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Abstract

Jane Austen is not a writer ordinarily associated with venereal disease. Indeed, some admirers of Austen still cherish the fantasy, initially bequeathed by J.E. Austen-Leigh, of a "dear Aunt Jane" whose works need not ever be associated with that embarrassing topic, sex. Sense and Sensibility, however, contains an undeniable reference to venereal disease. Like the indirect references to the pox that scholars have already spotted in Emma and Persuasion, the syphilis in Sense and Sensibility at first appears minor, a glancing euphemistic allusion in a small embedded scene. Once decoded, however, the allusion and its implications reveal a good deal about Austen and about several points in Sense and Sensibility that critics have long found contentious.

Keywords

Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, venereal disease, sex, euphemisms, allusion

Cover page footnote

Contributor's note: Marie E. McAllister, associate professor of English at the University of Mary Washington, works on venereal disease in medical and popular literature.

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Marie E. McAllister

ane Austen is not a writer ordinarily associated with venereal disease. Indeed, some admirers of Austen still cherish the fantasy, initially bequeathed by J.E. Austen-Leigh, of a "dear Aunt Jane" whose works need not ever be associated with that embarrassing topic, sex. Sense and Sensibility, however, contains an undeniable reference to venereal disease, one undiscovered by previous commentators. Like the indirect references to the pox that scholars have already spotted in Emma and Persuasion, the syphilis in Sense and Sensibility at first appears minor, a glancing euphemistic allusion in a small embedded scene. Once decoded, however, the allusion and its implications reveal a good deal about Austen and about several points in Sense and Sensibility that critics have long found contentious.

The reference in question occurs almost exactly halfway through *Sense and Sensibility*, in the story of the two Elizas: the invisible mother and daughter whose lives turn out to be deeply intertwined with those of Colonel Brandon, Willoughby, and the Dashwood women. This curious story—melodramatic, digressive, structurally problematic—has provoked considerable critical comment, especially since the advent of feminist criticism. Critics have read it as an echo of *Clarissa*, as a doubling of the Marianne plot, as a lens through which to view Brandon or Marianne or Willoughby or Elinor or Edward (or Jane Austen herself), and as a fascinating and complicated political treatise in miniature. On a more basic level, however, the Eliza story actually functions as a metaphor for death by venereal disease—a metaphor that would have been familiar to Austen's readers from the novelistic and medical literature of the time—and this metaphor has important consequences for current understanding of the novel and its author.

Every commentary on the Eliza story must begin with the obvious

problem that its contents exceed its nominal purpose. Shortly before the story is told, Willoughby has cruelly jilted Marianne. Colonel Brandon relates the story of the two Elizas to Elinor (who passes it on to Marianne) in hopes that his revelations about Willoughby's true nature may ease Marianne's despair at losing her first great love. As far as it concerns Willoughby, the story is a simple one: before meeting Marianne, Willoughby had seduced, impregnated, and abandoned Brandon's ward Eliza. "He had left the girl whose youth and innocence he had seduced, in a situation of the utmost distress, with no creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address! He had left her promising to return; he neither returned, nor wrote, nor relieved her." The story dismays both sisters and is well calculated to rouse Marianne from her continuing idealization of a man who in no way deserves her regret. Eliza's plight, however, represents only the tail end of a multi-generational story. This Eliza, Brandon's ward, is the daughter of another Eliza, Brandon's first beloved and the woman he thinks Marianne resembles. Her story proves far more complex: an interrupted elopement, a forced marriage to Brandon's elder brother, an adulterous affair conducted in the depths of unhappiness, a divorce, and worse: "I could not trace her beyond her first seducer, and there was every reason to fear that she had removed from him only to sink deeper in a life of sin" (207). By the time Brandon finds her, the elder Eliza lies on her deathbed—but all this remains irrelevant in illuminating Willoughby's character. Austen does need to establish a reason for Brandon to have a ward, and it does not hurt to give Brandon a past that can explain his present bachelor state and his attraction to Marianne. Yet why, for these purposes, does Austen choose the melodramatic and narratologically excessive story of a fallen woman?

The deathbed scene itself begins to explain Austen's choice and sets the stage for the argument that follows. Brandon, returned at last from regimental duty in the East Indies, spends months unsuccessfully tracking the elder Eliza before stumbling on her in a spunging-house (debtors' prison) to which he has come on a charitable errand:

So altered—so faded—worn down by acute suffering of every kind! hardly could

Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (1811; reprint, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 209. References are to this edition. I would like to thank the contributors of the C18-L online listserv, especially Judith Mesa-Pelly, Shelley King, and Julie A. Schaffer, for references used in this article, and my perceptive readers William Kemp, Lucy McDiarmid, and Linda Merians.

I believe the melancholy and sickly figure before me, to be the remains of the lovely, blooming, healthful girl, on whom I had once doated. What I endured in so beholding her—but I have no right to wound your feelings by attempting to describe it—I have pained you too much already. That she was, to all appearance, in the last stage of a consumption, was—yes, in such a situation it was my greatest comfort. Life could do nothing for her, beyond giving time for a better preparation for death; and that was given. I saw her placed in comfortable lodgings, and under proper attendants; I visited her every day during the rest of her short life; I was with her in her last moments. (207)

In Edgar Allen Poe's incisive phrase, "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world," and compared to other deathbed scenes from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this one is relatively restrained. Austen stresses the physical changes Eliza has undergone, the tortures felt by her former beloved, and the charitable impulses that lead Brandon to find her and to comfort her last hours. If the scene has nothing to do with explaining Willoughby, it has everything to do with explaining Brandon and demonstrating his worthiness to become Elinor's dear friend and Marianne's husband.

But there is more to this scene than meets the eye. The "consumption" of which Eliza perishes, and which Brandon describes as a mercy, is not, in fact, tubercular; Eliza dies of nothing less than venereal disease. "Consumption" is Austen's euphemism—and not only Austen's—for syphilis. When Brandon pronounces the nearness of Eliza's death his "greatest comfort," he is not implying that he, or society, will be more comfortable once the fallen woman is removed from view; he means that her venereal disease is so advanced that death will be a mercy. Eliza's downward trajectory, her "life of sin,"

² Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846), cited in Elisabeth Bronfen, Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic (New York: Routledge, 1992), 59.

Here I obviously disagree with Claudia L. Johnson's argument that Brandon would rather have seen Eliza dead years ago. Johnson quotes Brandon's line "Happy had it been if she had not lived to overcome those regrets which the remembrance of me occasioned" (206) and asks "Happy for whom? one wonders." Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 66. Once we recognize in Eliza's disease the slow and agonizing end it produces, it becomes clear that Brandon is thinking of her happiness, or at least her lack of suffering, when suggesting that she might have been better off dying before her adultery, divorce, and subsequent misfortunes. Likewise, although Brandon's account certainly emphasizes his pain, as Mary Poovey points out, I read this as a way to show his sensibility rather than his self-centredness; he is thus made a suitable match for Marianne, as I will discuss later in this article. Poovey, 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), 191.

has involved dire economic necessity: "'Her legal allowance was not adequate to her fortune, nor sufficient for her comfortable maintenance, and I learnt from my brother, that the power of receiving it had been made over some months before to another person'" (207). After selling her allowance, the reader is expected to infer, she has sold her body. Three and a half years later, when Brandon finds her, she lies dying of what any eighteenth-century doctor would unhesitatingly have diagnosed as a confirmed pox.

Two kinds of evidence support this conclusion. First, consumption becomes a novelistic euphemism for venereal disease well before Austen's time. Second, eighteenth-century medicine itself often conflates or associates the two diseases. To begin with novels: two examples confirm this euphemism, one from early in the century and one from around the time Austen was drafting Sense and Sensibility. In neither case *must* "pox" be read for "consumption," but in both, pox is certainly implied. In 1732, the co-protagonist of the anonymous sensational novel Love a la Mode: or, the Amours of Florella and Phillis is kidnapped, raped, persuaded to join a brothel, treated twice for "the French disease," accused in court of having given the disease to the man who really gave it to her, and a great deal more. At last, bankrupt and repentant, she dies when "The Violence of her Grief brought on a Consumption." Thus far, readers might interpret Phillis's illness as merely tubercular, but her deathbed speech suggests the ravages of a less mentionable disease. In her final words, Phillis warns comely young women against getting lured into a life of prostitution and keeping, which, she says, can result only in "Ruine and Death." The implication is that her former way of life has led to her death, a connection readers would be more likely to make with syphilis than with tuberculosis. The widely known difficulty of curing syphilis also encourages readers to suspect that "consumption" may be a euphemism for the long-term effects of those double poxes.

A similar novelistic example from the period in which Austen began drafting *Sense and Sensibility* appears in Elizabeth Helme's popular *The Farmer of Inglewood Forest* (1796).⁵ One strand of Helme's plot relates the story of a farmer's daughter who, seduced by a married libertine,

^{4 [}Anon.], Love a la Mode: or, the Amours of Florella and Phillis (London: J. Roberts, 1732), 56.

⁵ Elizabeth Helme, The Farmer of Inglewood Forest, 4 vols (London: William Lane, 1796). Helme's novel was frequently reprinted throughout the nineteenth century, and in 1846 W. Rogers turned it into the wonderfully titled three-act play The Farmer of Inglewood Forest, Or, The Seducer! The Murderer!! And the Suicide.

becomes a kept woman and then a common prostitute. Emma's story, told after her death, makes explicit though delicately worded reference to the syphilis she catches from "an emaciated debauchee" and passes on to a daughter who dies of the disease:

All was riot, which they called pleasure, for three days, when I began to find my health uncommonly disordered, as well as that of my child, and soon discovered, do I live to relate it? that her pure blood was contaminated as well as my own, in consequence of the acquaintance I had so lately formed. I cannot proceed, I have in vain tried to describe the agonies my cherub suffered, until her once clear and transparent complexion was changed to the deadly hue of saffron; suffice it, she died, and left me the most unhappy—most cursed! Oh!—my head—my heart—pardon me—the recollection—even yet disorders my brain!

White space and a one-inch line follow this description, and then readers hear that "I was mad for six months after her death, in which state medicines were forced down my throat that restored my bodily health; but my senses were long imperfect, during which period I can only remember I was frequently cruelly, even brutally treated." The medicines are presumably anti-venereal remedies, while the brutal treatment presumably involves continued prostitution (she remains in the brothel), physical violence, or both. Like Phillis in Love a la Mode, Helme's Emma has had venereal disease; like Phillis, she has undergone treatment; like Phillis, she dies of something the author terms "consumption." Returning home at last, miserable and repentant, Emma displays the classic symptoms of true pulmonary consumption: emaciation, pallor, a "hectic cough, with an expectoration of blood." Helme's readers, like readers of *Love a la Mode*, might take this death as merely tubercular, but again the text hints at more. Emma asserts that "my punishment, though perhaps not adequate to my faults, has yet been severe; the Hand of God, I am convinced, is upon me," and after her death readers are informed that she sank "into the grave, the victim of her own errors, and a striking example of the inefficacy of every human endowment without virtue." Contemporary doctors did believe that strong emotions could bring on a consumption of the lungs, but the fact that "her own errors"—that is, her sexual experiences—have caused her death suggests that readers are meant to think of venereal disease rather than simple consumption.⁶

Before turning to the medical literature, it is important to note that not every consumptive death in a novel should be taken as

⁶ Helme, 4:69, 71; 3:157; 3:151, 189.

euphemistic. Tubercular consumption was a major killer in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and appears frequently in literature simply as itself. To give but one example, also contemporaneous with Austen, in Amelia Opie's Adeline Mowbray (1804) the radical philosopher Glenmurray sinks under a consumption that clearly has nothing to do with venereal disease: although he advocates an end to marriage, both he and his beloved Adeline are transparently virgins before their non-legal union. (His sin is probably philosophy; see Clark Lawlor and Akihito Suzuki on the popular association of consumption with youthful genius and intensive study.)⁷ Every reader will be able to supply further examples from literature and life, including the utterly unvenereal demise of John Keats four years after Austen's own death.8 As well, many novelists had no desire to disguise venereal disease with euphemisms, depending on the purpose for which they introduced such disease into their novels. Mrs Bennet in Henry Fielding's Amelia (1751) finds herself infected by a rapist; since her interpolated tale is a warning for Amelia, Fielding makes the danger explicit: "I was indeed polluted by the villain—I had infected my Husband." In The Adventures of Roderick Random (1748), Tobias Smollett uses the pox as a comic motif—Roderick and Miss Williams enjoy a tender reunion while undergoing treatment together—and as a means to increase readers' awareness of the grim realities of poverty and prostitution; euphemism would defeat his purpose. When Agnes Maria Bennett in Anna: or, Memoirs of a Welch Heiress (1786) uses venereal disease to illustrate a husband's unkindness, her reference is decorous but similarly clear: "Still he offended, and still he was forgiven; till the consequence of his indelicate connections had injured her health."10

⁷ Clark Lawlor and Akihito Suzuki, "The Disease of the Self: Representing Consumption, 1700–1830," Bulletin of the History of Medicine 74:3 (2000), 458–94.

The most extreme example I know is *Mary: A Novel* (1788), in which Mary Wollstonecraft uses consumption to kill off the title character's mother and both her love interests. Two of these deaths have symbolic value—one results from early poverty, one from excessive indulgence in a staged feminine passivity—but none is venereal. Ironically, Addison's Disease, of which Jane Austen probably died, was formerly often caused by tuberculosis of the adrenal glands. Thomas Dormandy, *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 24.

⁹ Henry Fielding, *Amelia*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (1751; reprint, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), 299.

¹⁰ Agnes Maria Bennett, Anna: or, Memoirs of a Welch Heiress (London: William Lane, 1786), 3:137–38.

In Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice* (1799), a repentant prostitute writes of having contaminated "with a deadly poison, the health and the principles of those unfortunate victims whom, with practiced allurements, I entangled in my snares," and the indirect language in no way camouflages the nature of her "poison." April London has discussed dozens of other eighteenth-century novels in which venereal disease is explicitly present or concealed by only the most transparent of codes: "fire-ship," "spitting," "a month in the country." Especially in the early years of the century, many novels contain direct and often quite vulgar references to poxes and claps. The need for euphemisms such as "consumption" creeps in later, in response to changing discourses about venereal disease and sexuality, and in response to changes in the function of venereal disease as a plot element or symbolic marker.¹³ The novelistic picture is further complicated by countless fictional fallen women who, like their pure foremother Clarissa, die of "penitence and sorrow," "grief," "self-reproach and misery," and similar causes. 14 Most such cases make no apparent reference to venereal disease; their authors simply follow the convention under which the fallen woman must die. In others, even when neither pox nor consumption is named, the trope of emotionally induced death may be intended to suggest more earthy causes. In Elizabeth Cullen Brown's The Sisters of St. Gothard (1819), for example, Rosette becomes the last of Montalvo's many libertine

¹¹ Mary Hays, The Victim of Prejudice, ed. Eleanor Ty (1799; reprint, Peterborough: Broadview Press, 1994), 67.

¹² April London, "Avoiding the Subject: The Presence and Absence of Venereal Disease in the Eighteenth-Century English Novel," *The Secret Malady: Venereal Disease in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France*, ed. Linda E. Merians (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1996), 213–27.

These changes have not yet been studied comprehensively, but Claude Quétel offers a good overview of the history of venereal disease. *The History of Syphilis*, trans. Judith Braddock and Brian Pike (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). On the ways in which the discourse about infected women, especially prostitutes, changed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Kathryn Norberg, "From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730–1802," *The Secret Malady*, 34–50; Kevin P. Siena, "Pollution, Promiscuity, and the Pox: English Venereology and the Early Modern Medical Discourse on Social and Sexual Danger," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 8:4 (1998), 553–74; and Mary Sprongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ These examples come from Jane West, The Advantages of Education (London: William Lane, 1793; reprint, New York and London, 1974), 2:61; Maria Regina Roche, The Nocturnal Warning (London: William Lane, 1800; reprint, New York: Arno, 1977), 4:391; and Louise Sidney Stanhope, Madelina: A Tale Founded on Facts (London: Minerva, 1814).

conquests. Seduced into a sham marriage, she perishes atop her broken-hearted father's grave of "repentance," "remorse," and a long consumptive illness. Montalvo then mysteriously shrivels into ugliness (the author attributes his change to mental anguish consequent to being shot in the knee during a duel) so that both seducer and seducee die of emotionally induced yet suspiciously physical illness.

The association of consumption with venereal disease appears far more explicitly in medical science. Although most medical texts clearly differentiate venereal disease and consumption, a significant number nonetheless connect the two, some metaphorically but many literally. Tubercular consumption was originally seen, like the pox, as a disgusting disease in which the body—in one case the lungs, in the other multiple parts of the body—literally corrodes and is eaten away. 15 The two could thus be metaphorically associated. More directly, many medical men believed that venereal disease could lead to consumption if not adequately treated, just as some believed that an uncured pox could lead to scurvy. Daniel Sennert and Nicholas Culpeper declared in 1660 that venereal disease, if imperfectly treated, could lead to "a deep Consumption." In 1678, Charles Peter referred to "an old consumptive pox"—a pox that, by persisting some time in the body, had brought on or turned into a consumption. Nicholas Robinson noted in 1736 that a patient suffering from a stubborn clap might "lapse into a Consumption," thus establishing a supposed connection between gonorrhea and tuberculosis. And in 1779, Henry Wasteall claimed not only that 30,000 persons a year died of consumption, but also that "it is an incontrovertible truth, that a considerable source of so dreadful a mortality originates from the various successive degrees of venereal infection."16 Just as an

Lawlor and Suzuki, 461–62. Indeed, consumption was not a single, identifiable disease before the advent of bacteriology. Thus early medical texts generally refer to "consumptions," using the plural, and sometimes encompass many different wasting diseases. Doctors did distinguish pulmonary consumptions from other types. For instance, Gideon Harvey's Morbus Anglicus, or The Anatomy of Consumptions (London: N. Brook, 1666) separates phthisis, or consumption of the lungs, from other wasting diseases, and Benjamin Marten's A New Theory of Consumptions: More Especially of a Phthisis or Consumption of the Lungs draws the same distinction (London: R. Knaplock, 1720). By the later eighteenth century, the popular usage "a consumption" appears to mainly indicate pulmonary diseases that also involved physical wasting, and it was especially used for symptoms that today's clinicians would identify as tubercular.

Daniel Sennert, Nicholas Culpeper, and Abadiah Cole, Two Treatises: The First of the Venereal Pocks (London: Peter Cole, 1660[?]), 74; Charles Peter, A Description of the Venereal Disease (London, 1678), 15; Nicholas Robinson, A New Treatise of the Venereal Disease (London: J.J. and P. Knapton, 1736), 98; Henry Wasteall, Observations on the Efficacy of a New Mercurial

untreated clap was long believed to result in a pox, consumption was often seen as yet another stage of venereal infection. Some doctors even believed that mercury, the standard remedy for the pox, could itself induce consumption: William Buchan argued in 1796 that patients who unwisely went out into the English weather during treatment were especially likely to find their pox turned into a consumption. Some of these sources may refer to wasting diseases in general rather than to pulmonary consumption, but the association of syphilis and tuberculosis continued long into the nineteenth century. Thomas Dormandy has traced the supposed link between "sexual irregularities" and tuberculosis, and the mid-century discovery of "a distinctly syphilitic form of tuberculosis."

In addition to being directly tied to venereal disease, consumption sometimes serves as a euphemism in medical texts, as it does in novels. William Moss, author of the splendidly titled An Essay on the Management and Nursing and Diseases of Children ... The Whole designed for Domestic Use, and purposely adapted for Female Comprehension, in a manner perfectly consistent with the Delicacy of the Sex; and suited to the Medical Student and Younger Practitioner, makes appropriately delicate reference to the importance of checking a prospective wet-nurse for consumption. His language, however, makes clear that he also, or actually, has venereal disease in mind: "A few cautions are proper to be observed in the choice of a hired wet-nurse, in large towns, more especially, for very obvious reasons." Parents must inquire into the character of both the nurse "and her husband (if she be a married woman)," and see to it that the nurse is "free from any infectious complaint," especially consumption, "as there appears to be a greater risque of a child's imbibing that disease, than any other the human

Preparation, For the Cure of the Venereal Disease (London: J. Murray, 1779), vii.

¹⁷ William Buchan, *Observations Concerning the Prevention and Cure of the Venereal Disease* (1796; reprint, New York: Garland, 1985), 194–213. The idea that an improperly treated clap would develop into a pox was reinforced by the frequency of simultaneous infection and by the difficulty of accurate experimentation; on the unicist theory, which held the two diseases to be the same, see Quétel, 82–83. This confusion is but one reason that many writers on venereal disease now avoid using our modern terms "syphilis" and "gonorrhea" to describe diseases that may not correlate with what previous periods termed a "pox" or a "clap."

¹⁸ Dormandy, 43, 290. The association between venereal disease and tuberculosis persisted even after the organisms responsible for each disease were identified. For instance, Christabel Pankhurst used the association in 1913 as a way to demand votes for women in *The Great Scourge and How to End It* (London: E. Pankhurst, 1913).

body is naturally liable to." Pulmonary tuberculosis is frightfully contagious, and any sensible parent would have ruled out a consumptive nurse, but the fact that parents are directed to examine the moral character of both the nurse and her husband suggests that Moss is also covertly warning against a venereally infected nurse. Similarly, large towns, with their bad air, were believed to be conducive to tubercular consumption, but also realistically believed to be hotbeds of prostitution and venereal disease. And long before Moss's day, it was widely known that "pocky" nurses could infect their charges, just as pocky children could transmit disease to a nurse.

Both novelistic precedent and medical "fact" thus suggest that Austen intended Eliza's death from consumption to point to a less mentionable disease. The changing iconography of consumption during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lends further credibility to this argument. Lawlor and Suzuki, in a brilliant recent study, have demonstrated that, in the second half of the eighteenth century, consumption changed from being a loathsome disease associated with foul-smelling bodily decay to being an ever-more admired form of death. Death by consumption was increasingly represented as peaceful, spiritual, and even beautiful. Consumptives had time to prepare for death, and their characteristic pallor and fever-flushed cheeks fitted well with the English ideal of beauty. Recapitulating Lawlor and Suzuki's argument about the class and gender differences inherent in this changing iconography is not necessary here, but one representation traced in their study lends credence to my argument: that of consumptive women and girls. Before the end of the eighteenth century, the consumptive female becomes, in literature and even in medicine, synonymous with purity and peaceful death. Pale and delicate, she is represented "in all media and genres as a beautiful bride of heaven, an angel too pure and spiritualized to abide long in the material world of the crude body and less-refined minds."20

At first, this association of consumptive women and purity seems to contradict the novelistic examples introduced above. Phillis, Emma, and Austen's own Eliza are all "fallen" women, women whose consumption is meant to suggest venereal disease. A closer look, however, reveals the appropriateness of this changing iconography. The consumptive fallen women of literature die repentant, reconciled with

¹⁹ William Moss, An Essay on the Management and Nursing and Diseases of Children (1781; 2nd ed., Egham: C. Boult, 1794), 139.

²⁰ Lawlor and Suzuki, 479.

their families or their God. Their sexual trespasses are a thing of the past, and their deaths are tragic but peaceful. They are doomed—all belong to the literary tradition in which a sexually active woman must die—but in dying, they become moral examples. Phillis from Love a la Mode dies giving advice to other attractive women. Helme's Emma forms a "striking example" to her nephews, who behold "a woman yet in the prime of life, and uncommonly lovely, sinking into the grave, the victim of her own errors."21 Austen's Eliza expires offstage, but Brandon's account makes her, too, an example from whose courses he has tried to keep the young Eliza—successfully until the appearance of the smooth-tongued Willoughby—and an example of what could have happened to Marianne. By the nineteenth century, the dying consumptive maiden is so much the epitome of angelic goodness that doctors start complaining that reality is being erased: "Writers of romance (whether from ignorance or because it suits the tone of their narrative) exhibit the slow decline of the consumptive, as a state on which the fancy may agreably [sic] repose, and in which not much more misery is felt, than is expressed by a blossom, nipped by untimely frosts."22 Love a la Mode, The Farmer of Inglewood Forest, and Sense and Sensibility all use this powerful if medically unrealistic iconography: their consumptive women have indeed renounced (sexual) activity and die angelic and hyper-feminine deaths.²³

Lawlor and Suzuki also mention a still older symbolic connotation of consumption, the association between it and disappointed love that dates back at least as far as the Renaissance. Long before people began to view consumption as a beautiful death, it was the disease of melancholy lovers consumed by hopeless passion.²⁴ Sometimes the consumptive languishes for a lost loved one; Austen draws on this iconography in *Emma* when she has Jane Fairfax's mother sink "under

²¹ Helme, 3:189.

Thomas Beddoes, Essay on the Causes, Early Signs, and Prevention of Pulmonary Consumption for the Use of Parents and Preceptors (Bristol: Biggs and Cottle, 1799), 6, cited in Roy Porter, "Consumption: Disease of the Consumer Society?" Consumption and the World of Goods, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 67.

²³ Such iconography has much earlier roots. For example, Lucinda Becker has argued that representations of dying women in seventeenth-century diaries avoid mention of physically suffering female bodies, instead concentrating on the "good" (peaceful) death, which can be read as the sign of a virtuous life. "The Absent Body: Representations of Dying Early Modern Women in a Selection of Seventeenth-Century Diaries," Women's Writing 8:2 (2001), 258.

²⁴ Lawlor and Suzuki, 466–67.

consumption and grief" after the death of her husband.²⁵ (She also spoofs it in *Love and Freindship* when Sophia expires of a "Galloping consumption" caught by "continued faintings in the open air," her dying words an admonition to "Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint.")²⁶ Sometimes the consumptive sinks with a heart broken by either an unattainable love or a romantic betrayal: Daniel Defoe's Moll Flanders nearly becomes consumptive after losing her first lover, while Smollett's Monimia, in *Ferdinand, Count Fathom*, declines after being abandoned by her deceived lover and attacked by the evil Ferdinand.²⁷ A seduced and abandoned maiden, such as Helme's Emma or Austen's elder Eliza, evokes several traditional iconographies of consumption, each appropriate: broken-hearted after a lover's betrayal, physically tainted and a warning to others, purified at last in death.

So what does it mean that Austen created a scene in which venereal disease, however euphemistically presented, plays a role? First, and most simply, the indirect reference to pox in *Sense and Sensibility* confirms Austen's awareness of venereal disease. Such awareness should be no surprise: no sentient being, however genteel, could have been unaware that claps and poxes existed, any more than a reader of this piece can be unaware of AIDS, and Austen's general level of medical awareness and interest has been well documented.²⁸ Because of her family's connections, however (two brothers achieved high rank in the Royal Navy), Austen may also have recognized that venereal disease was—because of its presumed impact on military and naval preparedness—in the process of being redefined as a major public health issue, a process that culminated in the 1860s with the passage of a series of Contagious Disease Acts designed to regulate

²⁵ Austen, Emma, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (1816; reprint, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 163.

²⁶ Austen, Love and Freindship (dated 1790), in Minor Works, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101–2.

²⁷ Daniel Defoe, The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders, ed. G. A. Starr (1722; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 42; Tobias Smollett, The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom, ed. O.M. Brack, Jr, intro. Jerry C. Beasley (1753; reprint, Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 238. Lawlor and Suzuki mention both scenes, 477–78.

²⁸ On Austen's medical knowledge in the context of *Sense and Sensibility*, see Laurie Kaplan and Richard S. Kaplan, "What Is Wrong with Marianne?: Medicine and Disease in Jane Austen's England," *Persuasions* 12 (1990), 117–30; and John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: "The Picture of Health"* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45–48.

prostitution.²⁹ By making the former prostitute Eliza expire of a probable pox, Austen alludes to an issue that had both gendered and nationalist overtones in the nineteenth century.

Austen's euphemistic reference to pox also reveals much about her political inclinations at the time she wrote Sense and Sensibility. The tale of the two Elizas rewrites a novelistic trope much used from the 1790s through the 1830s, that of the innocent country maiden seduced and abandoned by the aristocratic libertine. In the hands of radical and Jacobin writers, this story became an allegory of the oppression of the poor by the well-to-do, as well as a depiction of the sexual double and triple standard held by wealthy gentlemen.³⁰ Austen's version of the story adopts yet reshapes these politics. Libertines betray both Elizas, but Austen removes the aristocratic element: the villains in the elder generation—Colonel Brandon's father, his brother, and perhaps also Eliza's unknown "first seducer"—are members of the land-owning gentry, as is Willoughby in the younger generation. Austen's revision also makes the elder Eliza a rich orphan and the younger Eliza the object of Colonel Brandon's generous charity and even his presumptive heir (something Austen mentions just once because she intends his estate for Marianne and their children). These changes in social class temper the economic and political radicalism often attached to the seduction story: Austen's version does not pit lower class against higher class or imply that England would be better off without an aristocracy. The changes, however, also widen the reach of its critique. Austen's version blames not a handful of aristocratic libertines but a much larger group, all men who feel themselves

²⁹ Sprongberg's *Feminizing Venereal Disease* offers an excellent discussion of these Acts, especially as they affected women's lives and public perceptions about gender.

³⁰ The mathematical impossibility of women remaining chaste while men sowed their wild oats—the double standard—led to what is often termed the "triple standard": lower-class women were often considered fair game for seduction by upper-class men. Important sources on the seduction narrative at different moments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include Marilyn Butler, Jane Austen and the War of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 31–50; Susan Staves, "British Seduced Maidens," Eighteenth-Century Studies 14:2 (Winter 1980/81), 109–34; Anna Clark, "The Politics of Seduction in English Popular Culture, 1748–1848," The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction, ed. Jean Radford (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), 47–70; Jane Spencer, The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 107–39; and Ruth Perry, "Clarissa's Daughters: Or, The History of Innocence Betrayed. How Women Writers Rewrite Richardson," Clarissa and Her Readers: New Essays for the "Clarissa" Project, ed. Carol Houlihan Flynn and Edward Copeland (New York: AMS Press, 1999), 119–41. Clark and Spencer pay special attention to radical versions of the seduction story.

entitled to sexual conquest. Thus when Willoughby later mentions Mrs Smith's demand that he marry Eliza, Austen has him speak dismissively of "the purity of her life, the formality of her notions, her ignorance of the world" (323). The "world" recognizes the meaninglessness of such liaisons, and only someone ignorant of their frequency could expect a gentleman to patch up his sin by marrying an illegitimate daughter. And as Claudia L. Johnson has pointed out, Austen carefully makes Willoughby a gentleman rather than, for example, a steward's son like Wickham in *Pride and Prejudice*. Like her radical precursors, she explicitly criticizes the privileged and powerful.³¹

Moreover, since the underlying seduction story remains constant— Eliza senior is lured away from her unhappy home and Eliza junior is lured into the clutches of Willoughby—the story of the Elizas remains potentially radical in other ways. In recent decades, critics have frequently read Sense and Sensibility as a progressive novel, pointing out that the elder Eliza's life, as related by Colonel Brandon, offers a brief but pronounced attack on marriage for money, on primogeniture, and on the abuse of paternal authority. 32 For those who do not remember all the details, Eliza is forced by harsh treatment to marry the eldest Brandon son: "Her fortune was large, and our family estate much encumbered." Her feelings and those of young Brandon, with whom she is in love, are ignored: he is banished to the house of a relation, and she is confined until she submits to marry the son who will inherit. Like Clarissa, on which it is modelled, the story makes a strong case for companionate marriage and against the privileging of first-born sons. It also sounds an alarm against the moral and intellectual miseducation of women. Before her forced marriage, Eliza is on the point of eloping to Scotland with the young Brandon.

³¹ Johnson, 56. Johnson also argues cogently that having not one but two Elizas—what she calls the "insistent redundancy" of Brandon's narrative—furthers the implication that such stories of seduction and abandonment are common (57).

³² Nearly all recent criticism reads *Sense and Sensibility* as progressive by at least some definitions. Johnson, for example, argues that "Eliza's fate testifies to the failures of conservative ideology" and "indicts the license to coercion, corruption and avarice available to grasping patriarchs and their eldest sons" (56). A notable exception to the pattern is Tara Ghoshal Wallace. In a reading well-informed by feminist criticism, she labels *Sense and Sensibility* Austen's "most anti-feminist book." *Jane Austen and Narrative Authority* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), 31. The general trend can be explained partly by the growing importance of feminist criticism in the last three decades and partly by the importance of Marilyn Butler's conservative reading of Austen, to which critics after 1975 have had to respond.

This whiff of Lydia from *Pride and Prejudice* suggests that Eliza senior may not have the moral wherewithal to resist her eventual seducer. Telling her story many years later, Colonel Brandon remains sympathetic to her plight. As he puts it, the consequences of marital mistreatment "upon a mind so young, so lively, so inexperienced as Mrs. Brandon's, was but too natural. ... Can we wonder that with such a husband to provoke inconstancy, and without a friend to advise or restrain her, (for my father lived only a few months after their marriage, and I was with my regiment in the East Indies) she should fall?" (206). Well, yes, we can. Both the creator of the Bennet girls and the most famous contemporary writer on women's miseducation, Mary Wollstonecraft, would have had something to say about the problems inherent in educating daughters to expect admiration and entertainment rather than offering them a solid foundation for rational and self-created happiness. Brandon's words are meant to lead the reader to sympathize with Eliza, not to encourage the thought that women's weakness is inevitable. Austen reinforces the message later when she has Willoughby defend himself by mentioning not just "the violence of" the second Eliza's "passions," but also "the weakness of her understanding" (322). Inexperience may be excused—after all, Georgiana Darcy at age fifteen thinks herself in love and almost elopes with the fortune-hunting Wickham—but women educated only for love too easily become Elizas.

In addition to these attacks on the miseducation of women, primogeniture, economic marriage, and patriarchal might, the elder Eliza's story offers a critique of male libertinism, one which reappears, much amplified, in the younger Eliza's story. This latter strongly criticizes the mores that encourage men like Willoughby to seduce but not marry women who possess neither name nor fortune. Austen allows Willoughby to damn himself as he confesses his faults to Elinor near the end of the novel:

I do not mean to justify myself, but at the same time cannot leave you to suppose that I have nothing to urge—that because she was injured she was irreproachable, and because I was a libertine, *she* must be a saint. If the violence of her passions, the weakness of her understanding—I do not mean, however, to defend myself. Her affection for me deserved better treatment, and I often, with great self-reproach, recal [*sic*] the tenderness which, for a very short time, had the power of creating any return. I wish—I heartily wish it had never been. (322)

The repetition here is revealing. Twice Willoughby protests that he does not mean to defend himself. In three escalating clauses sand-

wiched between these protests he then depicts Eliza as sexually eager, even predatory: reproachable, no saint, then violently passionate. He next substitutes a different but equally scornful portrait of her as weak both in her understanding and in her characteristically feminine affection. Finally, he turns to self-reproach, but his words are still revealing. Not Eliza but Eliza's "affection for me" deserved better treatment. He wishes that "it had never been," but the undefined pronoun leaves the object of his regrets unclear: his brief tenderness? the whole affair? his betrayal? Elinor may forgive Willoughby to some extent (and critics have argued a great deal about why), but Austen's wording makes clear that the author does not excuse his self-proclaimedly "libertine" outlook.

To claim that these various critiques align Austen with her radical contemporaries would be to exaggerate the case. Parental tyranny, forced marriage, marriage simply for money, and libertinism were easy targets by the 1790s, and served more often as literary clichés than as calls to action. Attacks on primogeniture and the miseducation of women are likewise familiar, yet somewhat fresher because in them Austen attacks the status quo, not merely the standard novelistic demons of the last fifty-odd years. Still, what is important in *Sense and Sensibility* is the sophistication with which Austen transforms familiar criticisms of society into new and potentially thought-provoking forms. Brandon's tale of the Elizas, with its veiled allusion to death by venereal disease, is mirrored at least twice elsewhere in the text. Comparing these passages with the original reveals the depth of Austen's social engagement and the sophistication of her critique.

The first passage mirrored by the Eliza story is, of course, Marianne's sickness, a fever brought on by emotional suffering, "delightful twilight walks" through romantically wet grass, and self-neglect (305). Many critics have pointed out how Marianne's fever both reenacts and redirects the elder Eliza's consumption. Each is harmed by love and her own actions, each sickens, each is watched by loved ones when at death's door, and so on. The melodrama of the elder Eliza's tale helps reinforce the comparison: quite unusually for Austen, the reader has already seen one woman die horribly and so cannot help wondering if Marianne, too, will be destroyed by love. Ultimately, though, the contrasts between the cases prove more important than the similarities. Marianne lives: Austen refuses to punish her, or let her punish herself, with the classic death scene

meted out to sentimental heroines who have dared to feel passion.³³ Her illness is no vaguely painted allegory like Eliza's demise; as John Wiltshire points out, her symptoms are made medically realistic throughout.³⁴ And Marianne believes that her death would have been "self-destruction" had it occurred, whereas Eliza's death, after her initial bad choice, is plainly due to the callousness of others.

That Eliza's death results from venereal disease sets her even further apart from Marianne. The latter has been too quick to feel and to trust, but she has not committed the sin that contemporary novels punish with death: nowhere in the novel does Austen suggest that Marianne forgets her culture's beliefs about premarital sex and parentally approved marriage, even if she boldly defies other conventions. (Edward Neill thinks the Eliza story hints that Willoughby has probably had sex with or at least "taken liberties" with Marianne, but nothing in the text supports this. Indeed, as Mary Waldron has noted, no one in the novel ever impugns Marianne's reputation. Since Mrs Jennings and Sir John's predilection for talking about other people is shared by most of the characters in the book, and since many of the characters freely discuss Marianne's affairs, the absence of slander about Marianne is the more striking and shows the care with which Austen avoided any intimation of sexual involvement.) 35 Marianne does not try to elope with her first love, as did the elder Eliza, or allow herself to be seduced by Willoughby's charms, as did the younger. In a novel full of deceitful, selfish, or unfaithful men, her restraint is one of the clearest indicators that she possesses fully as much sense as sensibility. Brandon first admires her because she resembles his lost Eliza, but to Elinor he marks the difference: "Had the natural sweet disposition of the one been guarded by a firmer mind, or an happier marriage, she might have been all that you will live to see the other be" (208). The elder Eliza lacked Marianne's supportive family, but she also lacked Marianne's "firmer mind." Thus the Eliza story reinforces what critics since at least the 1980s have been trying to get readers to see: Austen has no

Johnson offers the most insightful discussion of how Marianne's illness rewrites novelistic convention (64–69). Consumptive death as a punishment for passion persists throughout the century and in various genres; see *La Traviata* (1853) and *La Bohème* (1896).

³⁴ Wiltshire, 45-46.

³⁵ Edward Neill, The Politics of Jane Austen (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), 43; Mary Waldron, Jane Austen and the Fiction of Her Time (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 83.

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intention of setting up a good sister and a bad, one all sense and one all sensibility. Rather, she creates a far more complex look at how Marianne, Elinor, or any other woman must negotiate between passion and prudence—to say nothing of finances, families, social expectations, and the myriad other forces whose action she cannot escape.

The second passage mirrored by the Eliza story seems never to have been recognized as such. Even more than Marianne, Edward Ferrars plays the part of an Eliza—more like the first Eliza than the second, indeed, because the venereal disease in the elder Eliza's story appears metaphorically in Edward's history as a contagion of unhappiness. Like Eliza, Edward has been seduced: Eliza into an adulterous affair, Edward into a foolish and long-regretted engagement with Lucy Steele. Just as Eliza "falls" because of ill-treatment from her guardian and then her husband, Edward "falls" because of ill-treatment from the authority figure in his life, the mother who forbids him to pursue the clerical career he desires, keeps him out of Oxford for a year, and refuses to give him his independence. Eliza is young, uneducated, and weak; Edward is young, inexperienced, and bored. Edward carries the taint of his engagement with him just as Eliza carries the taint of the disease that kills her. Discontented and depressed, he cannot state or act on his love for Elinor, and his unhappiness puzzles her and undercuts her pleasure during the short time together at Barton that Austen gives them. Austen then removes Edward and substitutes Lucy, who proceeds to torment Elinor like some lingering secret disease: Elinor suffers but cannot speak of what ails her. This state of affairs persists until Lucy finally frees Edward by running off with his brother, creating one last parallel between the Edward and Eliza stories. Like Eliza with her "first seducer," Edward is ultimately abandoned, although, in his case, happily.

By making Edward into a type of seduced maiden, Austen, of course, inverts the traditional seduction story. This time the sexual predator is female, the "victim" male. (Quotation marks seem appropriate because Austen makes Edward a victimizer as well as a victim; even the forgiving Elinor admits that he was wrong to lead her on.) Austen's inversion softens the critique of male dominance presented in the Eliza story: Mrs Ferrars's matriarchal tyranny is every bit as harsh as the patriarchal rule that divides Brandon and Eliza, and in Lucy, scheming females are proven to do nearly as much harm as

male libertines such as Eliza's "first seducer" or Willoughby. 36 At the same time, however, the inversion emphasizes how men as well as women suffer in a system that too often regards sex and marriage as opportunities for exploitation. In other respects as well, casting Edward as a seduced maiden reinforces the radicalism of the Eliza story. The similarities between his role and Eliza's emphasize the immorality of marrying for money, which was Lucy's goal in hanging onto Edward after their initial attraction has vanished and her reason for abandoning him once he has been disinherited. The similarities also enhance the critique of primogeniture laid out when Eliza is forced to marry Brandon's elder brother: because Edward is the eldest, his mother and sister cannot be satisfied with letting him be a clergyman; they want to "get him into parliament, or to see him connected with some of the great men of the day" despite his evident disinclination for such a life (16). When at eighteen he resists, "idleness was pronounced on the whole to be the most advantageous and honourable" profession for an eldest son (103). Likewise, the similarities between Edward and Eliza supplement Austen's critique of the miseducation of women by revealing the frequent miseducation of upper-class men. Ultimately, the substitution of Mrs Ferrars for Eliza's male guardian or Lucy for Eliza's first seducer does little to defuse the radical charge of the novel, which remains a powerful protest against the selfish exploitation of others.

Austen's allusion to venereal disease in the Eliza story thus has the same potential for social criticism that critics have recently seen in the allusions to syphilis previously discovered in *Emma* and *Persuasion*, although without the comic elements of those references. In *Emma*, readers may recall, Mr Woodhouse keeps trying to remember the rest of "Kitty, a fair but frozen maid," his would-be contribution to Harriet's book of riddles. In 1975, Alice Chandler noted that this riddle comes from a risqué allegory for venereal infection and its cure; Kitty kindles "a flame I still deplore." Recently, Jill Heydt-Stevenson has interpreted the riddle as a coded but fierce criticism of

Poovey and Wallace have already made it difficult to read the novel as a straightforward protest against male oppression. Each argues that Austen repeatedly excuses her male characters by making them the victims of "excess[ive]" or "monstrous" women: Edward's passivity and perhaps unintentional unfairness to Elinor are the fault of his mother, sister, and fiancée, while Willoughby can blame Mrs Smith, the second Eliza, and perhaps even Marianne. Poovey, 189; Wallace, 33.

³⁷ Alice Chandler, "'A Pair of Fine Eyes': Jane Austen's Treatment of Sex," *Studies in the Novel* 7:1 (Spring 1975), 88–103.

the marriage market, and shown the implications behind what might seem like a throw-away line.³⁸ A similarly disguised reference to syphilis appears in Austen's *Persuasion*, again in the form of an in-joke with serious connotations. In volume two of that novel, Sir Walter Elliot assumes that the "greatly improved" Anne has been using Gowland's Lotion, the vanguisher of Mrs Clay's freckles.³⁹ In 1983, Nora Crook argued that Austen's readers might have seen more in this remark than Sir Walter's usual thoughtlessness. Two years before Persuasion appeared, Reece's Gazette of Health publically exposed Gowland's Lotion as containing the same ingredient—corrosive sublimate of mercury—most often used in treating venereal cases. Crook suggests that the reference may therefore hint at the general corruption of the well-born Elliot family: Mrs Clay almost marries Sir Walter Elliot and does become the mistress of his heir. "It seems decidedly possible that her use of the discredited Gowland's ... would have been a very pointed reference indeed to certain readers." Crook's surmise is made still more persuasive by three pamphlets advertising Gowland's Lotion, published between 1792 and 1806, which specifically suggest Gowland's for "scorbutic eruptions." Scurvy, though known to be a different disease, was nonetheless one euphemism for pox. It seems undeniable, therefore, that Austen permitted herself a reference to one of her era's most dreaded and unmentionable diseases in laying out her attack on the Elliots. 40 In Sense and Sensibility, the allusion to syphilis permits Austen to speak out more broadly still against self-interest, oppression, and a range of social ills. The story of the two Elizas naturally carries none of the comic overtones of the other references; seduction and death cannot be treated as lightly as freckles or forgotten riddles.

³⁸ Jill Heydt-Stevenson, "'Slipping into the Ha-Ha': Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen's Novels," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 55:3 (December 2000), 316–23. Provocatively, Heydt-Stevenson also imagines Austen teasing *Emma*'s readers with intimations that Mr Woodhouse's infirmity could be tertiary syphilis—a delightful reading even if Heydt-Stevenson's evidence is medically shaky.

³⁹ Austen, *Persuasion*, in *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (1811; reprint, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 145–46.

⁴⁰ Nora Crook, "Gowland's Lotion," [letter to the editor] *Times Literary Supplement* (7 October 1983), 1089, cols 1–2. A typical link between scurvy and venereal disease appears in Robinson's chapter entitled "Of relieving the venereal lues or French disease, when it degenerates into the scurvy; vulgarly called the scorbutic pox." Robinson argues that the pox "frequently terminates" in scurvy if not well cured (371). Closer to Austen's own time, Buchan's 1796 *Observations* warms that "Afflictions of the skin which pass for scorbutic, are not infrequently of the venereal kind" (163).

The presence of venereal disease in *Sense and Sensibility* becomes even more interesting when we turn to Colonel Brandon, the man who narrates and serves as a principal actor in each of the Eliza stories. In Austen criticism, Brandon remains a figure of enormous controversy, a figure onto whom readers have been able to project almost anything. Many an Austen fan has expressed dislike for the passive Edward. This dislike pales, though, when compared to the outright hatred often expressed for Colonel Brandon. The most extreme representative of the Brandon-haters is Melvin Mudrick, who in 1952 made all future criticism of Brandon anticlimactic by proclaiming that "If Edward Ferrars is dull, Colonel Brandon is a vacuum" and that by marrying off Brandon and Marianne, Austen ruined her ending: "Marianne, the life and center of the novel, has been betrayed; and not by Willoughby."41 Others have since added to this portrait: Neill implies that Brandon is no better than a stalker; Maaja A. Stewart associates him with British imperialism in India; Alison G. Sulloway reduces him to a naive and sentimental granny figure; Mary Poovey portrays him as self-centred and terrified of any female sexuality not under his control; Barbara K. Seeber argues for his complicity in the falls of both Elizas; and so on. 42 Others have read him more positively, noting his frequent superiority to other secondary characters and even going so far as to see him as the novel's moral authority. 43 Still a third group has argued for Brandon as romantic hero: after mourning his first love for years and comforting her last hours, he falls in love with Marianne at first sight and remains true to her even when his love looks hopeless. He also has the romantic past of a hero: hidden heartache, service as a soldier, experience in the exotic East, the rescue of not one but two fallen women, a duel over honour. Not least, he has the Willoughby-like ability to win Elinor's

⁴¹ Marvin Mudrick, Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 93.

⁴² Neill, 39; Maaja A. Stewart, Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 74; Alison G. Sulloway, Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989), 53; Poovey, 190–94; and Barbara K. Seeber, "'I See Every Thing As You Desire Me to Do': The Scolding and Schooling of Marianne Dashwood," Eighteenth-Century Fiction 11:2 (January 1999), 227, and General Consent in Jane Austen: A Study of Dialogism (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 71–72.

⁴³ See, for example, David Monaghan, *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1980), 47, 59–63; and Darrel Mansell, *The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973), 73.

sympathy with a vivid story of thwarted passion.⁴⁴ Until quite recently, however, most readers of *Sense and Sensibility* have objected vociferously to his marrying Marianne, some claiming that the match represents the triumph of oppressive convention, some seeing him as Austen's way of punishing and thus warning readers against Marianne's excess, some seeing the ending as a narrative failure or a convention adapted from inferior fiction, and some simply allying themselves with Richardson's reader Lady Bradshaigh, who felt that the lady and the dashing rake belong together no matter what the author may intend.⁴⁵

Readers are entitled to hate Marianne's marriage to Brandon as much as they please, although analyses of the novel's ending have tended to be disturbingly selective about which of Austen's lines they choose to use as ammunition one way or another. But how is Colonel Brandon's character or his suitability for Marianne affected if we read the elder Eliza's consumption as a euphemism for venereal infection? Brandon-haters are likely to take the reference as yet more proof of Brandon's culpability: Eliza fell and was infected because he absented himself, and his narrative suggests that when he found her again his primary concern was with his own pain. 46 This argument must work around certain inconvenient facts: Brandon was forcibly exiled until Eliza's marriage; he then absented himself to give them both time to recover from their early affection; and although he does indeed focus on his own suffering when narrating Eliza's story to Elinor, his pain results from "What I endured in so beholding her" (180).

Yet even were the reader to accede to this view of Brandon, the reference to venereal disease makes it almost impossible to see his marriage to Marianne as either a punishment or a triumph of convention. Brandon's knowledge of a world tainted by debauchery

⁴⁴ Defenders of Brandon as a romantic hero include Isobel Armstrong, Jane Austen: "Sense and Sensibility" (London and New York: Penguin, 1994), 75–80, and Anne Crippen Ruderman, The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 79–80. Another vigorous advocate of Brandon is Gene W. Ruoff, Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility" (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992).

⁴⁵ The list of vociferous objectors includes writers as diverse as Mudrick, Poovey, Tony Tanner, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Seeber, to name but a few from the last fifty years. Strong defenders of the marriage include Johnson and Ruderman. See Mudrick, 82–93; Poovey, 183–94; Tanner, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 100–2; Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 818–37; Seeber, *General Consent in Jane Austen*, 27–37; Johnson, 49–72; Ruderman, 79–81. On Lady Bradshaigh, see T.C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel, *Samuel Richardson: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 221–25.

⁴⁶ See Poovey, 191, and Seeber, "'I See Every Thing As You Desire Me to Do,'" 227.

and venereal disease—and especially his knowledge of their horrible consequences for women—shows that he is no symbol of propriety or restrictive social convention. Still less is he Marianne's punishment for excessive sensibility. His narrative affirms his own sensibility by placing him in a sentimental tableau far beyond any imagined or experienced by Marianne: at the bedside of the fallen woman whose disease spares her just long enough for "a better preparation for death" (207). Likewise, he is no controlling patriarch. Although now the patron of a village rather than a would-be-eloper second son, he never enforces his authority, and his one visible act of patronage, offering the living to Edward, is performed through Elinor and precipitated by his own sense of the "cruelty ... of dividing, or attempting to divide, two young people" as attached to each other as he imagines Lucy and Edward to be (282). He fails the second Eliza precisely by granting her too much freedom for her age and asserts that his own imprudence should be blamed for her seduction in Bath. More importantly, he keeps silent about Willoughby's crime as long as he thinks Marianne is finding what she wants in Willoughby's attentions—just the opposite of a man who wishes to control the woman who attracts him. 47 Although he surely wishes to offer himself as a protector and his motives in narrating the Eliza story may indeed be conflicted, as critics starting with Patricia Meyer Spacks have argued (and as Brandon himself worries), he admires rather than seeks to suppress the passionate side of Marianne, and he waits on the sidelines rather than seeking to take advantage of the effect his story has on either of the Dashwood sisters. 48

Once venereal disease is read into Eliza's consumption, in short, Brandon comes to represent a realism far beyond any that most characters in this book will ever confront. He has stood outside the pale of the genteelly awful society that Austen depicts, and he has seen that the corollary of its concern for propriety and appearance—the things for want of which even Elinor castigates Marianne—is its willingness to cast the fallen woman permanently into ignominy and disease. True, neither he nor Jane Austen has entirely rejected its codes. Eliza the second and her child have been "removed ... into the

⁴⁷ Here I obviously disagree with Seeber's interpretation that Brandon is "protecting his own secret rather than Marianne's happiness." *General Consent in Jane Austen*, 72.

⁴⁸ Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The Difference It Makes," Soundings 64 (1981), 354-55.

country" and are never mentioned again (211).⁴⁹ But he represents the world into which, most recent critics agree, both Elinor and Marianne are still growing—a distressingly real and often painful place despite its rich rewards; a world in which sense and sensibility are always problematic yet both essential.

Reading Eliza's consumption as a euphemism for venereal disease thus supports the view of Sense and Sensibility as a progressive novel, one very much concerned with class, gender, and authority. It reminds Austen's readers that she was well aware of issues such as adultery, prostitution, and disease, even when she tackled them euphemistically or in the romantic language of fiction. It reinforces the now-prevalent view that Marianne (like her sister) embodies both sensibility and sense. It casts a little light on Edward's problematic character, and it helps reconcile readers to Brandon and thus to the ending of Austen's novel. Itself merely a tiny detail, Eliza's encoded disease is nonetheless linked to many of the chief controversies concerning Sense and Sensibility. Perhaps, then, it is not too much to speculate that Austen deliberately left a hint that the elder Eliza's death contains more than it appears to upon first reading. When Brandon finally finds Eliza in her debtor's prison, "she was, to all appearance, in the last stage of a consumption" (207). As so often in this novel, appearances deceive.

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⁴⁹ Johnson suggests that Marianne and Brandon will become guardians to the pair (69). This view lends support to her reading of Sense and Sensibility as progressive social critique: its good characters refuse to ignore the world's nastier realities as, for instance, John Dashwood ignores his sisters' poverty or Lucy ignores Edward's feelings. But Wallace makes a stronger case for seeing the disappearance of Eliza and her child as a sign of Austen's inability to mount a full challenge to the sexual triple standard. Mrs Smith may demand that Willoughby marry the younger Eliza, but neither Austen nor anyone else in the novel believes that a gentleman might marry an illegitimate pregnant girl (36). Johnson was the first to point out the radicalism of Mrs Smith's demand. Joan Aiken's revisionist sequel Eliza's Daughter (New York: St Martin's Press, 1994) begins with the premise that no one wanted the younger Eliza's child.