

Jane Austen and the Paradox of the ‘Sensible’ Body: A Reading of Select Novels

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Abstract:

While it is undeniable that Jane Austen's characters constitute a unique literary demographic, often providing critics with promising subjects for diverse socio-literary case studies, it is perhaps equally important to register and acknowledge the unidimensionality of gender representations in her novels, marked by a striking lack, absence and erasure of the physical body. The gendered, sexual body appears for the most part to be completely invisibilized or, at best, politely ignored in Austen's novels. The only explicit documentations of the body found in her scrupulously sanitized narratives centre around the detailed and often humorous listings of psychophysical disorders plaguing her characters which are, more often than not, deftly transformed into comic fodder for her readers. Partially drawing upon the Enlightenment discourses on the body, contemporary vitalist medicine and examining select characters from Austen's literary menagerie, this paper attempts to explore another peculiar and often overlooked aspect of her female characterization - Austen's constructions of femininity through the pathologization and penalization of female bodies, sexualities and 'sensibilities'.

Keywords: Jane Austen, Women Characters, Sensibility, Body, Vitalism, Sexuality

The Enlightenment age has been categorically and qualitatively associated with ‘reason’, ‘sense’, ‘rationality’, marked by a cultural and historical urgency to unearth and explore the inherent ‘truths’ of the material world through epistemological praxes based on the logics and methodologies of scientific rationalism. The Enlightenment logic operated along diverse paradigmatic intersections between physiology, psychology, medicine, politics, aesthetics and literature. (Lloyd, 4) An attempt to locate the 18th century body within the logics-erotics spectrum, thus, necessitates a reference to contemporary theories of vitalism and animism which generated the idea of organic life as maintained and propelled by a form of non-mechanical force, corresponding to the French Enlightenment emphasis on “sensibility”. Diderot, following the tradition of Montpellier vitalism, describes it in his *Encyclopédie* as “the faculty of feeling, the principle of sensitivity, or the very feeling of the parts, the basis and the conserving agent of life, animality par excellence, the most beautiful, the most singular phenomenon of nature.” (Lloyd, 5) Diderot's conception of sensibility, perhaps, finds its closest analogy in Coleridge's ‘primary imagination’, the associative and aggregative function of the mind to collect and process sensory data and produce appropriate responses.

Innovations in biosciences in the mid-eighteenth century were, therefore, largely shaped by intense and extensive scientific engagements with theories on and of the living body, which was founded upon “the twin principles of sensibility and irritability”, foregrounded in the works of experimental physiologist Albert von Haller. He defined “irritability” as a contradiction of life and the life force that were the primary preoccupation of vitalist sciences. Critics have identified vitalist philosophies and sciences as essentially liminal spaces— remarkable of their capacity to

accommodate interpretive flux. (Normandin and Wolfe, 3) A significant recent attempt at a literary linkage between the biophysical theories of sensibility and the tradition of sentimental novels may be found in Catherine Packham's works.

Unlike the eighteenth century Montpellier enthusiasts, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* offers us a refreshing and unique re-interpretation of the conjunctions between abstract ideas of "sense" and "sensibility", where the latter is appropriated from its roots in the vitalist tradition, made synonymous with "sensitivity" and co-opted into the contemporary lexicon of social etiquette and civilized behavior, where an excess of sensibilities invariably incurs moral and, at times, (as in case of Marianne, Eliza and her daughter) physical and sexual punishments. This formulaic narrative strategy is a constant in Austen's works: moderation is praised and rewarded while emotional excesses are penalized.

For Austen, sensibility in a man is admirable; in a woman, it is necessary, if not mandatory. In *Sense and Sensibility*, thus, the female body is reduced to a moral battleground that must passively suffer and project the physiological manifestations of behavioral transgressions. Marianne's excessive and overtly romantic, even "lustful" attachment to Willoughby results in her near-fatal consumptive state. As Marianne recovers, the fever appears to have 'drained' her of her excessive emotionality (draining of blood, with the use of leeches, was a common medical practice of the time to reduce the temperature of the body), resulting in a 'pleasing' and pliant mellowness which allows her to find companionship and, ultimately, marital and monetary stability with Colonel Brandon. It is interesting to note that while the Colonel manages to survive his erstwhile romantic interest and passionate attachment to Eliza with relative dignity, both Eliza and her illegitimate daughter become victims of sexual predation and unwanted pregnancies – 'fallen' women who are made to bear the physical burden of their sins, transmitted generationally from mother to daughter.

Austen's distaste for the sentimental literary traditions, popularized by Sterne and Richardson, cannot be overstated. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Austen felt no compunction in endowing select characters with an overabundance of sensibility to create both comic opportunities and to pass her more sinister moral judgments. Marianne's constitution and beauty is threatened by a degenerative physiological disorder, Eliza dies of poverty and possibly undiagnosed STD, and her daughter is impregnated and abandoned by a profligate and a philanderer, continuing the cycle of sin and penalty. On the other hand, the embodiment of "sense" and burdened with "acquired notions about propriety", Elinor must constantly act as the savior to counterbalance the harmful sensibilities of her other and sister. (Johnson) She is the voice of reason, the nurturer - relentlessly rational, contained and modest. And like Fanny Price, Jane Bennet and Jane Fairfax, who embody all that is admirable in Austen's idealized and civilized heroines, Elinor is suitably compensated by Austen who orchestrates her unlikely but joyous union with the sedate and unambitious Edward and achieves, like all the 'good' heroines, "an ideal affective marriage". (Hall 66)

John Wiltshire in the introduction to his book, *Jane Austen and the Body*, humorously points to the "obvious restraints" imposed by the socio-cultural norms of Augustan England which severely curtailed "discussions of bodily matters and latitude of bodily expressions." (Wiltshire, 1) He opens his discourse with an interesting textual reference to a striking narrative episode from *Persuasion*: Louisa Musgrove's accident at Lyme. The titular page of the first edition of his book contains an image of the stone steps at Lyme where Louisa's fateful fall had occurred. It is a loaded visual symbol – an emptied space, significant in the very absence of the body that gives it distinction and meaning. (Wiltshire, 1)

The invisibilization of bodies, especially of female sexual bodies, in Austen's novels is the central concern of this paper. This erasure and absence is compounded, as stated in the earlier

section, by a deliberate authorial attempt to pathologize the desiring, sexual female body, a narrative treatment which, unlike the mild and enjoyably satirical portrayals of Mrs. Bennet's "nerves" or Mr. Woodhouse's acute hypochondria, is understated but distinctly toxic.

In fact, one of the prominent narrative tools, expertly wielded by Austen with devastating ironic precision, is the tongue-and-cheek representation of socio-moral indoctrination and social acculturation of young females in her novels: for instance, the verbal negotiations between Elizabeth and Lydia, as the former exhorts the younger, brasher and more unrestrained sister to adopt a more civilised and controlled public comportment. Lydia laughs too loudly, dances too energetically; she is as free with her affections as she is with her smiles. She boasts of her height, which in Austen-speak may as well be a direct reference to Lydia's puerile, nascent, yet increasingly noticeable, sexual presence. She is no wilting Fanny Price, contented to remain in the shadows of her more "eligible" cousins. Interestingly, Austen has been far kinder and more lenient towards Lydia than any of her other aberrant female characters who have been guilty of similar breaches in social and sexual conduct. Lydia's "indiscretion" may invite strong words and censure from the principal and minor characters within the novel, but she is, for the most part, left blissfully unaware of and unaffected by the potential dangers in her illicit relationship with Wickham. If she is in danger of ending up as a dire moral warning like Eliza in *Sense and Sensibility*, her timely rescue by Darcy prevents any serious social ramifications. In fact, one may even say, Lydia's sexual predicament is relevant only in its utility as a convenient bait and catalyst to facilitate the more *correct* relationship between Darcy and Elizabeth. Her own 'ruin' is averted, but more importantly, the marital possibilities and potentialities of the remaining Bennet sisters are not irreversibly damaged.

The loss of virginity or sexual 'purity' outside the sanction and legitimized marital space must be met with moral censorships, which are enacted, rationalized and actively enforced through bodily penalties and spatial confinement. The spaces inhabited by Austen's 'fallen' women are constantly restricted, and the punishments for their 'impropriety' often take the form of penal incarcerations. Emplaced under the panoptic masculine gaze, they must live in seclusion, in anxieties, fear and the constant contemplation of their supposed "guilt". Such Foucauldian power play enacted in the microcosmic familial spaces, ensure the sustained erasure of the women's social visibility and, therefore, existence. Maria's pre- and extramarital affair with Henry Crawford, results not only in her social fall from the heights of popularity but also a sentence of imprisonment passed by the patriarch of the family, wherein she is exiled from home with Mrs. Norris. Lydia's sexual transgressions merit a lesser sentence. Having gained the legitimacy of matrimony, Lydia's banishment is less overt: she must travel to the North with her husband, so that her 'character' cannot contaminate and destroy her sisters' potential manageability and marriageability.

Morality, as reflected in the in the Eighteenth century literary landscape of Austen's novels, was not, as Enit Karafili Steiner would have it, "the result of an ongoing exchange of ideas", but an inviolable code of conduct enforced by a contemporary arsenal of female conduct books, designed and deployed to regulate the collective female moral behavior, to keep women in their "place". Maria and Lydia, like Eliza and, to some extent, Marianne, become the exemplars of Austen's women who must be chastised, punished, often unilaterally banished and confined in their respective carceral states, and subjected to the corrective measures of a society that functioned by controlling, censoring and censuring, in equal measure, attempted and imagined female transgressions, misbehaviors and missteps.

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