

“At Seventeen: Adolescence in *Sense and Sensibility*”

[Conventional readings of Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* tend to consider her from the point of view of temperament, as an embodiment of the Romantic “sensitivity” referenced in the novel’s title. This article suggests that such readings lack an important dimension: understanding of Marianne as an adolescent who experiences the usual trials of that crucial and often painful stage of development and moves gradually toward adulthood. Shawn Lisa Maurer argues that interpreting Marianne’s development from this perspective offers fresh insight into her character and into readers’ reactions to her character. She frames her argument within a history of evolving perspectives around the concept of adolescence.]

Abstract

Examining Jane Austen’s seventeen-year-old protagonist Marianne Dashwood as an adolescent provides new insight into how Austen presents, and how readers have responded to, Marianne’s emotions, behaviors, and eventual marriage to Colonel Brandon. I work against the conventional opposition of sense versus sensibility to posit instead a developmental progression from adolescence to adulthood. In this article, I show how Austen uses the imaginative space of the novel to depict adolescence by allowing her protagonist first to explore and then to grow out of the dangers associated with this stage of life. This thoroughgoing re-evaluation of Marianne’s character challenges the prevailing readings of *Sense and Sensibility*.

If adolescence as an observable stage of life has a long history,
adolescence as a distinct idea has a short one.

—Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea*¹

In *Sense and Sensibility*, the age of seventeen is the turning point
for unprotected females.

—Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*²

1 Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 7.

2 Claudia Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 56.

Not yet seventeen as *Sense and Sensibility* begins, Jane Austen's protagonist Marianne Dashwood falls midway between thirteen-year-old Margaret and the adult-seeming Elinor, whose physical age of nineteen is consistently belied by the mature role she must play within the family dynamic.¹ Neither child nor adult, Marianne falls into that liminal category we have, since the early twentieth century, termed "adolescence"²—a category that while previously subsumed under the broader heading of "youth," nevertheless functions to define many of the eighteenth century's important fictional protagonists.³ Since the publication of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1811, Marianne has been many things to many readers: she has exemplified literary, cultural, and philosophical perspectives from sensibility and the sentimental to Rousseauism, Romanticism, and revolution;⁴ she has embodied pathologies including hysteria and melancholia, autoerotic excess, somatization, and love-madness.⁵ Although many critics have paid close and careful attention to Marianne's public actions and private feelings, that attention has largely been framed within

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- 1 Although Emma Thompson was in her mid-thirties during the making of the 1995 film version of the novel, her portrayal of Elinor convinces because of our sense of that character's exceptional maturity.
 - 2 The term found broad usage with the publication in 1904 of G. Stanley Hall's ground-breaking study, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, and Religion*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1904).
 - 3 Notable examples include Samuel Richardson's Pamela and Clarissa, Henry Fielding's Joseph Andrews and Tom Jones, and Frances Burney's Evelina.
 - 4 For useful explications of the "sense and sensibility" dynamic, see Isobel Armstrong, *Sense and Sensibility* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994); and Ros Ballaster, introduction to *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, ed. Ballaster (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995). Tony Tanner discusses Marianne's "Romantic" and "Rousseauistic" convictions in his *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), while Johnson's analysis emphasizes Marianne's revolutionary heritage in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*.
 - 5 For readings of Marianne as embodying a form of melancholia linked to sexual hysteria, see George Haggerty, "The Sacrifice of Privacy in *Sense and Sensibility*," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7, no. 2 (1988): 221–37, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/463680>. Marianne is the focus in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," in *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 110–29; while John Wiltshire analyzes somatization—emotions "deposited in the body and there reproduced as illness symptoms" (13)—in *Jane Austen and the Body: "The picture of health"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Helen Small reads Marianne as both exemplifying and resisting the tropes of "love-madness" in *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

discussions of the tropes of “sense” and “sensibility” in all of their complex physical, mental, emotional, and moral implications. Yet no critic, to my knowledge, has explored the ways in which Marianne’s deeply felt emotions and selfish, often impulsive actions—regularly coded as sensibility—might also exemplify behaviors we now associate with the developmental stage of adolescence.¹

In this article, I address the ways in which what we now call adolescence provides a conceptual paradigm that can incorporate, yet also go beyond, the novel’s necessarily dichotomized poles of sense and sensibility, reason and passion—categories that ultimately cannot fully account for crucial tensions in how the novel represents, and how readers have responded to, Austen’s protagonist. Reading Marianne as an adolescent offers a way to understand not only Austen’s sometimes satirical presentation of her heroine, but also the mostly negative critical response to the novel’s ending.² I argue that rather than constituting an artistic or ideological failure, Marianne’s marriage to Colonel Brandon represents instead a painful process of maturation, a developmental progression from the intense emotions and dangerous passions associated with adolescence to the duties and responsibilities of adulthood. By explicating readers’ disappointment in that marriage as evidence of a historical shift in our views of adolescence, I locate Marianne Dashwood as a distinctly modern adolescent figure, whose transformation into “a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village,”³ evokes in many readers a deep sense of the lost possibilities inherent in her adolescent state. That is, we value and thus regret what Marianne has seemingly had to relinquish in order to achieve her present “adult” status: the fantasy of marriage to an idealized figure like Willoughby, and the romantic excess, the imaginative and sexual passion, as well as the naïveté that made such a fantasy possible—all characteristics of

1 While Spacks’s *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination* examines several of Austen’s novels, her study mentions *Sense and Sensibility* only in passing.

2 Marvin Mudrick claims that in the novel’s conclusion, Austen “buries” Marianne “in the coffin of convention” in what he sees as a failure of both the character of Marianne and Austen’s own artistic integrity. Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 91. Tanner takes a similarly negative view: claiming that “the way Marianne is disposed of at the end” constitutes the “weakest part of the book,” he contends that “Marianne does, in effect, die. Whatever the name of the automaton which submits to the plans of its relations and joins the social game, it is not the real Marianne” (100–1).

3 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. Kathleen James-Cavan (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2001), 380. References are to this edition.

adolescence as currently understood. Such a response, as I will argue, reveals much not only about the historical constructions of age and identity, but also about the imaginative possibilities of fiction itself.

As a theoretical category, adolescence has stayed largely beneath the critical radar, receiving little in the way of direct scrutiny from literary or historical scholars of the long eighteenth century. Thus, while childhood has been, and continues to remain, a significant focus of critical attention, the burgeoning field of childhood studies, which examines childhood and children's literature from a variety of literary and cultural perspectives, lacks a model for examining "adolescence" as a category both contained within and distinct from "childhood." This absence of critical discourse becomes strikingly evident in discussions of the eighteenth-century novel, itself an arguably adolescent genre. There are several reasons for this lacuna—reasons that are conceptual, historical, and methodological. First, there is the question of how to talk about a concept that did not exist as a discrete or recognizable category for Austen or her novelistic predecessors. Two hundred years ago, as Patricia Meyer Spacks reminds us, "no one spoke of adolescence. Moralists and educational theorists ... talked instead of 'youth,' a word capable of referring to any age from six to twenty-five."¹ According to Spacks, the lack of explicit terminology enabled writers of the period to blur and even to deny "the special social and psychological phenomena of puberty—of which, however, they remained quite aware."² Although the energy, passion, and unruliness long associated with this stage of life remained an important part of both didactic and imaginative literature of the period, these representations rested within a broader prescriptive framework that viewed adolescence as constituted within a necessary, if sometimes fraught, transition to adult life rather than as a distinct, and valued, developmental stage.³

Such a perspective is exemplified by one of the two conflicting historical models for describing the shift from childhood to adulthood in the pre-industrial and early modern world. Most closely associated with Philippe Ariès's famous study, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), this model posits a fast and secure transition to adult life, arguing

1 Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The Dangerous Age," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11, no. 4 (1978): 418, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2737964>.

2 Spacks, "Dangerous Age," 418.

3 Spacks elucidates these ideas in "The Dangerous Age" and expands on them in her subsequent study, *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination*; in addition, she explores generational tensions in relation to drama and fiction in "'Always at Variance': Politics of Eighteenth-Century Adolescence," in Spacks and W.B. Carnochan, *A Distant Prospect: Eighteenth-Century Views of Childhood* (UCLA: Clark Memorial Library, 1982).

“that before the nineteenth century the period of adolescence was virtually unknown, in theory as well as in practice,” and that “in past societies the young were integrated into adult society without ever developing a distinct generational consciousness.”¹ This perspective has been challenged by the work of demographic and other social historians who argue, by contrast, for adolescence as a necessary “prolongation of childhood” in a pre-industrial society structured by late marriage (mid-to-later twenties) and the subsequent delayed assumption of adult work and family responsibilities: “In early modern English society full participation in adult life was retarded, and legal, social and economic rights and obligations were accorded to the young only many years after they had reached puberty.”² And yet, despite their crucial differences, these opposing models of childhood, as well as subsequent, more specific historical studies of adolescence and youth, have contributed to the diminishment of adolescence as a distinct experiential and developmental category by defining adolescence almost exclusively in relation to the roles and authority of adulthood.³ This limited historiographic framework, which privileges hierarchy and engagement with figures of authority over adolescents’ own emotional responses to events, relationships, and experiences, has also shaped scholarship in the field of childhood studies which, when it attends to adolescence at all, has followed a similar trend, reading fictional depictions of adolescent characters primarily in relation to parent-child relations.⁴

There is, however, as I argue in this essay, another form in which adolescence exists in the eighteenth century. The inventive literary structures created by prose fiction and the developing, not to say developmental, novel in particular make possible a conception of “adolescence” as a category that is psychological, social, and cultural—a phase of life with its own pleasures, dangers, and difficulties, and which bears importance not only for individual characters, but also for society more broadly. By creating an imaginative, and potentially subversive, social space in which to stage adolescence by exploring the emotions, concerns, confusions, and desires associated with adolescent development, the novel thereby makes visible and in part codifies a stage of life which, while always observable,

1 Ilana Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 4, 3.

2 Ben-Amos, 5. The quoted phrase comes from historian Keith Thomas.

3 See, for example, Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

4 This perspective is exemplified, for example, in the title and focus of T.G.A. Nelson, *Children, Parents, and the Rise of the Novel* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995).

had remained largely uncharted as an idea and a desirable epistemological category, particularly within the larger prescriptive mode of eighteenth-century conduct literature. In sermons, treatises, and letters addressed to parents, educators, and the young themselves, “youthful passions” represent that which must be controlled, tamed, dampened. Throughout these didactic works, adulthood is the goal, and that adulthood must be achieved by avoiding, rather than learning from, the dangerous feelings and risky behaviors associated with youth.¹ By contrast, the expressive imaginative space created by fiction offers a means through which to constitute adolescent identity by exposing and exploring, often in great depth, the internal and emotional aspects of adolescent experience. While conduct literature counsels the avoidance of danger through suppressing the possibility of experience, fiction provides a place in which characters might undergo and assimilate precisely such perilous experiences, experiences that in turn become available to readers in new ways. Austen’s depiction of Marianne Dashwood makes recognizable both the intense emotions and the eventual process of maturation we have come to associate with adolescence; such a developmental model allows for an understanding of Marianne that moves beyond the necessarily static opposition of sense versus sensibility.

Adolescent Sensibilities

Marianne Dashwood’s own highly self-conscious, and frequently self-serving, alignment with the codes of sensibility, already on the wane in the 1790s, has made her an obvious target for authorial satire and formed an important focus of scholarly debate.² At the same time, this shared critical emphasis on the “scolding and schooling” of Marianne,³ the belief that her excessive sensibility is something that must, in the course of the novel, be punished, purged, corrected, or transformed, exists in tandem with other, more sympathetic or

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- 1 See Spacks’s reading of eighteenth-century didactic works in “Dangerous Age” and *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination*.
 - 2 See, for example, Mary Poovey’s claim that Marianne’s function as an avatar of the cult of sensibility can serve to educate the novel’s readers into their own, “proper” readings of the world in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 183–94. See also Johnson’s reading of Marianne as a self-styled sentimental heroine who, by resisting a tragic ending, represents a progressive critique of conservative ideology (esp. 64–69).
 - 3 Barbara K. Seeber, “‘I See Every Thing As You Desire Me to Do’: The Scolding and Schooling of Marianne Dashwood,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11, no. 2 (1999): 223–33, doi:10.1353/ecf.1999.0042.

unresolved responses to Marianne's experiences.¹ Particularly during and after her near-fatal illness, the novel presents Marianne as an object of compassion in a manner at odds with the novel's broader critique of her sentimental excesses. Yet the tropes of sense and sensibility, while clearly a crucial part of our understanding of both the novel and the character of Marianne, cannot sufficiently account for this ambivalence, in large part because the terms themselves and their association with the novel's sisters remain polarized, despite recent laudable attempts to historicize, and thereby complicate, their literary and cultural meanings.²

As framed initially within an explicit association to sense, in the case of Elinor, or sensibility, in the case of Marianne, the sisters' process of change in the course of the novel remains horizontal: as Elinor learns to express and Marianne to control feeling, each sister moves closer to the opposite pole in cultivating the qualities of the other. At the same time, and particularly for those readers who disparage the novel's ending, there is a necessarily either/or quality to this process, at least for Marianne: in learning to reflect, Marianne must seemingly renounce feeling, as the quintessentially dualistic nature of these terms, and the period's privileging of sense over sensibility, of reason over passion, of self-control over self-expression, admits little genuine integration. By contrast, plotting Marianne's behaviors and responses against an adolescent grid enables us to address the considerable overlap between sensibility and adolescence while simultaneously placing those shared characteristics into a more evolutionary framework. As a term that itself evolved to describe, and ultimately to criticize, the largely unchanging "complexities and rhythms of [characters'] own experience of perception,"³ sensibility cannot fully account for the more dynamic psychological attributes I associate with adolescence. Diachronic rather than synchronic, a theory of adolescence entails movement through time, allowing for the possibility of change that is developmental as well as character-related. *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel explicitly concerned with time: with characters' ages, with the changing seasons, with months and even days. Escaping the stasis of sensibility through the notion of

1 See for example, Marilyn Butler, who argues that "in flat opposition to the author's obvious intention," Marianne "has our sympathy: she, and our responses to her, are outside Jane Austen's control." Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 196. In *Love's Madness*, Small notes the conflicts between the text's ability to "ironize and deprecate" Marianne's feelings while making a passionate claim for their sincerity (95–96).

2 See Armstrong; and Ballaster.

3 Ballaster, xiv.

temporal progression, adolescence provides a conceptual framework that can incorporate change through its linking of past experience with present behavior. In this way, the novel creates an important distinction between Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood, in that the daughter transforms in the course of the novel whereas the mother remains the same—her immaturity based in character rather than developmental stage.

Marianne's development in the course of the novel also distinguishes her from her older sister Elinor. Although falling, at the age of 19, within the range of adolescence (twenty-first-century development researchers use the early twenties as a general ending point),¹ Elinor seems, nevertheless, a fully-formed adult—indeed more of an adult than her own mother. As such, she represents a model eighteenth-century adolescent, who is “indistinguishable from someone twice her age.”² She is described in the novel's first chapter as possessing “a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence”; Elinor's ability to govern her own feelings sets her apart both from her mother and from Marianne, whose “strikingly great” resemblance to each other serves to highlight Elinor's exceptional maturity (44).³ Replacing not only her immature mother but also her recently deceased father, living “in a state of perpetual social alertness”⁴ in which scrupulous attention to propriety and to the needs and feelings of others enables her to manage her own powerful emotions, Elinor exemplifies an eighteenth-century ideal of adolescence that is, in effect, no adolescence at all.

Marianne speaks to a more forward-looking view, in which the energies, attitudes, and behaviors of adolescence, as well as its egocentrism, its freedoms and lack of responsibility, become valued for their own sake. This rebellion, whether against parental authority or societal norms, is not viewed as something to be stamped out and punished, as dangerous blots on the road to adulthood.⁵ Rather, these

1 “The Teen Brain: Still under Construction,” National Institute of Mental Health (2011), <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-teen-brain-still-under-construction/index.shtml>.

2 Spacks, “Dangerous Age,” 436.

3 As John Wiltshire points out, when Mrs. Dashwood selfishly positions herself as Marianne's “sympathising sister,” she impels Elinor to stand “*in loco parentis*,” as the “alliance of mother and younger daughter forces Elinor into a position where she must appear older than her years” (26).

4 Armstrong, 90.

5 See Spacks, “Dangerous Age.”

qualities may be viewed as positive, if potentially problematic. The disappointment in the novel's ending, Marianne's change as a stifling of her energies and desires,¹ can be read in this context as our own dissatisfaction with the demands of adulthood, our longing for the passionate ideals that Marianne had earlier embodied. Long before she "falls" to Willoughby, the narrative describes Marianne as possessing the intense energies—mental, emotional, and sexual—associated with adolescence both in Austen's day and our own. Although her "abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's," she is, by contrast, "eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation" (44). Opinionated, self-indulgent, self-centered and demanding, she is also enthusiastic, affectionate, and loyal, with a "vital core of real spontaneity"² that contributes to her "striking" physical form (82) and powerful sexual appeal, which, as her half-brother John Dashwood notes, was especially "likely to attract the men" (244).³ Marianne's language and syntax further contribute to our view of her highly charged emotional state.⁴ A quintessential drama queen, Marianne does often speak in the overstated idiom usually associated with contemporary teenagers.

In the three sections that follow, I employ the descriptive categories of "storm and stress," part of early twentieth-century adolescent psychology as posited initially by G. Stanley Hall,⁵ to supply a

1 See, for example, Poovey: "At the end of the novel, Austen ushers Marianne into Brandon's world of diminished desires in such a way as to make Marianne herself negate everything she has previously wanted to have and to be" (189).

2 Margaret Anne Doody, introduction to *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, ed. James Kingsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), xix.

3 For an analysis of the "latent eroticism" in Marianne's physical behaviors, see Deborah Kaplan, "Achieving Authority: Jane Austen's First Published Novel," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 37, no. 4 (1983): 531–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3044682>. For the relation of Austen's depictions of female sexuality to broader sexual norms, see Jan Fergus, "Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen's Novels," in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (Totowa: Barnes and Noble, 1981), 66–85.

4 For an analysis of Marianne's speech, see P. Gila Reinsteint, "Moral Priorities in *Sense and Sensibility*," *Renaissance: Essays on Values in Literature* 35, no. 4 (1983): 269–83, Periodicals Archive Online Proquest, <http://tinyurl.com/cve577j>.

5 Although Hall's belief in adolescence as a universal period of heightened "storm and stress" has since been contested and refined, the concept remains valid for many psychologists: writing in 1999, Jeffrey Arnett argues for a "modified storm-and-stress view" in which "adolescence is the period when storm and stress is *more likely* to occur than at other ages" (317). Arnett, "Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered," *American* [continued]

developmental framework and emotional vocabulary not yet codified in Austen's time. Like Goethe's Werther, another adolescent whose sufferings have been conventionally viewed within the context of sensibility, Austen's Marianne lives in a world of heightened emotions and life-threatening angst. Not only does Marianne exemplify the conflict with parents, risk behavior, and mood disruptions that define adolescent "storm and stress,"¹ but she also epitomizes the theory's recognition of adolescence as a life stage fraught with particular challenges, the "idea that adolescence is a period of life that is ... more difficult in some ways than other periods of life and difficult for adolescents as well as for the people around them."² Throughout the novel, Austen presents Marianne as experiencing difficulties that are as much internally as externally created. Thus while Elinor suffers from the painful knowledge of Edward's engagement and from the need to keep such knowledge secret, Marianne, by contrast, suffers from and nearly kills herself through an indulgence in her own anguish. Eventually Marianne learns to temper and control her debilitating emotions, but the novel first provides her a space in which to feel them, just as it provides a stage upon which she can indulge in behaviors that represent enormous social risks. In Austen's world, the need for stability, both financial and psychological, largely foreclosed young women's ability to engage in any kinds of risk-taking behavior. Austen recognized that female agency and energy were exciting yet also terrifying—dangerous and potentially disruptive not only to the young woman herself, but also to her family and community. Precisely because the stakes were so high, especially for women, there could be no social space in which to be adolescent. Yet Austen's novel provides Marianne Dashwood with exactly that space—first to inhabit and subsequently to grow out of.

Paradoxically, however, that space is created—indeed made possible—by the very narrative techniques that critics have traditionally read as distancing us from, rather than connecting us to, Austen's adolescent heroine. Most noticeable, of course, is the overtly mocking attitude that readers have long associated with the novel's broader critique of Marianne's excessive sensibility. Yet I contend that such satire constitutes less a dismissal than an investment—an opportunity to explore the very emotional and psychological states that the narrative voice so playfully ridicules. The novel's gently deprecating quality provides the means through which both the narrator and we

Psychologist 54, no. 5 (1999): 317–26, doi:10.1037/0003-066X.54.5.317. I am grateful to Alison Bryant Ludden for this reference.

1 Arnett, 319.

2 Arnett, 319.

as readers might freely scrutinize Marianne's extremity of feeling. What Austen does rhetorically through narrative voice, we do now through life-stage labels: "terrible twos," "teenage years," "mid-life crisis," "menopausal"—developmental constructs that enable us to explain, and in important ways to contain, incomprehensible forms of "acting out."

At the same time, and particularly in relation to Marianne's interactions with Willoughby, the novel provides surprisingly little direct access to Marianne's intimate thoughts. Refusing to employ narrative techniques, such as free indirect discourse, that would allow readers the kind of closeness to Marianne that readers often feel for Elinor, the narrative keeps readers at a critical and sometimes unsympathetic distance from Marianne's actions and behaviors,¹ in part by limiting the way in which we understand Marianne: in most cases, we view her either through a narrative voice aligned with Elinor's point of view or through the judgmental eyes of Elinor herself. In her depiction of Marianne, then, Austen employs narrative structures that function to inhibit rather than create the kind of sympathy we regularly feel for Elinor. And yet, ironically, forms of narrative distancing also serve to create a literal and sometimes "off stage" space for Marianne's problematic and even potentially scandalous actions, especially in regard to Willoughby. By foregoing the accountability that comes with direct dialogue and choosing instead to represent those perilous interactions at arm's length—overseen, overhead, or even transpiring unseen, as in the visit to Allenhurst—Austen's structure reveals the author's own ambivalence as it negotiates the tensions between possibility and condemnation.

In addition to creating the narrative space within which to depict Marianne's adolescent behaviors, forms of narrative withholding—keeping back crucial information from Marianne herself and from the novel's reader—serve a broader psychological purpose in highlighting the egocentrism associated with adolescent identity formation.² Thus, for example, by prohibiting Marianne the same direct

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- 1 See Butler, who writes that "Marianne's unwonted secrecy, after Willoughby has left Barton, and after her arrival in London, functions quite as effectively in restricting the reader's sympathy as in restricting Elinor's" (196); and Poovey, who analyzes how Austen's use of "indirect narration" of the novel's most emotional scenes, including those between Marianne and Willoughby, prevents the reader from "being allowed to identify with Marianne" (187). See also Doody, who notes that Austen's shift from the epistolary form of the earlier "Elinor and Marianne," written in the mid-1790s, to a third-person narrative functions further to distance readers from Marianne (xix).
 - 2 See, for example, Erik Erickson's description of "Identity vs. Role Confusion" in *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1963), 261–63.

and intimate access to Elinor's painful situation afforded the reader, the novel's structure accentuates Marianne's egotism, in particular her erroneously self-centred belief that "everything that happens in the novel, happens first to her."¹ Equally powerfully, the narrative's distancing mechanisms create emotional experiences for the novel's readers, who experience in Marianne the self-silencing, emotional withholding, and psychological withdrawal we have come to associate with adolescence.

"She used to be all unreserve": Conflict with Parents

The youthful conflict with parents and authority figures, particularly as expressed in rebellion and resistance to "adult authority,"² has long been a hallmark of adolescent unruliness.³ As rebellious as overt insurrection, I argue, is Marianne's emotional withdrawal, a self-imposed silence that serves to separate her from the family members who love her as well as to intensify her isolation and dejection. Such withdrawal, part of Marianne's stage of life, is made possible in large part by the forms of narrative distancing that both reflect and manifest Austen's attitude towards her adolescent heroine. Significantly, Austen depicts Marianne as beginning the novel in an almost perfect similitude with her "romantic" mother. Abdicating parental authority and responsibility, Mrs. Dashwood fails to temper Marianne's "excess of ... sensibility," instead indulging it as something to be "valued and cherished" (44). Refusing to govern her own powerful feelings, Mrs. Dashwood can exert no controlling influence on her daughter's emotional extremes; in mourning the death of Mr. Dashwood and their eviction from Norland, mother and daughter incite each other's "increase of wretchedness" and support each other's immature resolution "against ever admitting consolation in future" (45). Here, as throughout the novel, Austen presents such self-indulgence in direct contrast to the self-control of Elinor who, although herself "deeply afflicted," can nevertheless "struggle," "exert," and even "encourage"—if unsuccessfully—others to act the same (45).

Before the novel even begins, then, we see Elinor as having achieved an adult status founded mainly upon her clear distinction from Mrs. Dashwood. Austen portrays Marianne's own separation process as far more vexed, owing in part to the fact that she has, in her mother at least, seemingly little to separate from. Unlike Colonel Brandon's cousin Eliza, who rebels against the patriarchal tyranny of

1 Ballaster, viii.

2 Arnett, 319.

3 See Ben-Amos, 16–19.

uncle and guardian through her attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to elope with the man she loves, Marianne's immediate attraction to the handsome and romantic Willoughby—so different from the unprepossessing Edward or the “silent and grave” Colonel Brandon (71)—is shared initially by her entire family, as his “manly beauty and more than common gracefulness were instantly the theme of general admiration” (79). Although Elinor often questions Marianne's unreserved behavior towards Willoughby (a point I will return to in the following section), she never doubts his suitability as an object of her sister's romantic affections; while Mrs. Dashwood, on her part identifying with her daughter's situation, comes quickly to expect their marriage much in the way she had earlier predicted Elinor's own union, “and secretly to congratulate herself on having gained two such sons-in-law as Edward and Willoughby” (85).

Austen formulates Marianne's filial conflict as transpiring not in terms of the man she chooses to love but rather in the way that she conducts their very public courtship: specifically, in the information that she seemingly withholds from both sister and mother about the exact nature of their attachment, information that, as noted above, is also kept from the reader. The exclusive and increasingly intimate nature of Marianne's interactions with Willoughby leads even the sceptical Elinor to believe that what she witnesses between them must be evidence of a formal commitment: “she doubted not of their being engaged to each other; and the belief of it created no other surprise, than that she, or any of their friends, should be left by tempers so frank, to discover it by accident” (94). Thus the silence that becomes increasingly disconcerting to Elinor functions, even before Willoughby's unexpected departure from Barton Cottage, to separate Marianne from the rest of her family. Marianne's ostensible lack of disclosure—even if she has, at this point, nothing to tell—positions her as standing apart not only from the sister whose opinion about public displays of affection differs so greatly from her own, but also, and even more significantly, from the mother who had previously shared wholeheartedly in her interactions with Willoughby, “enter[ing] into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking this excessive display of them” (89).

Unlike Mrs. Dashwood, and in spite of the seeming “evidence”¹ provided by the lock-cutting episode or the surreptitious visit to Allenham, Elinor remains troubled by the “extraordinary silence” that seems so powerfully at odds with the lovers' dispositions and actions: “Why they should not openly acknowledge to her mother and herself, what their constant behavior to each other declared to

1 See Armstrong's analysis of “Knowing and Spying” in section 4 of her study.

have taken place, Elinor could not imagine" (105). Throughout these crucial chapters, Elinor's attempt to understand her sister's situation, which is intensified on the narrative level by the use of free indirect discourse to provide unmediated access to Elinor's thoughts while withholding those of Marianne, functions to highlight what seems to Elinor to be the unaccountable nature of the couple's "strange" silence (105). Yet once Willoughby leaves Devonshire, Austen transforms the couple's collective silence, disconcerting as it may have been to Elinor, into Marianne's own "violent sorrow" (110)—a far more powerful physical, emotional, as well as verbal withdrawal from her family. While Marianne's intense, uncontrolled, and indulgent grief over Willoughby's departure mimics her earlier response to her father's death, this time she mourns alone, without the comfort or encouragement of the mother who had previously participated so fully in her daughter's sorrows and her joys. Because the narrative continues to keep from us Marianne's thoughts about Willoughby, so that we obtain not information but simply what one critic has aptly called the "stag[ing] of her distress,"¹ we are left with Elinor and Mrs. Dashwood to speculate on the real reasons behind Willoughby's behavior. Increasingly frustrated by her sister's prolonged grief and continued silence, Elinor approaches her mother with a "direct" and "simple" method for "knowing the real state of the affair"—confronting Marianne directly: "Why do you not ask Marianne at once ... whether she is or she is not engaged to Willoughby? From you, her mother, and so kind, so indulgent a mother, the question could not give offense. It would be the natural result of your affection for her. She used to be all unreserve, and to you more especially" (116).

While the subsequent narrative repetition confirms Elinor's belief in the misguided nature of her mother's refusal, in which "common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood's romantic delicacy" (116), what seems equally important is Marianne's own self-silencing. From being depicted as "all unreserve," particularly, as Elinor notes, with her mother, Marianne has retreated into a state of melancholy detachment, of "solitary walks and silent meditations" (115). Despite the fact that, as she later tells Elinor in London, "We have neither of us any thing to tell; you, because you do not communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing"

1 As Small writes, "*Sense and Sensibility* continually reminds us that Marianne is acting the role of suffering romantic heroine. Always the same charge is laid against her, explicitly and implicitly: that she indulges, feeds, courts her grief, inflicts it on other people, indeed that she can measure it by the pain it gives to others" (94–95). As argued throughout, I read such "staging" as one manifestation of Marianne's adolescent state.

(193), Marianne does literally conceal “no thing”—the nothing that is her non-engagement to Willoughby. Keeping this knowledge to herself is on one level an act of self-protection: by refusing to reveal her uncertain status to others, she can retain her self-respect by holding on to the expectation that Willoughby will make good on the promise implicit in his behavior. On a deeper level, acknowledging the truth of the situation would also mean admitting the potential danger in her own, passionately held belief system, a system that Elinor had earlier described as “hav[ing] all the unfortunate tendency of setting propriety at nought” (91). In the silence that functions to isolate Marianne from her concerned family and from the reader, Marianne can attempt to deny, and Austen to depict, the significant risks and potential harm, especially to Marianne herself, of her norm-breaking behavior. As channelled largely through the perspective of Elinor, whose heightened awareness of and respect for social duty form a crucial part of her “adult” status, Marianne’s own blatant disregard for the opinions and feelings of others—she “abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve” (88) and refused to engage in “telling lies when politeness required” (149)—has largely been read as a manifestation of the selfishness inherent in her excessive sensibility. While this perspective is clearly not incorrect, it may also be incomplete: that is, Marianne’s ability to set “propriety at nought” and thereby engage in “reckless, norm-breaking, and anti-social behavior” that “carries the potential for harm”¹ might also be interpreted as a symptom of her tumultuous adolescence.

“Setting propriety at nought”: Risk Behavior

As a result of her own intractable “temper” (93) and her mother’s indulgence, Marianne is depicted, often satirically, as passionately opinionated in her beliefs and desires. We are of course meant to find ludicrous her conviction, as a seventeen-year-old, that “At my time of life opinions are tolerably fixed. It is not likely that I should now see or hear any thing to change them” (123). Yet such presumption, by revealing Marianne’s belief that she has nothing to learn, also presents a direct attack on a social structure that valued hierarchy and thus youthful deference to adult authority, authority gained through the experience that accompanied adulthood. As an adolescent, in other words, Marianne attacks social norms by making a claim that should rightfully belong only to those adults who have gained the wisdom of experience. Such overconfidence, as conduct literature

1 Arnett, 319.

was relentlessly fond of pointing out, could be highly dangerous, particularly for young women whose reputation, and thus marital eligibility and economic future, depended on the outward performance of feminine modesty. Austen's novel in many ways follows these proscriptions: it is precisely Marianne's extreme and untrammelled openness of expression, her refusal to brook criticism or any possible modification of her belief system, that make her especially vulnerable to emotional manipulation by the dangerously attractive Willoughby. And yet remarkably, the novel also permits Marianne to give way to desire, to act impulsively, even imprudently, to ignore the potential consequences of her behavior without, in turn, explicitly condemning that behavior.¹ Austen allows Marianne to enact many of the kinds of risk-taking behaviors we have come to associate with adolescence in part by calling attention to the very adolescent nature of those behaviors. Refusing to take Marianne as seriously as she takes herself, Austen's satirical distance mitigates the power and potential threat of Marianne's actions, much in the way that we roll our eyes at teenagers' current obsessions or bad behaviors as constituting "just a stage."

Yet the narrative, which criticizes even as it describes Marianne's behavior, reveals as well a powerful suspicion regarding precisely such adolescent forms of social and sexual indiscretion. Throughout the novel, particularly in her interactions with Willoughby, Marianne recognizes but refuses to accept the impropriety, and thus potential danger, of her own behavior. Austen depicts Marianne as consciously, indeed joyfully, repudiating those rules of female decorum that she considers stuffy, outmoded, even ridiculous. Thus the physical exuberance that led to her seemingly fortuitous fall to Willoughby is matched by a verbal outpouring in which "she had neither shyness nor reserve in their discussion" (82). Throughout the exchange in which they soon "conversed with the familiarity of long-established acquaintance," Marianne is the actor and Willoughby the acted upon; from music and dancing "she proceeded to question him on the subject of books; her favorite authors were brought forward and dwelt upon with so rapturous a delight, that any young man of five and twenty must have been insensible indeed, not to become an immediate convert to the excellence of such works, however disregarded before" (83). The one-sided nature of their encounter—as she questions, brings forward, and dwells, he is converted by her zeal—is

1 See, by contrast, the overt and consistent denunciation of *Pride and Prejudice*'s "vain, ignorant, idle, and absolutely uncontrouled" adolescent Lydia Bennet. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, ed. Vivien Jones (London: Penguin, 1996/2003), 223.

misinterpreted by Marianne as mutuality, despite the narrator's tongue-in-cheek emphasis on the fact that Willoughby is affected as much by Marianne's looks as by her ideas: "Their taste was strikingly alike. The same books, the same passages were idolized by each—or if any difference appeared, any objection arose, it lasted no longer than till the force of her arguments and the brightness of her eyes could be displayed. He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm" (83). Yoking powerful arguments with beautiful eyes, the narrative alerts the reader to Austen's own recognition of something that Marianne, in her adolescent eagerness, cannot yet see for herself—namely, the danger of mistaking the acquiescence born of flirtation for genuine exchange.

In the subsequent conversation between the sisters, Elinor herself takes on the narrative's semi-mocking tone in her gentle reproach to Marianne, whose response reveals first-hand the very excess the narrator had earlier described: "I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull and deceitful:—had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared" (83). Yet Marianne's exaggerated dismissal of "every common-place notion of decorum" actually misses the point—on several levels. As Elinor's own exchanges with Edward Ferrars have already revealed, it is possible to be "open and sincere" without being "spiritless" or "dull"; all of Austen's novels display ways in which forms of genuine exchange between men and women can transpire even amid the requirements of social duty. Moreover, Austen uses Marianne's hyperbolic response to show her character's adolescent inability to acknowledge the kind of middle ground represented by Elinor—namely, the possible value of social restraint, as well as the potential consequences of its refusal. Although under the terms of Marianne's own system, to have held back her feelings would have constituted the deceit, her unmediated self-disclosure problematically sets her up for Willoughby's own deceitful manipulations. Willoughby catches her enthusiasm, but it is she who becomes caught in his trap by naively believing his performance to be wholly sincere.¹

The fact that Austen understands, but cannot sanction, the emotional need that drives Marianne's psychological abandon allows us to read from the perspective of adults, to be ourselves caught up in Marianne's enthusiasm while remaining, in contrast to Marianne herself, aware of its imminent dangers. Although Marianne claims to "abhor" Sir John Middleton's vulgarity in stating that she is "setting

1 See Doody's analysis of Willoughby as a "hunter" (xxviii–xxx).

[her] cap" at Willoughby (81), she has herself breached the norms of respectability in her avid pursuit of a man, a fact she continually denies or disregards. We see, therefore, that much like Willoughby, Marianne is also engaged in a performance, one driven by both youthful naïveté and her adolescent need to be recognized and loved. As an object of desire to the novel's most desirable bachelor, who exemplifies physical and sexual energy—"not a bolder rider in England," according to Sir John (80)—Marianne can establish, in the most public of ways, her emerging sexual subjectivity. At the same time, we see the intense narcissism of their encounters: she loves him because he mirrors back herself, albeit in male form.¹ To Marianne, Willoughby appears perfect ("Every thing he did, was right. Every thing he said, was clever" [88]) because the studied reciprocity of "his animated admiration of her" (88) provides the assurance of her own self-worth.

In Willoughby, Marianne actively seeks a relationship that can confirm her sexual attraction and solidify her tenuous class position by potentially culminating in marriage to a landed gentleman of £2000 a year. Yet Marianne's progression into womanhood does not end in genteel marriage—at least not in marriage to Willoughby himself. As the "false step" (78) that results in her rescue by Willoughby implies—what Sir John more crudely refers to as "all this tumbling about and spraining of ancles" (81)—Marianne's unguarded behavior results in serious sexual impropriety. And yet, while the errors she commits would, according to Marilyn Butler, "almost certainly" have caused contemporary conservative novelists to have "Marianne seduced and killed off,"² she nevertheless lives to tell the tale, to grow up and take her place at Colonel Brandon's side. Yet to facilitate this maturation process, the novel must remain curiously reticent about, and largely uncritical of, Marianne's numerous transgressions. Thus we see most of the interactions between Marianne and Willoughby at a narrative distance: either reported by the narrator, whose language records, yet does not necessarily condemn, the "exquisite enjoyment" (84) of Marianne's own feelings; or filtered through what others have overheard (Willoughby promising to save his horse Queen Mab for Marianne) or overseen (Willoughby cutting a lock of Marianne's hair).

Even in depicting Marianne's most egregious risk, the unchaperoned visit to Allenham that critics have viewed as a serious breach of

1 As Butler writes, "Just as Marianne has no doubts about herself, so she can have none about her *alter ego*, Willoughby" (187).

2 Butler mentions "Mrs. West, Mrs. Hamilton, or the young Maria Edgeworth" (189).

both sexual and social decorum,¹ the narrative adopts the lovers' own vague and "general terms" to describe their excursion, noting only that they "both seemed delighted with their drive" (101). Austen's use of the nosy Mrs. Jennings to disclose their destination carries on that sense of pleasure by emphasizing not censure but an opportunity for gleeful raillery: "I have found you out, despite all your tricks," she teases them, calling Willoughby "Mr. Impudence" and telling Marianne that "I hope you like your house" (101). Although Marianne is embarrassed, turning away "in great confusion" from Mrs. Jennings's disclosure, the older woman nevertheless provides Marianne with a powerful public confirmation of her adult status in the projected (if ultimately ironic) possession of Willoughby's future inheritance: "your house." Although Elinor alone attempts to confront Marianne about whether she might now "doubt the discretion of [her] own conduct," their conversation goes nowhere, as Marianne's admitting that her visit may have been "ill-judged" is followed immediately by her delighted description of Allenham itself (102–3).

Through these rhetorical strategies, Austen allows Marianne to engage in the risk behavior we have come to associate with adolescent development without, in turn, being tainted by that behavior. Marianne, that is, can play with fire and, while she cannot escape being singed, can attain an adult marital status that distinguishes her not only from the erring heroines of the late eighteenth-century novels discussed by Butler, but also from such exemplars as Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*. What makes this process possible is the displacement of the seduced and abandoned plot onto two characters who, while relegated to the novel's margins, exert a powerful ripple effect on the novel's characters, female as well as male. At the "dangerous age" of seventeen, both Colonel Brandon's beloved cousin Eliza and her daughter are "lost ... for ever" (225), exposed to temptations they cannot overcome: the former to adultery and the latter to seduction that also results in pregnancy. While the sins of the mother are clearly visited upon the daughter, both Eliza Brandon and her daughter Eliza Williams are also likened to Marianne herself: the former by Colonel Brandon, who tells Elinor that "I once knew a lady who in temper and mind greatly resembled your sister, who thought and judged like her" (91), and the latter by both the Colonel and by Willoughby, who describes Marianne's affection for himself as "scarcely less warm" than that of the seventeen-year-old he had earlier seduced and abandoned (330). As Margaret Anne Doody has observed, the presence of the two Elizas makes possible Marianne's

1 On sexual danger, see Kaplan, 542. Doody notes Marianne's "sins of insensitivity, greed, and callous calculation" (xxxii).

own sexual subjectivity: “Marianne possesses sexual appetite and sensitivity, and she chooses the man she could prefer, blind to the social likelihood that a man in Willoughby’s position might truly wish her for a sexual partner for a time, without wishing to marry her. Marianne is spared the trials of the seduced woman—the Elizas stand in for her, in undergoing those traumas.”¹

By marrying Marianne, Colonel Brandon can in effect rewrite, and thereby allow the novel to recuperate and contain, the narrative of adolescent sexual danger embodied by the two Elizas. Yet in order for such rewriting to become possible, Austen must first emphasize other, also adolescent traumas Marianne must undergo—suffering brought on by Willoughby’s abrupt abandonment, by her lack of knowledge about his intentions, by her inability to reconcile his marriage to Miss Grey with his previous affection for her. Traumatized as well by his treatment of Eliza Williams, and by the implications of such “loss of ... character” (231) for his behavior towards herself, she must ultimately come to terms with the brutal fact that although he did love her, “he did not love her enough to marry her.”² In the aftermath of Willoughby’s departure, Marianne endures severe mental anguish that is both manifested in and intensified by physical debilitation, suffering that culminates in her near-fatal and largely self-induced illness at Cleveland. Although such suffering has generally been interpreted as the self-indulgent excesses of sensibility, Austen’s narrative representation proffers a different, more developmental possibility—that we might attribute Marianne’s physical and mental distresses to the volatility and emotional susceptibility associated with adolescence.

“This violent oppression of spirits”: Mood Disruptions

Throughout the novel, Marianne both experiences and indulges a powerful form of adolescent angst. Like many adolescents, Marianne takes her suffering seriously. Although the narrative repeatedly filters such suffering through the lens of satire, Austen’s detailed depictions of Marianne’s physical and psychological disease function to grant credence to Marianne’s excessive passions even while mocking them. Although the novel cannot share Marianne’s emotional egocentrism, expressed in her unqualified belief in the value of intense and uncontrolled feeling, the narrative’s own representation of her powerful emotions creates a structure through which to explore them, a structure that can, in turn, present such emotional experience as part

1 Doody, xvi.

2 Armstrong, 77.

of a broader developmental process. By first granting Marianne a space in which to feel and act out the often overwhelming and sometimes even life-threatening emotions associated with adolescence, the novel can subsequently show how her ability to control those feelings represents a necessary part of the transition to adulthood. Critical attention to Marianne's distress has concentrated on two climactic episodes from the latter half of the novel: Marianne's receipt, in Mrs. Jennings's London home, of the letter from Willoughby that causes her to "almost [scream] with agony" (204) and, in the third volume, the "putrid" infection that almost kills Marianne during the sisters' stay at Cleveland.¹ Yet these scenes of intense emotion and of physical and mental incapacity are preceded by comparable, if somewhat less intense, depictions of Marianne's behavior on other, earlier occasions: the reaction to her father's sudden death and to the family's forced departure from Norland as well as the parallel response to Willoughby's subsequent, and perhaps equally unexpected, abandonment of Marianne in Devonshire. In these earlier sections, Austen's presentation of Marianne's "violent oppression of spirits" (114) allows for emotional reactions that are both self-consciously created and genuinely felt: "She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with an 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" (115).² While clearly functioning to parody sentimental excess, the narrative voice also uses Marianne's intense "indulgence of feeling" (115) to explore in great detail the exaggerated affect, lack of emotional self-control, and tendency towards episodes of depression that we now associate with adolescence.³

Austen's critique encompasses Marianne's considerable lows and her proportionally manic highs. As a character who possesses "no moderation" in either "sorrows" or "joys" (44), Marianne consistently demonstrates the "extremes of mood and the ... swings of mood from one extreme to the other" correlated with adolescence.⁴ In an early example of such reversal, Marianne is forced to give up her "continual seclusion" for a nevertheless silent walk with her sisters. Spying in the distance a figure she believes to be Willoughby, Marianne quickly recovers emotional as well as physical and verbal energy: "Marianne

1 See Tanner's claim that "the cause and subsequent suppression of that scream are quite as important ... as the more or less delicate jostling for partners, property, and power, which would seem to occupy the foreground of the action" (75). See also Haggerty; Wiltshire; and Small.

2 See Small, 94–95.

3 Arnett, 319.

4 Arnett, 319.

rapturously exclaimed, 'It is he; it is indeed;—I know it is!'—And was hastening to meet him" (117) when Elinor corrects her. (The visitor is Edward Ferrars who, himself a melancholy type, recognizes Marianne's own depression in a way that escapes her own family.)¹ This oscillation between abject despair and rapturous delight becomes most pronounced in the novel's second volume, where the idea of accompanying Mrs. Jennings to London (where she might meet Willoughby) interrupts Marianne's melancholy by arousing an intense eagerness that easily overrides her previous antipathy. In language that aptly captures the extremity of her response, Marianne declares that Mrs. Jennings's "invitation has insured my gratitude for ever, and it would give me such happiness, yes almost the greatest happiness I am capable of, to be able to accept it" (179). Yet, in London, Marianne undergoes even more violent, painful, and debilitating swings of mood. In a scene that mirrors the earlier (mis)recognition at Barton, Marianne hears a knock that she believes to be Willoughby's. Rather than retaining a satirical distance from Marianne's extreme swings of mood, the narrative shares her exuberance, using short clauses, separated by commas, to capture the restless tension that leads first to "extasy" and then to disappointment: "Every thing was silent, this could not be borne many seconds, she opened the door, advanced a few steps towards the stairs" and, in the "extasy of her feelings ... seemed almost ready to throw herself into [Willoughby's] arms"—to discover, instead, Colonel Brandon (186).

Austen's detailed representations of Marianne's disruptions of mood contribute as well to the novel's larger delineation of Marianne's all-consuming adolescent egocentrism. Increasingly trapped within the "irritable refinement of her own mind" (221), Marianne adamantly refuses to gain command over her feelings and their expression. At first wholly obsessed with meeting Willoughby, Marianne becomes "unfit for any thing" (193) or even anyone; "too restless for employment, too anxious for conversation," she retreats to a "melancholy meditation" (195) that estranges her both from social encounters and from her increasingly concerned sister. Preparing for the party in which she will, unexpectedly, come upon Willoughby, Marianne's listless and "wholly dispirited" affect causes her to be "lost in her own thoughts and insensible of her sister's presence" (198), let alone the effects of her depression on that sister. Ignoring, in the aftermath of that meeting, Elinor's plea to "Exert yourself, dear Marianne, ... if you would not kill yourself and all who love you" (207), Marianne does contract a near-fatal illness—the fever which, as she will herself later acknowledge, was a direct result of her self-induced depressive state.

1 See Doody, who calls Edward the novel's "arch depressive" (xxvi).

Austen's point could not be clearer: adolescent egocentrism and its attendant depression of mind and body threaten not only the adolescent's place within the larger web of social responsibility but also, and significantly, the adolescent's own life. In the novel's depiction of Marianne's transition from adolescence to adulthood, her illness and near death serve as a crucial turning point by providing her with a kind of psychological time out—the "leisure and calmness for serious recollection" (350). Recognizing that "my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and ... my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave" (350), she reflects, for the first time, with both "frankness and ... contrition" (351) on her past behavior. Marianne's new-found deliberative facility enables her, upon returning to Barton, to confront rather than perpetuate her anguish by encountering, in a new way, the very places, objects, and experiences most closely associated with Willoughby. In the following section, I address how Austen's extraordinary attention to Marianne's grieving process forms part of a developmental narrative that, by working to counteract her previous adolescent self-absorption, provides the emotional maturity that will enable her to love again.

From Melancholia to Mourning

Although critics have rightly called attention to the melancholic or depressive affect of many of the novel's characters, including Edward Ferrars, Colonel Brandon, and even Elinor herself, it is Marianne whose behavior, notably after the receipt of Willoughby's letter, most closely approximates what we would now consider a form of clinical depression or what Sigmund Freud describes as the "distinguishing mental features of melancholia": "a profoundly painful dejection, abrogation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings."¹ Set in motion at Barton, and further exacerbated by the violent swings of mood she experienced while waiting to meet Willoughby in London, Marianne's "gloomy dejection" (231), with its associated loss of sleep and appetite, has produced a change in physical appearance noticeable to John Dashwood who, knowing his half-sister's looks to be her dowry, worries about this considerable loss of "bloom": "what is the matter with Marianne?—she looks very unwell, has lost her color, and is grown quite thin. Is she ill?" (244).

1 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *General Psychological Theory*, ed. Philip Rieff (1917; New York: Collier Books, 1963), 165.

Marianne has been ill, yet the toll her depression takes is as much mental as it is physical. Even the disclosure of Edward's secret engagement to Lucy, and of Elinor's own "constant and painful exertion" in keeping the depth of her own suffering private (277), cannot fully rouse Marianne from emotional torpor. Facing up to the difference between Elinor's conduct and her own, she lapses into the "self-reproaches and self-revilings" described above by Freud: "She 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" (283). In leaving London, the site of her "extinguished" hopes (311), and also at Cleveland, Marianne continues to nurture her own grief: within five minutes of arrival at the Palmers' estate, she "steal[s] away" to indulge in "moments of precious, of invaluable misery" at her proximity to Willoughby's own estate at Combe Magna and to rejoice "in tears of agony" at her nearness to him (312). Throughout this section of the novel, Austen's depiction of Marianne's self-induced suffering epitomizes the self-destructive, suicidal tendencies associated with depression,¹ as her emotional turmoil in turn promotes the physical behavior—walking in the tall wet grass, sitting in her wet shoes and stockings, ignoring the symptoms of a violent cold—that contributes to the infectious fever that nearly causes her death.²

Only after her illness can Marianne, for the first time, exert the self-command and concomitant awareness of others that she had earlier recognized in Elinor but had been either unwilling or unable to emulate herself. In Marianne's changed behavior towards both Mrs. Jennings and Colonel Brandon, in her "bodily ease" and particularly in her "calmness of spirits," Elinor discerns the "apparent composure of mind, which, in being the result as she trusted of serious reflection, must eventually lead her to contentment and cheerfulness" (346). First, however, Marianne must undergo the difficult process of grieving, a process made possible by something she never had before: a "mind awakened to reasonable exertion" (347). Thus upon entering the sitting room of Barton Cottage, "Marianne turned her eyes around it with a look of resolute firmness, as if determined at once to accustom herself to the sight of every object with which the

1 See Freud on the melancholiac's "tendency to suicide" (173).

2 See Wiltshire, who calls attention to the ways in which Marianne's illness is rendered with "specific medical detail": "Marianne is not suffering here a 'hysterical' or 'nervous' illness, but one authenticated by contemporary physicians" (45, 46).

remembrance of Willoughby could be connected" (347). "Resolute," "firmness," "determined"—these are not words one would previously have associated with Marianne's emotions (although maybe with her opinions!)—yet Austen's depiction of Marianne's behavior reflects, to a remarkable degree, the work Freud associates with mourning: "The task is ... carried through bit by bit, under great expense of time and cathectic energy, while all the time the existence of the lost object is continued in the mind. Each single one of the memories and hopes which bound the libido to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and the detachment of the libido from it accomplished."¹

Especially telling is Marianne's encounter with the pianoforte. While the narrative had earlier satirized the sentimental excess with which she responded to Willoughby's departure, when she "spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying" (115), this passage's serious tone reveals, by contrast, Austen's sympathetic support for Marianne's new-found qualities of self-knowledge and self-command. Thus finding the sight of music transcribed in Willoughby's handwriting too much to handle, Marianne "shook her head, put the music aside, and after running over the keys for a minute, complained of a feebleness in her fingers, and closed the instrument again; declaring however with firmness as she did so, that she should in future practise much" (347). In this brief scene, Marianne displays not only the "firmness" born of self-awareness in "clos[ing] the instrument," but she also manufactures an excuse for doing so. By attributing her behavior to physical rather than emotional weakness, she acknowledges others' concern for her vulnerable state; she also, if unwittingly, assumes the burden of social responsibility, "of telling lies when politeness required" (149), previously relegated to Elinor. Marianne, in other words, is learning to be an adult.

In a subsequent scene, Austen uses the site of the lovers' first encounter to situate not Marianne's melancholy indulgence in the past, but rather her attempt to command her feelings in the present, by understanding Willoughby's intentions towards herself. Significantly, Elinor had herself agonized over how to present Willoughby's confession to her vulnerable sister. However, Marianne's firm declaration that, although it would be false "to say that I shall soon or that I ever shall forget" Willoughby, she will regulate and check her "remembrance" of him (351), displays, through its verbs, Marianne's readiness to gain the knowledge she seeks without being devastated by it. Although she is consoled by knowing that Willoughby did love her, Marianne finalizes her mourning by acknowledging the self-interested nature of that love: "My happiness was never his

1 Freud, 166.

object" (355). Through this process, Austen prepares the ground for a relationship based not in a kind of shared adolescent narcissism but rather on the more mature ability to bring happiness to another.

"The mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village": Adolescence to Adulthood

Although Mrs. Dashwood attempts to take responsibility for her own "imprudence" in handling the aborted relationship between Marianne and Willoughby (355), her comparably enthusiastic treatment of Colonel Brandon's own declaration of love for her second daughter, revealed on their journey together to Cleveland, shows that she has, in effect, changed very little. With the power of "active fancy, which fashioned everything delightful to her, as it chose" (342), Mrs. Dashwood convinces herself, and attempts to persuade Elinor, that despite or even because of the difference in age, the Colonel's "disposition" makes him "exactly the very one to make your sister happy" (343). Although still operating out of her own immature sense of optimism and wish-fulfilment, Mrs. Dashwood does, in a sense, get it right by recognizing that the Colonel, despite his age and gravity, possesses the critical attribute lacking in Willoughby: the capacity for genuine care and concern for other people. A "sensitive man as well as ... the man of sense Elinor finds him to be,"¹ he is a representative eighteenth-century man of feeling,² "manly" in the "unstudied simplicity" of his manners—in direct contrast to the "artificial" posturing of the more charismatic Willoughby (343–44)—and in his "ability to help, sensitively and unconditionally."³ As Sarah Ailwood has argued, the novel's positive depiction of Colonel Brandon as a mature figure who, like Marianne herself, has suffered greatly, can function to challenge contemporary notions of the dashing romantic hero.⁴ At the same time, it also serves to set up the Colonel as the ideal mate for Marianne—not only because he has, unlike Willoughby, much to give, but also because he has much to gain from her own disposition as well as from her love for him.

Readers who have felt a powerful sense of disappointment in Marianne's marriage to Colonel Brandon—believing that, while Elinor finds fulfilment, Marianne must sacrifice her own needs and desires

1 Armstrong, 78.

2 See Small, 99–100.

3 Armstrong, 79.

4 Sarah Ailwood, "'Too much in the common Novel style': Reforming Masculinities in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*," in *Women Constructing Men: Female Novelists and Their Male Characters, 1750–2000*, ed. Sarah Frantz and Katharina Rennhak (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 73–76.

for the kind of “commercial exchange” (75) she had earlier denigrated—have emphasized Marianne’s disconcerting passivity during the novel’s final chapter.¹ From actively pursuing her own passion for Willoughby, she has become an object of the desires of others: her marriage to Colonel Brandon is described as the “darling project” of Mrs. Dashwood and “equally the wish” of Edward and Elinor, who form what the narrator describes as a “confederacy” against Marianne: “They each felt [Colonel Brandon’s] sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the reward of all” (379). This powerful sense of Marianne’s own loss of agency and helplessness in the face of obligations in which she also shares—“what could she do?”—is intensified by the mocking tone of the subsequent, often-quoted paragraph, in which repetition of the word “born,” with its connotations of the physiological and inevitable, emphasizes the distance between Marianne’s earlier ideals and her present reality:

Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims. She was born to overcome an affection formed so late in life as at seventeen, and with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another!—and *that* other, a man who had suffered no less than herself under the event of a former attachment, whom, two years before, she had considered too old to be married,—and who still sought the constitutional safeguard of a flannel waistcoat! (379–80)

At the same time, we might also conclude that such change of opinion, such valuing of esteem and friendship as a valid basis for matrimony,² demonstrates that Marianne has now grown up in the sense of having both aged and matured. This perspective is literally corroborated by the abrupt time shift within the paragraph itself, which has jumped ahead two years and is now narrating retrospectively. It is, I contend, no coincidence that in these final passages Marianne ends the novel at the precise age, and in the same psychological place, at which Elinor began: both cognizant and capable of performing the roles—so new to Marianne—of a responsible adult member of her society. Thus “she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new

1 See, for example, analyses by Tanner (100–1); and Small (98–103).

2 Recall that Marianne had earlier mocked Elinor’s use of the term “esteem” to describe her own attachment to Edward Ferrars (59).

home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village” (380). Austen’s novel, then, itself brings adolescence into literature in a new way, despite the work’s own concern about what it might mean to create a narrative space for such emotional and psychological excesses. And it is, I conclude, precisely that powerful, and in many ways subversive, portrayal of Marianne’s adolescence that evokes for modern readers such a strong sense of disappointment in her marriage to Colonel Brandon. Yet by viewing Marianne’s movement through time as part of a process in which the “storm and stress” of adolescence has evolved into the more moderate attachments and broader social obligations associated with adulthood, we might, in contrast to those critics for whom the closure of possibilities has become condemnation, read in her marriage not the devastating loss but rather the developmental transformation of Marianne’s adolescent self.

(2013)