings on her side treated them both with all possible kindness” (SS 119). These moments in which Elinor puts aside her own feelings for those of others exemplify the connections between Austen and Wollstonecraft. Austen upholds Wollstonecraft’s affirmation that good will and love require thought, and thought in this case is mediated through a balance of reason and sensibility.

While critics are quick to clearly delineate Elinor as the rational or “sensible” character and Marianne as the female protagonist plagued by her “sensibilities,” this dichotomy of the title should not be taken as a divisive

distinction, but rather indicative of “a kind of progression or education” (ApRoberts 355). This type of education is similar to the education that Wollstonecraft demands for women. Wollstonecraft’s focus on virtue, acquired through a balance of reason and sensibility, is not lost on Austen, in whose work virtue emerges as “a fount of decency,” rooted in, “the ability to feel, first for ourselves, and then, with good hope, for others” (ApRoberts 364). This self-knowledge and empathy is essential to become a virtuous individual, wife, and mother. The sister faculties of sense and sensibility are mutually dependent in the Dashwood sisters who aim to become more virtuous, self-governing women.

This close examination of both Wollstonecraft and Austen reveals a new view of Austen that is not often considered. While most critics “unequivocally align Austen’s work with conservative critiques of the culture of sensibility,” I argue that Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* is a radical work that appeals to ideas first established by Wollstonecraft in 1792 (James-Cavan 16). The comparison between Wollstonecraft and Austen opens up a new view of Austen entirely, as an eighteenth century woman who is not solely focused on marriage and propriety but also on female education. Recent studies of Austen, which “concentrate on the co-ordinating conjunction, the ‘and,’ of the title,” prove that “the concepts have more to join them than to separate them” (James-Cavan 17). Nazar similarly argues, “Austen sounds remarkably like Wollstonecraft in her depiction, through Marianne Dashwood’s story, of the damage women inflict upon themselves by cultivating sensibility alone” (Nazar 127). Considering reason (or sense) and sensibility as complementary terms for reformed female education aimed at virtue establishes Austen as a feminist thinker in her own right.

NOTES

[1] Critics agreeing with Butler include Tuite, Sedgwick, and Mudrick.

[2] All subsequent references to Wollstonecraft will be noted with a parenthetical citation with the abbreviated title of her work (*VRW*) in place of her name.

[3] All subsequent references to Austen will be noted with a parenthetical citation with the abbreviated title of her work (*SS*) in place of her name.

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