

“Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl”¹

[This essay by Eve Sedgwick is based on her 1991 presentation at the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention, a major scholarly conference in the humanities. The essay became a touchstone in an intense debate over perceptions of academic work inside and outside the academy: Sedgwick’s work in general and this essay in particular were taken up as a controversial example of the move toward critical theory in literary studies—a transformation that was criticized by traditionalists as self-indulgent, obscure, and overly radical. (Such critics generally advocated instead the teaching of works then considered canonical—a reading list dominated by white heterosexual male authors—and considered traditional approaches to interpretation to be more objective than approaches informed by critical theory.)

In the essay itself, Sedgwick explores the “literary aspects of auto-eroticism” and argues that masturbation, like homo- and heterosexuality, has a complex history worth further exploration. Using this lens, she reads *Sense and Sensibility* for its sexual subtext, positing Marianne’s erotic identity as one no longer recognized in the twentieth century: that of the “masturbating girl.”]

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The phrase itself is already evidence. Roger Kimball in *Tenured Radicals*—a treatise on educational “corruption” that must have gone to press before the offending paper was so much as written—cites the title “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” from a Modern Language Association convention program quite as if he were Perry Mason, the six words a smoking gun:² the warm gun that, for the journalists who have adopted the phrase as an index of depravity in academe, is happiness—offering the squibby pop (fulmination?

1 The project sketched out in this paper has evoked, not only the foreclosing and disavowing responses mentioned in its first paragraph, but encouragement and fellowship as well. Some instances for which I am especially grateful: Michael Moon and Paula Bennett collaborated excitingly with me on the “Muse of Masturbation” proposal and panel. Vernon Rosario and Ed Cohen were kind enough to share unpublished writing. Barbara Herrnstein Smith discussed Kant in a particularly helpful conversation. Jonathan Goldberg made invaluable suggestions on an earlier draft of the essay.

2 See Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York, 1990), pp. 145–46.

prurience? funniness?) that lets absolutely anyone, in the righteously exciting vicinity of the masturbating girl, feel a very pundit.¹

There seems to be something self-evident—irresistibly so, to judge from its gleeful propagation—about the use of the phrase, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” as the Q.E.D. of phobic narratives about the degeneracy of academic discourse in the humanities. But what? The narrative link between masturbation itself and degeneracy, though a staple of pre-1920s medical and racial science, no longer has any respectable currency. To the contrary: modern views of masturbation tend to place it firmly in the framework of optimistic, hygienic narratives of all-too-normative individual development. When Jane E. Brody, in a recent “Personal Health” column in the *New York Times*, reassures her readers that, according to experts, it is actually entirely possible for people to be healthy *without* masturbating; “that the practice is not essential to normal development and that no one who thinks it is wrong or sinful should feel he or she must try it”; and that even “those who have not masturbated ... can have perfectly normal sex lives as adults,” the all but perfectly normal Victorianist may be forgiven for feeling just a little—out of breath.² In this altered context, the self-evidence of a polemical link between auto-eroticism and narratives of wholesale degeneracy (or, in one journalist’s historically redolent term, “idiocy”)³ draws on a very widely discredited body of psychiatric and eugenic expertise whose only direct historical continuity with late twentieth-century thought has been routed straight through the rhetoric and practice of fascism. But it now draws on this body of expertise under the more acceptable gloss of the modern, trivializing, hygienic-developmental discourse, according to which autoeroticism not only is funny—any sexuality of any power is likely to hover near the threshold of hilarity—but also must be relegated to the inarticulable space of (a barely superseded) infantility.

“Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl”—the paper, not the phrase—began as a contribution to an MLA session that the three of us who proposed it entitled “The Muse of Masturbation.” In spite of the half-century-long normalizing rehabilitation of this common

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- 1 See, for a few examples of the phrase’s career in journalism, Roger Rosenblatt, “The Universities: A Bitter Attack...,” review of *Tenured Radicals*, by Kimball, *New York Times Book Review*, 22 Apr. 1990, pp. 3, 36; letters to the editor, *New York Times Book Review*, 20 May 1990, p. 54, including one from Catharine R. Stimpson disputing the evidential status of the phrase; and Richard Bernstein, “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct: America’s Fashionable Orthodoxy,” *New York Times*, 28 Oct. 1990, sec. 4, pp. 1, 4.
 - 2 Jane E. Brody, “Personal Health,” *New York Times*, 4 Nov. 1987.
 - 3 Rosenblatt, “The Universities,” p. 3.

form of isometric exercise, the proposal to begin an exploration of literary aspects of auto-eroticism seemed to leave many people gasping. That could hardly be because literary pleasure, critical self-scrutiny, and autoeroticism have nothing in common. What seems likelier, indeed, is that to label with the literal-minded and (at least by intention) censorious metaphor “mental masturbation” any criticism one doesn’t like, or doesn’t understand, is actually to refer to a much vaster, indeed foundational, open secret about how hard it is to circumscribe the vibrations of the highly relational but, in practical terms, solitary pleasure and adventure of writing itself.

As the historicization of sexuality, following the work of Michel Foucault, becomes increasingly involved with issues of representation, different varieties of sexual experience and identity are being discovered both to possess a diachronic history—a history of significant change—and to be entangled in particularly indicative ways with aspects of epistemology and of literary creation and reception.¹ This is no less true of autoeroticism than of other forms of sexuality. For example, the Aesthetic in Kant is substantively indistinguishable from, but at the same time definitionally opposed against, autoerotic pleasure. Sensibility, too—even more tellingly for the example of Austen—named the locus of a similarly dangerous overlap. As John Mullan points out in *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, the empathetic allo-identifications that were supposed to guarantee the sociable nature of sensibility could not finally be distinguished from an epistemological solipsism, a somatics of trembling self-absorption, and ultimately—in the durable medical code for auto-eroticism and its supposed sequelae—“neurasthenia.”² Similarly unstable dichotomies between art and masturbation have persisted, culminating in those recurrent indictments of self-reflexive art and critical theory themselves as forms of mental masturbation.

Masturbation itself, as we will see, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, is being demonstrated to have a complex history. Yet there are senses in which autoeroticism seems almost uniquely—or, at least, distinctively—to challenge the historicizing impulse. It is unlike heterosexuality, whose history is difficult to construct because it masquerades so readily as History itself; it is unlike homosexuality, for centuries the *crimen nefandum* or “love that dare not speak its name,” the compilation of whose history requires acculturation in a

1 My recent book, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, 1990), makes this argument at length in relation to the late nineteenth-century crisis of male homo/heterosexual definition.

2 See John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1988), esp. pp. 201–40.

rhetoric of the most pointed preterition. Because it escapes both the narrative of reproduction and (when practiced solo) even the creation of any interpersonal trace, it seems to have an affinity with amnesia, repetition or the repetition-compulsion, and ahistorical or history-rupturing rhetorics of sublimity. Neil Hertz has pointed out how much of the disciplinary discourse around masturbation has been aimed at discovering or inventing proprietary traces to attach to a practice that, itself relatively traceless, may seem distinctively to threaten the orders of propriety and property.¹ And in the context of hierarchically oppressive relations between genders and between sexualities, masturbation can seem to offer—not least as an analogy to writing—a reservoir of potentially utopian metaphors and energies for independence, self-possession, and a rapture that may owe relatively little to political or interpersonal abjection.

The three participants in “The Muse of Masturbation,” like most of the other scholars I know of who think and write about masturbation, have been active in lesbian and gay as well as in feminist studies. This makes sense because thinking about autoeroticism is beginning to seem a productive and necessary switchpoint in thinking about the relations—historical as well as intrapsychic—between homo- and heteroeroticism: a project that has not seemed engaging or necessary to scholars who do not register the anti-heterosexist pressure of gay and lesbian interrogation. Additionally, it is through gay and lesbian studies that the skills for a project of historicizing any sexuality have developed; along with a tradition of valuing nonprocreative forms of creativity and pleasure; a history of being suspicious of the tendentious functioning of open secrets; and a politically urgent tropism toward the gaily and, if necessary, the defiantly explicit.

At the same time, part of the great interest of autoeroticism for lesbian and gay thought is that it is a long-execrated form of sexuality, intimately and invaluablely entangled with the physical, emotional, and intellectual adventures of many, many people, that today completely *fails* to constitute anything remotely like a minority identity. The history of masturbation phobia—the astonishing range of legitimate institutions that so recently surveilled, punished, jawboned, imprisoned, terrorized, shackled, diagnosed, purged, and physically mutilated so many people, to prevent a behavior that those same institutions now consider innocuity itself—has complex messages for sexual activism today. It seems to provide the most compelling possible exposure of the fraudulence of the scientistic claims of any discourse, *including medicine*, to say, in relation to human behavior,

1 See Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York, 1985), pp. 148–49.

what constitutes disease. “The mass of ‘self-defilement’ literature,” as Vernon A. Rosario II rather mildly points out, can “be read as a gross travesty of public health education.”¹ And queer people have recently needed every available tool of critical leverage, including travesty, against the crushing mass of legitimated discourses showing us to be moribund, mutant, pathetic, virulent, or impossible. Even as it demonstrates the absolutely discrediting inability of the “human sciences” to offer any effectual resistance to the most grossly punitive, moralistic hijacking, however, the same history of masturbation phobia can also seem to offer the heartening spectacle of a terrible oppression based on “fear” and “ignorance” that, ultimately, withered away from sheer transparent absurdity. The danger of this view is that the encouragement it offers—an encouragement we can hardly forego, so much need do we have of courage—depends on an Enlightenment narrative that can only relegitimize the same institutions of knowledge by which the crime was in the first place done.

Today there is no corpus of law or of medicine about masturbation; it sways no electoral politics; institutional violence and street violence do not surround it, nor does an epistemology of accusation; people who have masturbated who may contract illnesses are treated as people who are sick with specific disease organisms, rather than as revelatory embodiments of sexual fatality. Yet when so many confident jeremiads are spontaneously launched at the explicit invocation of the masturbator, it seems that her power to guarantee a Truth from which she is herself excluded has not lessened in two centuries. To have so powerful a form of *sexuality* run so fully athwart the precious and embattled sexual *identities* whose meaning and outlines we always insist on thinking we know, is only part of the revelatory power of the Muse of masturbation.

2

Bedroom scenes are not so commonplace in Jane Austen’s novels that readers get jaded with the chiaroscuro of sleep and passion, wan light, damp linen, physical abandon, naked dependency, and the imperfectly clothed body. *Sense and Sensibility* has a particularly devastating bedroom scene, which begins:

1 Vernon A. Rosario II, “The Nineteenth-Century Medical Politics of Self-Defilement and Seminal Economy” (Paper delivered at the Nationalisms and Sexualities Conference, Center for Literary and Cultural Studies, Harvard University, June 1989), p. 18.

Before the house-maid had lit their fire the next day, or the sun gained any power over a cold, gloomy morning in January, Marianne, only half-dressed, was kneeling against one of the window-seats for the sake of all the little light she could command from it, and writing as fast as a continual flow of tears would permit her. In this situation, Elinor, roused from sleep by her agitation and sobs, first perceived her; and after observing her for a few moments with silent anxiety, said, in a tone of the most considerate gentleness,

‘Marianne, may I ask?—’

‘No, Elinor,’ she replied, ‘ask nothing; you will soon know all.’

The sort of desperate calmness with which this was said, lasted no longer than while she spoke, and was immediately followed by a return of the same excessive affliction. It was some minutes before she could go on with her letter, and the frequent bursts of grief which still obliged her, at intervals, to withhold her pen, were proofs enough of her feeling how more than probable it was that she was writing for the last time to Willoughby.¹

We know well enough who is in this *bedroom*: two women. They are Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, they are sisters, and the passion and perturbation of their love for each other is, at the very least, the backbone of this powerful novel. But who is in this *bedroom scene*? And, to put it vulgarly, what’s their scene? It is the naming of a man, the absent Willoughby, that both marks this as an unmistakably sexual scene, and by the same gesture seems to displace its “sexuality” from the depicted bedroom space of same-sex tenderness, secrecy, longing, and frustration. Is this, then, a hetero- or a homoerotic novel (or moment in a novel)? No doubt it must be said to be both, if love is vectored toward an object and Elinor’s here flies toward Marianne, Marianne’s in turn toward Willoughby. But what, if love is defined only by its gender of object-choice, are we to make of Marianne’s terrible isolation in this scene; of her unstanchable emission, convulsive and intransitive; and of the writing activity with which it wrenchingly alternates?

Even before this, of course, the homo/hetero question is problematic for its anachronism: homosexual identities, and certainly female ones, are supposed not to have had a broad discursive circulation until later in the nineteenth century, so in what sense could

1 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 193; hereafter abbreviated SS.

heterosexual identities as against them?¹ And for that matter, if we are to trust Foucault, the conceptual amalgam represented in the very term *sexual identity*, the cementing of every issue of individuality, filiation, truth, and utterance to some representational metonymy of the genital, was a process not supposed to have been perfected for another half- or three-quarters-century after Austen; so that the genital implication in either “homosexual” or “heterosexual,” to the degree that it differs from a plot of the procreative or dynastic (as each woman’s desire seems at least for the moment to do), may mark also the possibility of an anachronistic gap.²

In trying to make sense of these discursive transitions, I have most before me the model of recent work on Emily Dickinson, and in particular Paula Bennett’s discussion of the relation between Dickinson’s heteroerotic and her homoerotic poetics in *My Life, a Loaded Gun* and *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*.³ Briefly, Bennett’s accomplishment is to have done justice for the somewhat later, New England figure of Dickinson, to a complex range of intense female-homo-social bonds, including genitally figured ones, in her life and writing—without denying the salience and power of the male-directed eros and expectation that also sound there; without palliating the tensions acted out between the two; and at the same time without imposing an anachronistically reified view of the feminist consistency of these tensions. For instance, the all-too-available rhetoric of the polymorphous, of a utopian bisexual erotic pluralism, has little place in Bennett’s account. But neither does she romanticize the female-female bonds whose excitement, perturbation, and pain—including

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- 1 This is (in relation to women) the argument of, most influentially, Lillian Faderman, *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present* (New York, 1981), and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975): 1–29. A recently discovered journal, published as *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister (1791–1840)*, ed. Helena Whitbread (London, 1988), suggests that revisions of this narrative may, however, be necessary. It is the diary (for 1817–1823) of a young, cultured, religious, socially conservative, self-aware, land-owning rural Englishwoman—an almost archetypal Jane Austen heroine—who formed her sense of self around the pursuit and enjoyment of genital contact and short- and long-term intimacies with other women of various classes.
 - 2 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).
 - 3 See Paula Bennett, *My Life, a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston, 1986), pp. 13–94, and *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet* (London, 1990).

the pain of power struggle, of betrayal, of rejection—she shows to form so much of the primary level of Dickinson's emotional life. What her demanding account does enable her to do, however, is to offer a model for understanding the bedrock, quotidian, sometimes very sexually fraught, female homosocial networks in relation to the more visible and spectacularized, more narratable, but less intimate, heterosexual plots of pre-twentieth-century Anglo-American culture.

I see this work on Dickinson as exemplary for understandings of such other, culturally central, homosocially embedded women authors as Austen and, for example, the Brontës. (Surely there are important generalizations yet to be made about the attachments of sisters, perhaps of any siblings, who live together as adults.) But as I have suggested, the first range of questions yet to be asked properly in this context concerns the emergence and cultural entailments of "sexual identity" itself during this period of the incipience of "sexual identity" in its (still incompletely interrogated) modern senses. Indeed, one of the motives for this project is to denaturalize any presumptive understanding of the relation of "hetero" to "homo" as modern sexual identities—the presumption, for instance, of their symmetry, their mutual impermeability, or even of their both functioning as "sexual identities" in the same sense; the presumption, as well, that "hetero" and "homo," even with the possible addition of "bi," do efficiently and additively divide up the universe of sexual orientation. It seems likely to me that in Austen's time *as in our own*, the specification of any distinct "sexual identity" magnetized and reoriented in new ways the heterogeneous erotic and epistemological energies of everyone in its social vicinity, without at the same time either adequating or descriptively exhausting those energies.

One "sexual identity" that did exist as such in Austen's time, already bringing a specific genital practice into dense compaction with issues of consciousness, truth, pedagogy, and confession, was that of the onanist. Among the sexual dimensions overridden within the past century by the world-historical homo/hetero cleavage is the one that discriminates, in the first place, the autoerotic and the alloerotic. Its history has been illuminated by recent researches of a number of scholars.¹ According to their accounts, the European

1 Useful historical work touching on masturbation and masturbation phobia includes G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life: Male Attitudes toward Women and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1976); Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side* (New York, forthcoming); John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York, 1988); E.H. Hare, "Masturbatory Insanity: The History of an Idea," *Journal of the Mental Sciences* 108 (Jan. 1962): 1–25; Robert H. MacDonald, "The Frightful Consequences of Onanism: Notes [continued]"

phobia over masturbation came early in the “sexualizing” process described by Foucault, beginning around 1700 with publication of *Onania*, and spreading virulently after the 1750s. Although originally applied with a relative impartiality to both sexes, anti-onanist discourse seems to have bifurcated in the nineteenth century, and the systems of surveillance and the rhetorics of “confession” for the two genders contributed to the emergence of disparate regulatory categories and techniques, even regulatory worlds. According to Ed Cohen, for example, anxiety about boys’ masturbation motivated mechanisms of school discipline and surveillance that were to contribute so much to the late nineteenth-century emergence of a widespread, class-inflected male homosexual identity and hence to the modern crisis of male homo/ heterosexual definition. On the other hand, anxiety about girls’ and women’s masturbation contributed more to the emergence of gynecology, through an accumulated expertise in and demand for genital surgery; of such identities as that of the hysteric; and of such confession-inducing disciplinary discourses as psychoanalysis.

Far from there persisting a minority identity of “the masturbator” today, of course, autoeroticism per se in the twentieth century has been conclusively subsumed under that normalizing developmental model, differently but perhaps equally demeaning, according to which it represents a relatively innocuous way station on the road to a “full,” that is, alloerotic, adult genitality defined almost exclusively by gender of object choice. As Foucault and others have noted, a lush plurality of (proscribed and regulated) sexual identities had developed by the end of the nineteenth century: even the most canonical late-Victorian art and literature are full of sadomasochistic, pederastic and pedophilic, necrophilic, as well as autoerotic images and preoccupations; while Foucault mentions the hysterical woman and the masturbating child along with “entomologized” sexual categories such as zoophiles, zooerasts, auto-monosexualists,

on the History of a Delusion,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (July–Sept. 1967): 423–31; John Money, *The Destroying Angel: Sex, Fitness and Food in the Legacy of Degeneracy Theory: Graham Crackers, Kellogg’s Corn Flakes and American Health History* (Buffalo, N.Y., 1985); George L. Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (New York, 1985); Robert P. Neuman, “Masturbation, Madness, and the Modern Concepts of Childhood and Adolescence,” *Journal of Social History* 8 (Spring 1975): 1–27; Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York, 1985); Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York, 1986); and Jean Stengers and Anne van Neck, *Histoire d’une grande peur, la masturbation* (Brussels, 1984).

and gynecomasts, as typifying the new sexual taxonomies, the sexual “*specification of individuals*,” that he sees as inaugurating the twentieth-century regime of sexuality.¹ Although Foucault is concerned to demonstrate our own continuity with nineteenth-century sexual discourse, however, (appealing to his readers as “We ‘Other Victorians’”),² it makes a yet-to-be-explored difference that the Victorian multiplication of sexual species has today all but boiled down to a single, bare—and moreover fiercely invidious—dichotomy. Most of us now correctly understand a question about our “sexual orientation” to be a demand that we classify ourselves as a heterosexual or a homosexual, regardless of whether we may or may not individually be able or willing to perform that blank, binarized act of category assignment. We also understand that the two available categories are not symmetrically but hierarchically constituted in relation to each other. The identity of the masturbator was only one of the sexual identities subsumed, erased, or overridden in this triumph of the heterosexualist homo/hetero calculus. But I want to argue here that the status of the masturbator among these many identities was uniquely formative. I would suggest that as one of the very earliest embodiments of “sexual identity” in the period of the progressive epistemological overloading of sexuality, the masturbator may have been at the cynosural center of a remapping of individual identity, will, attention, and privacy along modern lines that the reign of “sexuality,” and its generic concomitant in the novel and in novelistic point-of-view, now lead us to take for granted. It is of more than chronological import if the (lost) identity of the masturbator was the proto-form of modern sexual identity itself.

Thus it seems likely that in our reimaginings of the history of sexuality “as” (we vainly imagine) “we know it,” through readings of classic texts, the dropping out of sight of the autoerotic term is also part of what falsely naturalizes the heterosexualist imposition of these books, disguising both the rich, conflictual erotic complication of a homoerotic matrix not yet crystallized in terms of “sexual identity,” and the violence of heterosexualist definition finally carved out of these plots. I am taking *Sense and Sensibility* as my example here because of its odd position, at once germinal and abjected, in the Austen canon and hence in “the history of the novel”; and because its erotic axis is most obviously the unwavering but difficult love of a woman, Elinor Dashwood, for a woman, Marianne Dashwood. I don’t think we can bring this desire into clear focus until we also see how Marianne’s erotic identity, in turn, is not in the first place exactly either a

1 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, pp. 105, 42–43.

2 Ibid., p. 1.

same-sex-loving one or a cross-sex-loving one (though she loves both women and men), but rather the one that today no longer exists as an identity: that of the masturbating girl.

Reading the bedroom scenes of *Sense and Sensibility*, I find I have lodged in my mind a bedroom scene from another document, a narrative structured as a case history of “Onanism and Nervous Disorders in Two Little Girls” and dated 1881:

Sometimes [X ...’s] face is flushed and she has a roving eye; at others she is pale and listless. Often she cannot keep still, pacing up and down the bedroom, or balancing on one foot after the other. ... During these bouts X ... is incapable of anything: reading, conversation, games, are equally odious. All at once her expression becomes cynical, her excitement mounts. X ... is overcome by the desire to do it, she tries not to or someone tries to stop her. Her only dominating thought is to succeed. Her eyes dart in all directions, her lips never stop twitching, her nostrils flare! Later, she calms down and is herself again. “If only I had never been born,” she says to her little sister, “we would not have been a disgrace to the family!” And Y ... replies: “Why did you teach me all these horrors then?” Upset by this reproach, X ... says: “If someone would only kill me! What joy. I could die without committing suicide.”¹

If what defines “sexual identity” is the impaction of epistemological issues around the core of a particular genital possibility, then the compulsive attention paid by anti-onanist discourse to disorders of attention make it a suitable point of inauguration for modern sexuality. Marianne Dashwood, though highly intelligent, exhibits the classic consciousness-symptoms noted by Samuel Tissot in 1758, including “the impairment of memory and the senses,” “inability to confine the attention,” and “an air of distraction, embarrassment

1 Demetrius Zambaco, “Onanism and Nervous Disorders in Two Little Girls,” trans. Catherine Duncan, *Semiotext(e)* 4, “Polysexuality” (1981): 30; hereafter abbreviated “O.” The letters standing in place of the girls’ names are followed by ellipses in the original; other ellipses are mine. In quoting from this piece I have silently corrected some obvious typographical errors; since this issue of *Semiotext(e)* is printed entirely in capital letters, and with commas and periods of indistinguishable shape, I have also had to make some guesses about sentence division and punctuation. Zambaco’s case was later published, under less equivocal scholarly auspices, in *A Dark Science: Women, Sexuality, and Psychiatry in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Jeffrey Mousaieff Masson and Marianne Loring, ed. Masson (New York, 1986), pp. 61–89.

and stupidity.”¹ A surprising amount of the narrative tension of *Sense and Sensibility* comes from the bent bow of the absention of Marianne’s attention from wherever she is. “Great,” at one characteristic moment, “was the perturbation of her spirits and her impatience to be gone” (SS, p. 174); once out on the urban scene, on the other hand,

her eyes were in constant inquiry; and in whatever shop the party were engaged, her mind was equally abstracted from every thing actually before them, from all that interested and occupied the others. Restless and dissatisfied every where ... she received no pleasure from any thing; was only impatient to be at home again. [SS, p. 180]

Yet when at home, her “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, p. 177).

Marianne incarnates physical as well as perceptual irritability, to both pleasurable and painful effect. Addicted to “rapidity” (SS, p. 75) and “requiring at once solitude and continual change of place” (SS, p. 193), she responds to anything more sedentary with the characteristic ejaculation: “I could hardly keep my seat” (SS, p. 51). Sitting is the most painful and exciting thing for her. Her impatience keeps her “moving from one chair to another” (SS, p. 266) or “[get-ting] up, and walk[ing] about the room” (SS, p. 269). At the happiest moments, she frankly pursues the locomotor pleasures of her own body, “running with all possible speed down the steep side of the hill” (SS, p. 74) (and spraining her ankle in a tumble), eager for “the delight of a gallop” when Willoughby offers her a horse (SS, p. 88). To quote again from the document dated 1881,

In addition to the practices already cited, X ... provoked the voluptuous spasm by rubbing herself on the angles of furniture, by pressing her thighs together, or rocking backwards and forwards on a chair. Out walking she would begin to limp in an odd way as if she were lopsided, or kept lifting one of her feet. At other times she took little steps, walked quickly, or turned abruptly left. ... If she saw some shrub she straddled it and rubbed herself back and forth. ... She pretended to fall or stumble over something in order to rub against it. [“O,” pp. 26–27]

1 Quoted and discussed in Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side*.

Exactly Marianne's overresponsiveness to her tender "seat" as a node of delight, resistance, and surrender—and its crucial position, as well, between the homosocial and heterosocial avidities of the plot—is harnessed when Elinor manipulates Marianne into rejecting Willoughby's gift of the horse: "Elinor thought it wisest to touch that point no more. ... Opposition on so tender a subject would only attach her the more to her own opinion. But by an appeal to her affection for her mother ... Marianne was shortly subdued" (SS, p. 89).

The vision of a certain autoerotic closure, absention, self-sufficiency in Marianne is radiantly attractive to almost everyone, female and male, who views her; at the same time, the same autoerotic inaccessibility is legible to them through contemporaneous discourses as a horrifying staging of autoconsumption. As was typical until the end of the nineteenth century, Marianne's autoeroticism is not defined in opposition to her alloerotic bonds, whether with men or with women. Rather, it signifies an excess of sexuality altogether, an excess dangerous to others but chiefly to herself: the chastening illness that ultimately wastes her physical substance is both the image and the punishment of the "distracted" sexuality that, continually "forgetting itself," threatens, in her person, to subvert the novel's boundaries between the public and the private.

More from the manuscript dated 1881:

The 19th [September]. Third cauterisation of little Y ... who sobs and vociferates.

In the days that followed Y ... fought successfully against temptation. She became a child again, playing with her doll, amusing herself and laughing gayly. She begs to have her hands tied each time she is not sure of herself. ... Often she is seen to make an effort at control. Nonetheless she does it two or three times every twenty-four hours. ... But X ... more and more drops all pretense of modesty. One night she succeeds in rubbing herself till the blood comes on the straps that bind her. Another time, caught in the act by the governess and unable to satisfy herself, she has one of her terrible fits of rage, during which she yells: "I want to, oh how I want to! You can't understand, Mademoiselle, how I want to do it!" Her memory begins to fail. She can no longer keep up with lessons. She has hallucinations all the time. ...

The 23rd. She repeats: "I deserve to be burnt and I will be. I will be brave during the operation, I won't cry." From ten at night until six in the morning, she has a terrible attack, falling several times into a swoon that lasted about a quarter of an hour.

At times she had visual hallucinations. At other times she became delirious, wild eyed, saying: "Turn the page, who is hitting me, etc."

The 25th I apply a hot point to X ...'s clitoris. She submits to the operation without wincing, and for twenty-four hours after the operation she is perfectly good. But then she returns with renewed frenzy to her old habits. ["O," pp. 32–33]

As undisciplined as Marianne Dashwood's "abstracted" attention is, the farouche, absent presence of this figure also reorganizes the attention of others: Elinor's rapt attention to her, to begin with, but also, through Elinor's, the reader's. *Sense and Sensibility* is unusual among Austen novels not for the (fair but unrigorous) consistency with which its narrative point of view is routed through a single character, Elinor, but rather for the undeviating consistency with which Elinor's regard in turn is vectored in the direction of her beloved. Elinor's self-imposed obligation to offer social countenance to the restless, insulting, magnetic, and dangerous abstraction of her sister constitutes most of the plot of the novel.

It constitutes more than plot, in fact; it creates both the consciousness and the privacy of the novel. The projectile of surveillance, epistemological demand, and remediation that both desire and "responsibility" constrain Elinor to level at Marianne, immobilized or turned back on herself by the always-newly-summoned-up delicacy of her refusal to press Marianne toward confession, make an internal space—internal, that is, to Elinor, hence to the reader hovering somewhere behind her eyes—from which there is no escape but more silent watching. About the engagement she is said to assume to exist between Marianne and Willoughby, for example, her "wonder"

was engrossed by the extraordinary silence of her sister and Willoughby on the subject. ... Why they should not openly acknowledge to her mother and herself, what their constant behaviour to each other declared to have taken place, Elinor could not imagine. ... For this strange kind of secrecy maintained by them relative to their engagement, which in fact concealed nothing at all, she could not account; and it was so wholly contradictory to their general opinions and practice, that a doubt sometimes entered her mind of their being really engaged, and this doubt was enough to prevent her making any inquiry of Marianne. [SS, p. 100]

To Marianne, on the other hand, the question of an engagement seems simply not to have arisen.

The insulation of Marianne from Elinor's own unhappiness, when Elinor is unhappy; the buffering of Marianne's impulsiveness, and the absorption or, where that is impossible, coverture of her terrible sufferings; the constant, reparative concealment of Marianne's elopements of attention from their present company: these activities hollow out a subjectivity for Elinor and the novel that might best be described in the 1980s jargon of "co-dependency," were not the pathologizing stigma of that term belied by the fact that, at least as far as this novel is concerned, the co-dependent subjectivity simply *is subjectivity*. Even Elinor's heterosexual plot with Edward Ferrars merely divides her remedial solicitude (that distinctive amalgam of "tenderness, pity, approbation, censure and doubt" [SS, p. 129]) between the sister who remains her first concern, and a second sufferer from *mauvaise honte*, the tell-tale "embarrassment," "settled" "absence of mind" (SS, p. 123), unsocializable shyness, "want of spirits, of openness, and of consistency," "the same fettered inclination, the same inevitable necessity of temporizing with his mother" (SS, p. 126), and a "desponding turn of mind" (SS, p. 128), all consequent on his own servitude to an erotic habit formed in the idleness and isolation of an improperly supervised youth.

The co-dependency model is the less anachronistic as Marianne's and Edward's disorders share with the pre-twentieth-century version of masturbation the property of being structured as addictions. (Here, of course, I'm inviting a meditation on the history of the term *self-abuse*, which referred to masturbation from the eighteenth century until very recently—when it's come, perhaps by analogy to *child-abuse*, to refer to battering or mutilation of oneself. Where that older sense of *abuse* has resurfaced, on the other hand, is in the also very recent coinage, *substance abuse*.) Back to 1881:

The afternoon of the 14th of September X ... is in a terribly over-excited state. She walks about restlessly, grinding her teeth. ... There is foam on her lips, she gasps, repeating, "I don't want to, I don't want to, I can't stop myself, I must do it! Stop me, hold my hands, tie my feet!" A few moments later she falls into a state of prostration, becomes sweet and gentle, begging to be given another chance. "I know I'm killing myself," she says. "Save me." ["O," p. 30]

Although *the addict*, as a medicalized personal identity, was (as Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards demonstrate in *Opium and the People*) another product of the latter part of the nineteenth century, the hypostatization of the notion of "will" that would soon give

rise to the “addict” identity, and that by the late twentieth century would leave no issue of voluntariness untinged by the concept of addiction, is already in place in *Sense and Sensibility*.¹ A concept of addiction involves understanding something called “the will” as a muscle that can strengthen with exercise or atrophy with disuse; the particular muscle on which “will” is modeled in this novel is a sphincter, which, when properly toned, defines an internal space of private identity by holding some kinds of material inside, even while guarding against the admission of others. Marianne’s unpracticed muscle lets her privacy dribble away, giving her “neither courage to speak of, nor fortitude to conceal” (SS, p. 333) the anguish she experiences. By contrast, in the moment of Elinor’s profoundest happiness, when Marianne is restored from a grave illness, Elinor’s well-exercised muscle guarantees that what expands with her joy is the private space that, constituting her self, constitutes it also as the space of narrative self-reflection (not to say hoarding):

Elinor could not be cheerful. Her joy was a different kind, and led to anything rather than to gaiety. Marianne restored to life, health, friends, and to her doating mother, was an idea to fill her heart with sensations of exquisite comfort, and expand it in fervent gratitude;—but it led to no outward demonstrations of joy, no words, no smiles. All within Elinor’s breast was satisfaction, silent and strong. [SS, p. 310]

Such an apparently generalizable ideal of individual integrity, the unitary self-containment of the strong, silent type, can never be stable, of course. Elinor has constructed herself in this way around an original lack: the absention of her sister, and perhaps in the first place the withholding from herself of the love of their mother, whom she then compulsively unites with Marianne, the favorite, in the love-drenched tableaux of her imagination. In the inappropriately pathologizing but descriptively acute language of “self-help,” Marianne’s addiction has mobilized in her sister a discipline that, posed as against addiction, nonetheless also is one. Elinor’s pupils, those less tractable sphincters of the soul, won’t close against the hapless hemorrhaging of her visual attention-flow toward Marianne; it is this, indeed, that renders her consciousness, in turn, habitable, inviting, and formative to readers as “point-of-view.”

1 See Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England* (New Haven, Conn., 1987). For more on the epistemology of addiction, co-dependency, and addiction-attribution, see my “Epidemics of the Will,” *Zone* (forthcoming).

But that hypostatization of “will” had always anyway contained the potential for the infinite regress enacted in the uncircumscribable twentieth-century epidemic of addiction-attribution: the degenerative problem of where, if not in some further compulsion, one looks for the will *to* will, as when Marianne, comparing herself with the more continent Elinor,

felt all the force of that comparison; but not as her sister had hoped, to urge her to exertion now; she felt it with all the pain of continual self-reproach, regretted most bitterly that she had never exerted herself before; but it brought only the torture of penitence, without the hope of amendment. Her mind was so much weakened that she still fancied present exertion impossible, and therefore it only dispirited her more. [SS, p. 270]

In addition, the concept of addiction also involves a degenerative perceptual narrative of progressively deadened receptiveness to a stimulus that therefore requires to be steadily increased—as when Marianne’s and her mother’s “agony of grief” over the death of the father, at first overpowering, was then “voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again” (SS, p. 42). Paradoxically afflicted, as Marianne is, by both hyperaesthesia and an emboldening and addiction-producing absentmindedness (“an heart hardened against [her friends’] merits, and a temper irritated by their very attention” [SS, p. 337]), the species of the masturbating girl was described by Augustus Kinsley Gardner in 1860 as one

in whom the least impression is redoubled like that of a “tam-tam,” [who seek] for emotions still more violent and more varied. It is this necessity which nothing can appease, which took the Roman women to the spectacles where men were devoured by ferocious beasts. ... It is the emptiness of an unquiet and sombre soul seeking some activity, which clings to the slightest incident of life, to elicit from it some emotion which forever escapes; in short, it is the deception and disgust of existence.¹

The subjectivity hollowed out by *Sense and Sensibility*, then, and made available *as* subjectivity for heterosexual expropriation, is not Marianne’s but Elinor’s; the novel’s achievement of a modern psychological interiority fit for the heterosexual romance plot is created for Elinor through her completely one-directional visual fixation on her sister’s specularized, desired, envied, and punished autoeroticism.

1 Quoted in Barker-Benfield, *The Horrors of the Half-Known Life*, pp. 273–74.

This also offers, however, a useful model for the chains of reader-relations constructed by the punishing, girl-centered moral pedagogy and erotics of Austen's novels more generally. Austen criticism is notable mostly not just for its timidity and banality but for its unrelenting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson—for the vengefulness it vents on the heroines whom it purports to love, and whom, perhaps, it does. Thus Tony Tanner, the ultimate normal and normalizing reader of Austen, structures sentence after sentence: “Emma ... *has to be tutored* ... into correct vision and responsible speech. Anne Elliot *has to move*, painfully, from an excessive prudence.”¹ “Some Jane Austen heroines *have to learn* their true ‘duties.’ They all *have to find* their proper homes” (*JA*, p. 33). Catherine “quite literally is in danger of perverting reality, and one of the things she *has to learn* is to break out of quotations” (*JA*, p. 45); she “*has to be disabused* of her naive and foolish ‘Gothic’ expectations” (*JA*, p. 48). Elizabeth and Darcy “*have to learn to see* that their novel is more properly called” ... (*JA*, p. 105). A lot of Austen criticism sounds hilariously like the leering school-prospectuses or governess-manifestoes brandished like so many birch rods in Victorian sadomasochistic pornography. Thus Jane Nardin:

The discipline that helps create the moral adult need not necessarily be administered in early childhood. Frequently, as we have seen, it is not—for its absence is useful in helping to create the problems with which the novel deals. But if adequate discipline is lacking in childhood, it must be supplied later, and this happens only when the character learns “the lessons of affliction” (*Mansfield Park*, p. 459). Only after immaturity, selfishness, and excessive self-confidence have produced error, trouble, and real suffering, can the adult begin to teach himself or herself the habits of criticism and self-control which should have been inculcated in childhood.²

1 Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), p. 6; hereafter abbreviated *JA*; emphasis, in each case, added.

2 Nardin is remarkably unworried about any possible excess of severity: In this group of characters [in *Mansfield Park*], lack of discipline has the expected effect, while excessive discipline, though it causes suffering and creates some problems for Fanny and Susan Price, does indeed make them into hard-working, extremely conscientious women. The timidity and self-doubt which characterize Fanny, and which are a response to continual censure, seem a reasonable price to pay for the strong conscience that even the unfair discipline she received has nurtured in her. [Jane Nardin, “Children and Their Families in Jane Austen’s Novels,” in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. Janet Todd (New York, 1983), p. 83. (Nardin is using *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 5 vols. [London, 1966].)]

How can it have taken this long to see that when Colonel Brandon and Marianne finally get together, their first granddaughter will be Lesbia Brandon?

Even readings of Austen that are not so frankly repressive have tended to be structured by what Foucault calls “the repressive hypothesis”—especially so, indeed, to the degree that their project is avowedly *antirepressive*. And these antirepressive readings have their own way of re-creating the spectacle of the Girl Being Taught a Lesson. Call her, in this case, “Jane Austen.” The sight to be relished here is, as in psychoanalysis, the forcible exaction from her manifest text of what can only be the barest confession of a self-pleasuring sexuality, a disorder or subversion, seeping out at the edges of a political conservatism always presumed and therefore always available for violation. That virginal figure “Jane Austen,” in these narratives, is herself the punishable girl who “has to learn,” “has to be tutored”—in truths with which, though derived from a reading of Austen, the figure of “Jane Austen” can no more be credited than can, for their lessons, the figures “Marianne,” “Emma,” or, shall we say, “Dora” or “Anna O.”

It is partly to interrupt this seemingly interminable scene of punitive/pedagogical reading, interminably structured as it is by the concept of repression, that I want to make available the sense of an alternative, passionate sexual ecology—one fully available to Austen for her exciting, productive, and deliberate use, in a way it no longer is to us.

That is to say, it is no longer available to us *as passion*, even as its cynosural figure, the masturbating girl, is no longer visible as possessing a sexual identity capable of redefining and reorganizing her surround. We inherit it only in the residual forms of perception itself, of subjectivity itself, of institution itself. The last time I taught *Sense and Sensibility*, I handed out to my graduate class copies of some pages from the 1981 “Polysexuality” issue of *Semiotext(e)*, pages that reproduce without historical annotation what appears to be a late nineteenth-century medical case history in French, from which I have also been quoting here. I handed it out then for reasons no more transparent than those that have induced me to quote from it here—beyond the true but inadequate notation that even eight years after reading it, my memory of the piece wouldn’t let up its pressure on the gaze I was capable of levelling at the Austen novel. I hadn’t even the new historicist’s positivist alibi for perpetuating and disseminating the shock of the violent narratives in which they trade: “Deal,” don’t they seem tacitly but moralistically to enjoin, “deal with your own terror, your own arousal, your disavowals, in your own way, on

your own time, in your own [thereby reconstituted as invisible] privacy; it's not our responsibility, because *these awful things are real*." Surely I did want to spread around to a group of other readers, as if that would ground or diffuse it, the inadmissibly, inabsorably complex shock of this document. But the pretext of the real was austere withheld by the informal, perhaps only superficially, sensationalistic *Semiotext(e)* format, which refused to proffer the legitimating scholarly apparatus that would give any reader the assurance of "knowing" whether the original of this document was to be looked for in an actual nineteenth-century psychiatric archive or, alternatively and every bit as credibly, in a manuscript of pornographic fiction dating from any time—any time including the present—in the intervening century. Certainly plenty of the other pieces in that issue of *Semiotext(e)* are, whatever else they are, freshly minted and joltingly potent pornography; just as certainly, nothing in the 1881 document exceeds in any detail the known practices of late nineteenth-century medicine. And wasn't that part of the shock?—the total plausibility either way of the same masturbatory narrative, the same pruriently cool clinical gaze at it and violating hands and instruments on it, even (one might add) further along the chain, the same assimilability of it to the pseudo-distantiating relish of sophisticated contemporary projects of critique. Toward the site of the absent, distracted, and embarrassed attention of the masturbatory subject, the directing of a less accountable flood of discursive attention has continued. What is most astonishing is its continuing entirely unabated by the dissolution of its object, the sexual identity of "the masturbator" herself.

Through the frame of 1881/1981, it becomes easier to see how most of the love story of *Sense and Sensibility*, no simple one, has been rendered all but invisible to most readers, leaving a dryly static tableau of discrete moralized portraits, poised antitheses, and exemplary, deplorable, or regrettably necessary punishments, in an ascetic heterosexualizing context.¹ This tableau is what we now know as "Jane

1 As Mullan's *Sentiment and Sociability* suggests—and not only through the evocation of Austen's novel in its title—the eponymous antithesis "sense" versus "sensibility" is undone by, quite specifically, the way sensibility itself functions as a point of pivotal intersection, and potentially of mutual coverture, between alloerotic and autoerotic investments. Mullan would refer to these as "sociability" versus "isolation," "solipsism," or "hypochondria." He ignores specifically antimasturbatory medical campaigns in his discussion of late eighteenth-century medicine, but their relevance is clear enough in, for example, the discussion he does offer of the contemporaneous medical phenomenology of menstruation.

Menstruation is represented as an irregularity which takes the guise of a regularity; it is especially likely to signify a precarious [continued]

Austen”; fossilized residue of the now-subtracted autoerotic spectacle, “Jane Austen” is the name whose uncanny fit with the phrase “masturbating girl” today makes a *ne plus ultra* of the incongruous.

This history of impoverished “Jane Austen” readings is not the result of a failure by readers to “contextualize historically”: a new-historicizing point that you can’t understand *Sense and Sensibility* without entering into the alterity of a bygone masturbation phobia is hardly the one I am making. What alterity? I am more struck by how profoundly, how destructively twentieth-century readings are already shaped by the discourse of masturbation and its sequelae: *more* destructively than the novel is, even though onanism per se, and the phobia against it, are living issues in the novel as they no longer are today.

We can be the less surprised by the congruence as we see masturbation and the relations surrounding it as the proto-form of any modern “sexual identity,” thus as lending their structure to many vantages of subjectivity that have survived the definitional atrophy of the masturbator as an identity: pedagogic surveillance, as we have mentioned, homo/hetero divides, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, gynecology. The interpretive habits that make it so hard to register the erotics of *Sense and Sensibility* are deeply and familiarly encoded in the therapeutic or mock-therapeutic rhetoric of the 1881 document. They involve the immobilizing framing of an isolated sexual subject (a subject, that is, whose isolation is decreed by her identification with a nameable sexual identity), and her staging as a challenge or question addressed to an audience whose erotic invisibility is guaranteed by the same definitional stroke as their entitlement to intervene on the sexuality attributed to her. That it was this particular, apparently unitary and in some ways self-contained, autoerotic sexual identity that crystallized as the prototype of “sexual identity” made that isolating embodiment of “the sexual” easier, and made easier as

condition in the bodies of those for whom womanhood does not mean the life of the fertile, domesticated, married female. Those particularly at risk are the unmarried, the aging, and the sexually precocious.

The paradox, of course, is that to concentrate upon the palpitating, sensitized body of the woman caught in the difficult area between childhood and marriage is also to concede the dangers of this condition—those dangers which feature, in another form, in writings on hysteria. (Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, pp. 226, 228]

In *Epistemology of the Closet* (esp. pp. 141–81), I discuss at some length the strange historical career of the epithets “sentimentality” and “sensitivity,” in terms of the inflammatory and scapegoating mechanics of vicariation: of the coverture offered by these apparently static nouns to the most volatile readerly interchanges between the allo- and the auto-.

well a radical naturalization and erotic dematerialization of narrative point-of-view concerning it.

And the dropping out of sight in this century of the masturbatory identity has only, it seems, given more the authority of self-evidence to the scientific, therapeutic, institutional, and narrative relations originally organized around it. *Sense and Sensibility* resists such “progress” only in so far as we can succeed in making narratively palpable again, under the pressure of our own needs, the great and estranging force of the homoerotic longing magnetized in it by that radiant and inattentive presence—the female figure of the love that keeps forgetting its name.

(1991)