“I OUGHT TO FEEL IT”: THE IDEOLOGY AND AFFECT OF SENSIBILITY IN BURNEY, AUSTEN, AND WOLLSTONECRAFT

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: A Letter to a Friend: Burney’s Evelina and the Affect of Audience........ 11

Chapter Two: Vindicating Sensibility: Wollstonecraft’s Use of Rhetorical Sensibility 31

Chapter Three: Fluttering Nerves and Fainting Fits: Performances of Sensibility in Pride and Prejudice...................................................................................................................... 51

Conclusion .............................................................................................................................................. 70

Notes ....................................................................................................................................................... 73

Bibliography ........................................................................................................................................... 76
INTRODUCTION

The sheer number of ways words evoke emotion indicates the emotional charge carried by almost every word. . . . I would add association and connotation, or those feelings that have become attached to particular objects and words. A connotation can be private (the emotional residue of an earlier association, say) or public (emotions learned from the culture), and it is the latter that concerns me here. ... Connotation and association mean that every word in a passage floats on a pool of feeling, and that is just the beginning. Contagion, identification, dramatization, reaction and representation all trigger emotions within the reader. Because emotion begins as reaction, in fact, everything from fine detail to the crudest plot evokes it. But what is important is not the number of emotions, but their interaction and the subtle meanings that such exchanges express.

—Keith Opdahl, Emotion as Meaning

In Jane Austen and the War of Ideas, Marilyn Butler writes, “With few really good novels to its credit the movement known as sentimentalism is nevertheless fascinating for the contribution it makes towards the representation of the inner life, and its active engagement of the reader’s imaginative sympathy” (7). This, in essence, is the originating impetus of my work. It is not, however, the only point I hope to make as I read Frances Burney’s 1778 novel Evelina, or the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World, Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 political text A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and two fictional works Mary (1789) and The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria (1798), and Jane Austen’s 1813 novel Pride and Prejudice. Butler, among others, has already made an argument for the connection between emotion and the sentimental novel—the very term “sentimental novel” alludes to the essential presence of feelings in
the genre—and I would only be redundant if my work focused solely on “the representation of the inner life, and its active engagement of the reader’s imaginative sympathy.” Rather, I engage the idea of sympathy as an integral component of eighteenth-century culture and the resulting ideology of sensibility, not among readers but through the interactions between these author’s characters, as well as the narrative devices used to foster and complicate those interactions. Essential to my own ideas of sensibility in these texts is the inclusion of affect theory, both in how characters affect and are affected by the expressions of their fellows, as well as how performance enhances those affects.

Samuel Johnson’s definition of “sensibility” in the 1785 edition of his *Dictionary of the English Language* is comparatively short and unsatisfactory: “Quickness of sensation; quickness of reception” (596). “Sentiment” is nearly as disappointing, being defined only as “thought, notion, opinion,” and “the sense considered distinctly from the language or things, a striking sentence in a composition” (S. Johnson 597); “sentimental” is not included at all. It seems only natural, then, that various eighteenth-century texts are consumed with the interpretation of “sensibility” and what it meant to be a “sentimental novel”—or a “sentimental” anything else, for that matter. Jean Hagstrum writes in *Sex and Sensibility: Ideal and Erotic Love from Milton to Mozart* of the term “sentimental” that “we saw that its meaning was in the process of shifting from idea to feeling, from the rational to the intellectual to the emotional and amatory” (161). From referring to thoughts and opinions, “sentimental” evolved to include feelings, thus
eliding into an interchangeable use with “sensibility,” the definition of which was also in flux, coming to mean not only quickness of feeling, but a certain depth and type of emotional capability (Barker-Benfield xvii). In his comprehensive book *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Gerard Barker-Benfield examines the social effects of the popularity of the so-called “novel of sensibility.” He states that,

> according to the evidence of sentimental fiction, the ambiguous values of a fine “sensibility” took on a particular meaning in the relations between women and men. The aggrandizement of a certain kind of consciousness on the one hand was associated with the power of intellect, imagination, the pursuit of pleasure, the exercise of mental superiority, and wished-for resistance to men. On the other, it betokened physical and mental inferiority, sickness, and inevitable victimization, circumstances throwing severe doubt on the effectiveness of the female will. (36)

Sensibility, therefore, had come to be a factor in designating the social differences between men and women, constituting separate physical, mental, and emotion roles for each sex.

This shift in meaning has come to us through literature, where, Janet Todd points out, “[t]he arousal of pathos through conventional situations, stock familial characters and rhetorical devices is the mark of sentimental literature. Such literature buttonholes the reader and demands an emotional, even physical response” (2). Yet, as Walter Wright
argues, though novels written in a sentimental vein were not necessarily of the highest quality, “they provided a more nearly complete picture of the inward psychological life of man than did the writers who ignored the emotional forces which motivate action” (151). It is this “inward psychological life” on which I focus here, considering how Austen, Burney, and Wollstonecraft utilize affect created by the language and performance of emotion in order to engage with the conventions of sensibility in their work. Despite a span of nearly forty years between the publication of *Evelina* and *Pride and Prejudice* (with Wollstonecraft’s work falling almost exactly in the middle), all three authors share a tendency to promote sensibility while simultaneously critiquing it. “[N]ovelists of sensibility,” Joseph Bartolomeo states, “regularly urge upon readers a sympathy—a literal feeling *with* characters—inevitably encouraging further attention to the workings of the mind and heart” (109, emphasis mine). Though Burney, Austen, and especially Wollstonecraft are not normally termed “novelists of sensibility,” these women have produced works which include the sentimental conventions that constitute the genre as listed by Todd. What I want to emphasize is that while readers certainly experience sympathy—“literal feeling with characters”—when reading, authors produce these feelings in readers by creating affect between their characters; if a reader is “feeling with” a character, that character must first feel something for the reader to experience.

How and when characters influence readers’ emotions has been examined by other critics as well. Barbara Benedict considers how authors framed their narratives of
sensibility, arguing that sentimental fiction “seeks to modify excessive sympathy … [by allowing] a spectatorial distance to rationalize instinctive response” (9). She writes (in a statement which I think may help bridge the gap between the authors of the first half of the eighteenth century, such as Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, and those of the later half of the century, like Austen, a nearly 60 year hiatus during which Ian Watt caustically states nothing good was produced):

The earlier fictions evoke an identifiable set of social values to which private feelings should conform; using the moralistic structures of satire and fable, they speak through autobiographical, epistolary, and didactic voices to model the reconciliation of self and society. From the 1770s, however, sentimental fictions become more pessimistic about the liberating effect of feeling, and structure their sentiment within detached narratives. In all these texts, however, the conventions of plot, character and language that structure genre work to separate the reader from too unbridled an identification with the sentimental characters in the story and to criticize excess and feminine feeling. (18)

The idea Benedict postulates regarding sympathy—that sentimental fiction (at least that of the later eighteenth century) intends to regulate sympathy, to draw the reader away from too great a fellow-feeling with the characters portrayed in the later novels by creating a spectatorial distance—conflicts with Bartolomeo’s account and suggests that the manner of depiction of sensibility is important in creating affect. Yet, as we see in
Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, fellow-feeling, or sympathy, is necessarily a condition based upon spectatorship. One cannot, he says, actually feel what another person feels; one must imagine oneself in the same situation in order to have sympathy, and can only think about how he or she would feel in that particular circumstance (2). Sympathy, therefore, is a method whereby a person is affected by another through visual communication.

Benedict expresses some intriguing points regarding the shift in narrative style inherent in eighteenth-century literature, but I am not convinced that sentimental fiction worked to separate the reader from sympathy; instead, sympathy and the affect it creates are, I believe, an integral part of how the ideology of sensibility helped to construct the female reader—and necessarily, therefore, the female writer—as Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Markman Ellis writes in *The Politics of Sensibility* that “[r]eading sentimental fiction, then, was to be an improving experience, refining the manners by exercising the ability to feel for others” (17). While some writers, like Wollstonecraft in particular, attempted to shape their readers via a disdain for the sentimental, the ideology of sensibility runs too deeply through these texts for any reader or writer to have completely escaped its effects. Paul Goring’s work on embodiment of sensibility in the eighteenth century embraces the idea that sensibility was transmitted not only through books but through certain gestures and displays as well. In *The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, he explores how body language, particularly that of actors and readers of novels (though not necessarily
the novels themselves), plays a part in how sensibility is perceived by society.

“Sentimental fiction,” he writes,

insists upon an association between visible emotionalism and modern virtue, but the actual eloquence of bodies represented in fiction—the basis of their emotive hold over readers, and thus the basis of their social potential—hangs not only upon their embodiment of eighteenth-century thinking about the passions’ visibility, but also upon the mechanics of the scenes in which they are depicted. (153, emphasis mine)

It is the way in which bodies act and react, therefore, which provides expressive quality, and thus the way those bodies are seen, hinging on the idea of spectatorship—how they affect, in other words—which produces sympathy. Goring focuses on readers and communal reaction; I focus on how characters within these texts see each other, how they are sympathetic to each other, and how that sympathy, which becomes affect, creates an atmosphere which promotes the ideology of sensibility, thus, again as Armstrong argues, constituting the eighteenth-century female and her desires, regardless of how the author may wish to challenge that ideology.

Integral to my argument is the process by which Austen, Burney, and Wollstonecraft produce affect between their characters. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg write in their introduction to The Affect Theory Reader that “affect arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and to be acted upon” (1). “Affect,” they continue, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces—
visceral forces, beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion—that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability. (1)

More simply, affect is what occurs when humans feel: when we are made to feel by events and people around us or when we make those same people feel. And, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank point out in their “A Note on the Text” in *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, the face is “where affect happens” more than any other place on the body. In order to know another person has been affected, we must see affect occur; we engage in spectatorship. This spectatorship assumes distance; affect exists in the spectatorial separation that Benedict suggests produces limitation in the influence of sensibility in eighteenth-century literature. “Situations,” therefore, whether they are real or fictional, “are affective given the gap between the impressions we have of others, and the impressions we make on others, all of which are lively,” writes Sara Ahmed (37). Perception matters in determining how and what people—and characters—feel and therefore in how they affect and are affected. Essentially, as Ahmed points out, “we judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pain or pleasure” (31). Keith Opdahl writes in *Emotion as Meaning* that “emotion surrounds the images and ideas in the text, qualifying their
meaning and forming a pool of feelings, all of which fuse to form an essentially new entity, the representing emotion” (60), and “emotion also carries messages outside the body, to other people. To feel an emotion is to receive a message—a stunningly suggestive point” (62). Judgment, sharing emotions, sympathy, and most importantly, as a product of each of these, sensibility all occur in the in-between-ness of individuals.

“Affects can be, and are,” Sedgwick writes in her introduction to Touching Feeling, “attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects” (19). Clearly, affects can be, and perhaps should be more often, related to just about any topic, text, thought, and idea.

It seems odd, then, that very little has been written on any one of the texts I explore here in terms of affect. “The affect system,” Sedgwick and Frank state, “provides the primary motives of human beings” (36). As such, emotions and people’s reactions to them create the drama, the comedy, and the tragedy of literature. More than that, “[o]ut of the marriage of reason with affect there issues clarity with passion. Reason without affect would be impotent, affect without reason would be blind. The combination of affect and reason guarantees man’s high degree of freedom” (Sedgwick and Frank 37).

Here lies a central issue explored by all three authors, as British women in the late eighteenth century who witnessed the intellectual and political turmoil of that period, with whose works I engage in this project: where do and where should reason and emotion—or affect—or sensibility—intersect in their heroines? Each of these authors
utilizes sensibility in order to represent affect in the female characters she has created, pitting reason against emotion in the performances of sensibility that affect her heroines and the characters with whom they interact. In these performances, those written, verbal, and physical, Burney, Austen, and Wollstonecraft attempt to locate the proper place of sensibility within the constitution of the eighteenth-century female. While all may not fully answer the question of where and where should affect and reason interact, each explores sensibility in her own way, forced by a deeply ingrained ideology of what makes a “proper lady” to rely on sensibility to both perpetuate and critique the conventions they examine.
CHAPTER ONE
A LETTER TO A FRIEND: BURNEY’S EVELINA AND THE AFFECT OF AUDIENCE

The letter as sign has no intrinsic meaning in itself but takes on meaning only through the intersubjective relations among senders, receivers and holders.

—Joanne Cutting-Gray, Woman as ‘Nobody’ and the Novels of Fanny Burney

But the letter form has a great advantage over the body as a way of expressing sensibility since it requires no present spectator.

—Janet Todd, Sensibility

Coming on the heels of such literary giants as Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, and Sterne, Frances Burney’s debut novel Evelina seems at first to contribute little more to eighteenth-century literary culture than a well-written epistolary novel conforming to the traditions of the sentimental. Her heroine, fresh from the country, must attempt to adapt to city life, attract a husband, avoid the disadvantage of some rather unsavory relatives, and reclaim her true heritage, all the while entertaining an audience who read of her trials and tribulations along with her foster-father, Mr. Villars, and her dear friend, Maria Mirvan. As Joanne Cutting-Gray adroitly writes of Burney,

[i]n a period of great formal invention—Fielding’s comic epic in prose,

Richardson’s writing to the moment, Sterne’s discontinuous narratives—her work was credited with literary charm. She was praised for depicting the life and manners of a world in which overwrought heroines, lacking experience, found their innocence threatened. Though thwarted by social
entanglements, her proper heroines endured their female difficulties and were rewarded with marriage. (3)

“Literary charm” is perhaps not the most laudatory of praise, more patronizing than flattering, and certainly devalues the influence of Burney’s work on the female authors who succeeded her. *Evelina*, while a delightful, amusing—and, yes, even charming—read, does more than simply present a pattern card of female behavior, instructing its readers on proper manners in overcoming “social entanglements,” facing “female difficulties,” and earning the “reward” of a husband; the novel also demonstrates, through the exchange of letters, specifically Evelina’s own writing, the affects that influence the types and degrees of sensibility displayed by the characters. Burney creates a heroine who simultaneously reacts as both a typical woman of sensibility and a critic of such behavior. What results is a narrative that questions the construction of the public female while at the same time perpetuating that same figure. Burney’s so-called “literary charm,” therefore, camouflages a deeper meaning within *Evelina*: the way a woman represents herself through actions and speech not only affects and is affected by those with whom she interacts, but is also contingent upon the underlying ideological social construction that produces a common language of emotion and thought among the women who share that construction. This exchange, sometimes occurring on an unconscious level, is further complicated by the narrative form in *Evelina*; letter-writing itself reshapes the representation of feminine communication.

The epistolary novel offers a unique perspective into both eighteenth-century culture
and the interactions of public and private, not as it regards the Habermasian public
sphere or the larger market economy, but rather the politics of human emotions. *Evelina*
is a case study in the mediating effect of affect in letters; while she interjects her own
feelings into her descriptions to Mr. Villars, the majority of what she writes is in
actuality a recitation of the public events she experiences. Public made private is made
public through Evelina’s writing. In *The Secret History of Domesticity*, a study of the
complex intertwining of the public and private spheres in the eighteenth century,
Michael McKeon states that “[o]ne of the most ostentatious ways the private gets
publicized … is through the publication of private letters. Even in itself, correspondence
—personal sentiments exchanged with another person—evokes the mediating
doubleness of the private made public” (80). Though he relates this concept specifically
to Richard Steele and Joseph Addison’s periodicals in which the authors printed “letters
they received, making their private correspondents their public coauthors and their
reading public private writers,” this same overlapping, the “mediating doubleness,” can
be applied to the epistolary novel as what McKeon calls “public fictions of the private
mode” (80–81). Just as the words and sentiments of those people who wrote to Steele
and Addison became figures of public scrutiny via the tendering of what may have been
intended for private viewing to a much larger audience earlier in the century, the letters
that fashion the epistolary as a narrative form rely on this same concept. What is meant
to be a private communication between the character who writes the letters and the
character who reads them is instead opened to the public. In Burney’s debut novel,
“[Evelina’s] writing … oscillates between public and private, opening a space for a new sense of identity, a name other than private nobody and public innocent” (Cutting-Gray 5). Evelina, therefore—and more importantly, her emotional development—is made available to readers as a text, a body to be read, through her own writing.

_Evelina_ as a text is not unique; Richardson’s novels especially are analyzed over and over as examples of the sentimental novel written in the epistolary form. In discussing the representation of consciousness in the eighteenth-century novel, specifically the epistolary novel, Joe Bray writes:

Richardson’s novels initiated and inspired a trend which dominated the novel in the second half of the eighteenth century and has been called the sentimental novel or the novel of sensibility. Both terms, ‘sentimental’ and ‘sensibility’, contain within them the signs of a new struggle within consciousness; between feelings on the one hand and reason on the other. This period is generally said to privilege the representation of feelings and emotions, witnessed in the physical responses of a passive, suffering heroine. ... It has less often been appreciated that the letter also offers the opportunity for reasoned, rational thought as characters order their experiences and present them to their correspondents. Often torn between the fevered passion of their experiencing self and the calm reason of their narrating self, fictional letter-writers of the period experience turbulent and sometimes unresolvable psychological crises.
The mediating doubleness between public and private that McKeon states is inherent in the letter form as a method of communication, especially as iterated in *Evelina*, is presented here by Bray as the conflicting consciousnesses of “experiencing” and “narrating” selves. In the recitation of Evelina’s public interactions, her visits to the opera, to balls, to Lady Howard’s country house, and to her uncouth relatives’ home, her narrating self is what presents the scene, the other characters, and the lines to her readers almost as if her life were a drama and she the playwright who records what happens to her experiencing self for her correspondent. Whereas these somewhat mundane social situations may have “once been seen as narrative weaknesses in Burney’s writing,” the “charm” of her work might instead be considered a sophisticated exercise where the “[n]arrative gaps … open in her works when the female characters … must resort to sickness, madness, or fits of hysteria in order to be heard, that is, to become nameable” (Cutting-Gray 4). Evelina, then, must use silence or confusion in order to make sense of her world, returning to her letters in order to recapitulate events in a manner that she can understand and convey to her correspondent. This idea of temporal, and even spatial, separation conflicts with what has been general opinion regarding epistolary novels. The genre, Bray writes, “is often thought to present a relatively unsophisticated and transparent version of subjectivity, as its letter-writers apparently jot down whatever is passing through their heads at the moment of writing” (1). Rather than conforming to a more contemporary idea of narrative
consciousness, that is, the epistolary might previously have been described as perpetuating a stream-of-consciousness style of writing, closer to an inner monologue than the sophisticated method of story-telling more commonly found in later novels.

Part of this tendency in critical thought may stem simply from the tense used by an author in writing, i.e. the somewhat irrational logic of Pamela’s journalling in the present tense as it was later satirized by Fielding’s Shamela writing of her rape literally as it occurs. The criticism by Richardson’s contemporaries lingers in the pages of texts still read today, but this convention of the genre may not have disappeared in later works despite having been revealed in their predecessors. Many epistolary works “usually do not describe experience through the voice of an ironic narrator,” Barbara Benedict writes; “rather, they use the epistolary form to present sentiment even as it is being experienced and thus to stir the reader’s response” (93). When considered with Bray’s idea that the conflict of rational thought (“the calm reason of their narrating self”) and emotion (“the fevered passion of their experiencing self”) is transparent in the characters who write the letters constructing the frame-work for epistolary novels, Benedict’s assumption of letter writers “present[ing] sentiment even as it is being experienced” becomes problematic. If the majority of epistolary novels do in fact contain narratives written in the present tense, describing events and emotions as if they are occurring at the moment of the act of writing, Evelina stands on less populated ground, since Evelina does not write of events in the present, only of those in the past, mediating them through her letters. Indeed, a factor that would separate Burney’s single
epistolary novel from other sentimental epistolary texts is that Evelina’s “[t]houghts and feelings are not as unmediated and transparent in the fictional letter as has often been supposed” (Bray 2). This is evident in the statement Evelina makes in her first letter to Mr. Villars from London: “I shall write to you every evening all that passes in the day, and that in the same manner as, if I could see, I should tell you” (Burney 21, emphasis mine). She pledges to “write … every evening,” allowing for the passing of time between the event and her transcription of it, and will do so how she would “tell” him. There is a certain assumption of authenticity and sincerity in her promise here—her very naiveté would not allow her to purposely deceive her foster father—but within the word “tell” exists a discrepancy between any actuality and the recitation of what occurred, particularly if she “could see” him as she did so. Nor do we find, in any letter, anything resembling “all” of her daily activities; using the chamber pot is perhaps an extreme example (and I imagine few audiences, fictional or otherwise, would respond favorably to scatophilia from any writer other than Swift) but one still effective in elucidating the missing information that would complete the ubiquitous “all that passes” for Evelina. Here, then, is the mediation of thought and feeling Bray attributes to the epistolary as a narrative form.

This mediation is what regulates the effect of Evelina’s affects—and by this I mean who affects her, and whom she affects. In constructing her narrative, Burney uses sentimental language frequently and quite deliberately, giving her heroine the typical blushing cheeks, embarrassed and shameful downturned eyes, the tears, and the fainting
that Markman Ellis states are part of “the repertoire of conventions associated with the sentimental rhetoric of the body” (19). As components of sensibility, what Samuel Johnson defined in his *Dictionary* as “quickness of sensation; quickness of reception,” these particular reactions conform to what Gerard Barker-Benfield describes as a “psychoperceptual scheme [that] became a paradigm, meaning not only consciousness in general but a particular kind of consciousness, one that could be further sensitized in order to be more acutely responsive to signals from the outside environment and from inside the body” (S. Johnson 596, Barker-Benfield xvii). Each time Evelina writes to Mr. Villars, her letters emphasize both her emotional and physical reactions to these events. Her disastrous first experience at the balls of London leads her to run from her dance partner, Lord Orville: “He begged to know if I was not well? You may easily imagine how much I was embarrassed. I made no answer, but hung my head, like a fool, and looked on my fan” (Burney 25); of her interactions with the scapegrace Sir Clement Willoughby, she writes, “Overpowered by all that had passed, I had not the strength to make my mortifying explanation;—my spirits quite failed me, and I burst into tears” (39); when she intervenes between Mr. MacCartney and his “suicide,” she tells Mr. Villars:

> When I reached the door, I turned round; I looked fearfully at the pistols, and, impelled by an emotion I could not repress, I hastily stepped back, with an intention of carrying them away: but their wretched owner, perceiving my design, and recovering from his astonishment, darting
suddenly down, seized them both himself.

Wild with fright, and scarce knowing what I did, I caught, almost involuntarily hold of both of his arms, and exclaimed, “O Sir! have mercy on yourself!” …

The moment I reached again the room I had so fearfully left, I threw away the pistols, and flinging myself on the first chair, gave free vent to the feelings I had most painfully stifled, in a violent burst of tears, which, indeed, proved a happy relief to me. (151)

Repeatedly, Evelina records how she acts and how she feels, allowing her correspondent to observe her sentiments, though not immediately. The trait that highlights Evelina as a sentimental heroine, or a lady whose sensibility reigns over her good sense, is exactly what makes this epistolary novel slightly different than others: Evelina waits to tell her story. She is able to consider and determine what exactly she will tell and to whom.

Further complicating the separation of Evelina’s narrating self and her experiencing self and returning to McKeon’s mediating doubleness is the idea that in order for private feelings—the passions of her experiencing self—to be understood by her reader, those emotions must have some communal significance. That is, what emotion she expresses—her sensibility—must be predicated upon a similar feeling having been experienced by her correspondent. “Epistolary novels” like Evelina, Benedict writes, “are the artistic expression of socialized feeling, of individual perception and emotion translated into social communication. Through aesthetic description, emotion becomes spectacle;
through epistolary intercourse, private experience becomes communicable” (116, emphasis mine). Private becomes public once again, not simply in the publication and dispersal of a materiality located within the letter itself but in the very idea that within emotion lies meaning which is social in nature and based in the notion that a letter reader is always-already a spectator of both the events contained within the letter and the feelings publicized therein. Sensibility, therefore, particularly as Burney structures it in *Evelina*, is not merely a state of consciousness in which individuals feel deeply, as Barker-Benfield states; it stretches beyond one person’s feelings or ability to feel. Sensibility implies a collective depth and breadth of social emotion that may be transmitted, even unconsciously, between individuals via a certain type of spectatorship that need not rely on physical proximity. Like Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy, sensibility requires social interaction, requires a link to other human beings in order to become real—if not material, then tangible in its ability to be felt. In this, sensibility directly corresponds with Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg’s theory of affect; its ability to be communicated despite separation makes affect, like sensibility, “[arise] in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon” (1). The very act of writing to another person, thereby producing the “aesthetic description” of what one is feeling, is what creates affect and allows both participants in the exchange of letters, the writer and the reader, to experience emotion, and therefore to have sensibility (Benedict 116). Certainly, as Keith Opdahl speculates, “[p]erhaps emotion was originally a private code that has evolved into a public medium. It is more likely,
however, that emotion was originally a public expression,” evolving until “emotion is a
mode of consciousness that expresses meaning” (61, 65). Emotion, then, as “a mode of
consciousness” like sensibility, affects.

In the distance established through the epistolary—a necessity, since this type of
“narrative of course depends on the separation of its correspondents”—the in-between-
ness of affect occurs (Bray 44). Evelina’s narrating self constantly iterates how she is
affected by what she sees and experiences, interjecting her thoughts on how she ought to
behave or to feel, as well as how others have behaved or communicated their own
feelings to her—how she affects them. Her sensibility, her depth and breadth of feeling,
is no secret, either from her correspondents, from the people she meets in London, or
from a wider literary audience. Her emotions, as she expresses them in her letters, carry
meaning to her readers, whether that meaning is what she intends it to be or not. As
Cutting-Gray states, “[f]eelings are less a subject Evelina takes up than an affective
condition that takes her. … Writing does not merely record her feelings for Orville, it
shapes them, gives space for feelings that draw her into dark alleys. Writing reveals to
her—and others—the pattern of her desires” (24). But not only does writing allow her
to reveal herself to her readers, particularly Mr. Villars, it also allows her to affect him:

Dead to the world, and equally insensible to its pleasures or its pains,
I long since bid adieu to all joy, and defiance to all sorrow, but what
should spring from my Evelina,—sole source, to me, of all earthly
felicity. How strange, then, is it, that the letter in which she tells me that
she is the happiest of human beings, should give me the most mortal
inquietude!

Alas, my child!—that innocence, the first, best gift of Heaven, should
of all others, be the blindest to its own danger,—the most exposed to
treachery,—and the least able to defend itself, in a world where it is little
know, less valued, and perpetually deceived. (Burney 253-4)

Evelina’s letters have clearly spelled out to both Mr. Villars and Burney’s larger
audience what emotions have stirred our heroine; yet, underlying those emotions
obvious to the reader is how Evelina’s guardian perceives them—how they affect him.

For Mr. Villars, Evelina’s approbation for Lord Orville is not based in rational
observation of his admirable qualities. Rather, her “first meeting with [him] was
decisive. … Imagination took the reins, and Reason, slow-paced, though sure-footed,
was unequal to a race with so eccentric and flighty a companion” (254). Her writing
conveys what Villars believes is her incorrect first impression and her subsequent
clinging to a vision of Lord Orville that has since, with her receipt of his inappropriate
letter (which reiterates the ability of affect to emerge from an epistle), been overturned.

The continued narrative of Evelina’s impressions of Orville’s virtues forces Villars to
respond in a manner that reflects his apprehensions onto Evelina—affecting her in turn:
“I have just received your letter,—and it has almost broken my heart!—Oh, Sir! the
illusion is over, indeed!—How vainly have I flattered, how miserably deceived
myself!” (265). Villars’ wariness causes a welling of shame and melancholy in Evelina,
which she then reveals to her reader.

It is in this revelation that we can begin to distinguish where Benedict’s statement regarding the epistolary and the stirring of an emotional response may come into play. Whereas the majority of Evelina’s letters are in fact written as she considers past events, in this particular response to Villars, she focuses on her present feelings: “Oh, Lord Orville, how little do you know the evils I owe to you! how little suppose that, when most dignified by your attention, I was most to be pitied!—and when most exalted by your notice, you were most my enemy!” (266) She articulates her pain, demanding some visceral reaction from Mr. Villars. At the same time, however, we see how Evelina continues to shape herself through her writing:

*His sight is baneful to my repose,—his society is death to my future tranquility!* Oh, Lord Orville! could I have believed that a friendship so grateful to my heart, so soothing to my distresses,—a friendship which, in every respect, did me so much honour, would only serve to embitter all my future moments!—What a strange, what an unhappy circumstance, that my gratitude, though so justly excited, should be so fatal to my peace! (266)

By recalling how she was affected by her association with Orville, her “friendship [that was] so grateful … so soothing … which … did [her] so much honour,” she highlights not only the in-between-ness that inspires her emotions but also how that affect changes her at both times. Like Opdahl’s theory of public expression of private feelings—“as in
those emotion-laden sounds that carry meaning so dramatically”—Evelina directs her statements to Orville through Villars’ letter, knowing Orville will never see them (61). She expresses in writing what she cannot currently say to Orville; “[w]riting gives Evelina an opportunity to speak,” Cutting-Gray writes, “lending her a voice” which she frequently cannot control or use so that “she participates in reordering what puzzles and frightens her” (23). In writing about her affect, Evelina creates a new vision of her world for both herself and her reader.

Through her reinvented reality, Evelina allows her reader to learn not only of her ever-shifting feelings for Lord Orville, but also of her opinions of the ladies with whom she spends her time, both in London, and later in Bristol Hotwells. Her narrating self is able to express certain ideas regarding sensibility in an almost scathing manner—not of her own feelings, but how sensibility is constructed by the women around her. Cutting-Gray, renaming the narrating self, states that our perception of “[t]he Evelina so named (represented) in the journal, however, is not the one who intrigues us as much as the who that narrates and orders the events by writing about them. The Evelina who writes reveals a much more evaluative knowledge of her world than the Evelina she writes about” (18). She is not merely a snivelling miss, lost in her own emotions and languishing over her encounters with Orville (though there is plenty of that as well). Evelina, in creating her own subjectivity through her writing, comments on the “proper” behavior for the women she meets. As discussed above, she is not unable to see her own faults, but she is also critical of the women whom she believes do not prescribe to a
certain standard of sensibility. By describing to Mr. Villars aspects of the Branghton sisters’, Madame Duval’s, and Lady Louisa Larpent’s behavior that do not fall within the realm of what she deems desirable or appropriate and suggesting that she herself has been better educated by her foster-father, Evelina perpetuates a style of inculcation that Nancy Armstrong states was

aimed at producing a woman whose value resided chiefly in her femaleness rather than in traditional signs of status, a woman who possessed psychological depth rather than a physically attractive surface, one who, in other words, excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male. As femaleness was redefined in these terms, the woman exalted by an aristocratic tradition of letters ceased to appear so desirable. In becoming the other side of the sexual coin, the aristocratic woman represented surface instead of depth, embodied material instead of moral value, and displayed idle sensuality instead of constant vigilance and tireless concern for the well-being of others. Such a woman was not truly female. (20)

While neither the Branghtons nor Madame Duval had access to the education of a lady, one which Evelina appears (in both her own words and Mr. Villars’) to demonstrate to its most ideological satisfaction, and can therefore not be held to a higher standard—though Evelina does seem to render judgement on them frequently—Lady Louisa, on the other hand, displays a curious lack of what Evelina regards as proper behavior. This
seems especially odd, given Evelina’s approbation for Lady Louisa’s brother, Lord Orville. While Evelina writes constantly about how Lord Orville—his actions, his words, his presence—affects her, she instead comments on Lady Louisa’s affectation, particularly as it is embodied by her contradictory actions and words:

… turning to Lady Louisa, who seemed rather surprised at his speaking to me, he added, “Give me leave, Sister, to introduce Miss Anville to you.”

Lady Louisa, half-rising, said, very coldly, that she should be glad of the honour of knowing me; and then, abruptly turning to Lord Merton and Mr. Lovel, continued, in a half-whisper, her conversation.

For my part, I had risen and courtsied, and now, feeling very foolish, I seated myself again; first I blushed at the unexpected politeness of Lord Orville, and immediately afterwards, at the contemptuous failure of it in his sister. How can that young lady see her brother so universally admired for his manners and deportment, and yet be so unamiably opposite to him in hers! But while his mind, enlarged and noble, rises superior to the little prejudices of rank, hers, feeble and unsteady, sinks beneath their influence. (Burney 236)

Unconcerned for the feelings of those around her, Lady Louisa is a poor example of proper womanhood and shares no common interests with Evelina; to use Armstrong’s words, in comparison to Evelina, Lady Louisa is “not truly female.” Through her refusal
to even speak to Evelina, we may see a rejection of not only Evelina herself, but of any ability to share language between women, of an ideology that binds them through collective educational standards whereby both females are constructed as subjects. Though Lady Louisa may share the qualities of sensibility found so often in characters of the sentimental novel—headaches, nerves, delicate constitutions—she is not, we see through Evelina’s description of her, a female who could be termed desirable in Armstrong’s definition (Burney 235).

Though this rather caustic criticism of a certain type of femaleness, one which displays a heightened though falsely enacted sensibility, affective because Evelina writes about it and invokes a response from her reader, we are able to see, as Paul Goring writes, that “various eighteenth-century projects which, at some level, were engaged in training the body—in shaping and directing the ways in which bodies, both male and female, should appear in public. Efforts to mould bodily eloquence are apparent, with varying degrees of explicitness, within an array of eighteenth-century social and cultural arenas” (5). Evelina conveys to Villars, and thus to the larger reading public, a sense of insult and unease with how Lady Louisa displays herself, her opinions writeable because she, unlike the higher ranking Louisa, has been inculcated into a “proper” ideology of feminine sensibility. In writing about her feelings, rather than displaying the type of sensibility to which Lady Louisa subscribes (blatantly public and fictitious), Evelina avoids “participation in public spectacle that [would injure] her, for as an object of display, she always loses value as a subject. ... As it constitutes the
female subject, then, such writing strips the body of the signs of identity that are
essential to displaying female value according to aristocratic rules of
kinship” (Armstrong 77). Instead, Evelina can only communicate effectively with the
author of her education, as well as other women—her friend Maria Mirvan, for example
—who share a similar status as a subject. We can see this specifically in the
communication Evelina sends Maria once Evelina has left London and is back at Berry
Hill with her foster-father. In her letters, Evelina gives Maria information to which Mr.
Villars is not privileged. Yet, we never see Maria’s answers, though we know, through
Evelina’s posts, that Maria has written and asked for details of what had upset her: “You
wonder, you say, since my heart takes no part in this affair, why is should make me so
unhappy? And can you, acquainted as you are with the high opinion I entertained of
Lord Orville, can you wonder that so great a disappointment in his character should
affect me?” (Burney 216). Though Villars does in fact confront Evelina on the same
issue after she leaves his house for the second time, the approaches are different.
Maria’s response is narrated by Evelina, creating a gap, an in-between-ness again, for
affect to occur. That is not to say that Evelina is not affected by Villars’ letter—she is,
certainly, as I have already observed; what is important here is not merely a lack of a
readable response by Maria, but rather that she asks the question of Evelina directly.
She does not tell Evelina that she has been misinformed and blinded from the first
interaction with Orville, as Villars does. Instead, she forces Evelina to create her own
emotion through the writing of them. She allows for Evelina’s narrating self to indulge
in affect, no matter whether it is “of fancy, not of truth” (216). In doing so, Maria—or rather, our interpretation of Maria’s words, mediated through Evelina—represents a female who understands and aids in the perpetuation of a language between women that needs no masculine intervention to translate. Evelina herself may, as Villars suggests, be blind, not by her idea of Orville as a paragon of politesse but by her own unwillingness to acknowledge her own sensibility. She refuses to allow the affect Orville has upon her to take hold; Maria, and thus her reading public, is the voice of what Armstrong states was a “female ideal” constituted by a certain type of education “that by this time [i.e. 1778] has passed into the domain of common sense where it provided the frame of reference for other kinds of writing” (62). Burney’s use of the epistolary in *Evelina* reveals in a kind of writing that reflects feminine common sense and narrates the in-between-ness of affect that sensibility is simultaneously produced by and produces.

Perhaps Evelina’s comfort in expressing a more emotional response in writing to Maria than what she eventually tells Villars stems from this shared female ideal. Or perhaps, as Barker-Benfield states, writing in and of itself suggests a situation similar to that where

> [s]entimental novelists told their distresses to their readers—often in epistolary novels—as if the readers were correspondents, participants in family secrets conveyed by the family code, a family based on sympathy rather than blood or marriage. Writers suggested that the understanding they shared with readers was so mutual it could be left implicit. (314)
There is, then, a community, “a family based on” sensibility, between Maria and Evelina, one solely of women, whereby they may share more emotive information than Evelina feels able to do with her foster father. In both cases, Evelina mediates her words, the separation between her narrating and experiencing selves evident in how she constructs her letters, as well as in the affect that is produced by that gap. But a communication that remains coded between Evelina and her female friend would suggest a certain level of ideological sensibility between them; if Evelina has been constructed as a specific type of female—as Armstrong suggests an eighteenth-century woman of the emerging middle class would be—and one she feels obligated to perform, particularly for Mr. Villars, this would affect her writing both in what and to whom she writes, as well as how she perceives their responses. Her emotions, her sensibility, her affect, rely not only on what she experiences, but also on how those around her experience them. Neither affect nor sensibility are solitary things.
CHAPTER TWO:
VINDICATING SENSIBILITY: WOLLSTONECRAFT’S USE OF RHETORICAL SENSIBILITY

If we give ourselves up to *A Vindication*’s eloquent but somewhat rambling prose, we will also discover *passim* an unforgettable early account of the making of a lady, an acute, detailed analysis of the social construction of femininity, which appropriates the developmental psychology of enlightenment and romantic thought.

—Cora Kaplan, “Wild Nights: pleasure/sexuality/feminism”

The sentiments I have embodied.

—Mary Wollstonecraft, *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*

Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that a history of the novel must, of necessity, consider the underlying ideologies of the eighteenth century:

“political history obviously converged with the history of sexuality as well as with that of the novel to produce a specific kind of individual” (21). It is the “specific kind of individual,” that of the woman, with which Mary Wollstonecraft engages in her 1792 political tract *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and her two fictions, *Mary* (1788) and *The Wrongs of Woman: or, Maria* (1798). Though her narrative approaches vary between these works—the difference of genre creating a requisite conventional shift between the political tract and the fictions, despite its chronological position between them—she embraces the same essential message in each: sensibility is detrimental to a woman’s position. Wollstonecraft chooses to advocate for a less effusive role for sensibility and what she sees as the ingrained weakness it created when used as the basis for women’s education. Since she believes sensibility harms a woman’s ability to
lead a productive life, it seems ironic, then, that the discourse Wollstonecraft’s works attempt to perpetuate is immersed in sensibility and affect, and that she herself “placed high value on sensibility” (Barker-Benfield xxx). “In [A Vindication of the Rights of Woman] especially,” Gerard Barker-Benfield writes,

she concentrated on the damage its cultivation did women because it was not accompanied by the cultivation of reason. Consequently, women’s capacity to develop, to individuate themselves, and to rise was forestalled, and they were kept in “the night of sensual ignorance.” (xxx)

This “sensual ignorance” was exactly the type of sensibility in which Wollstonecraft’s works become almost fatally ensnared, despite her attempts to avoid just such a fate. I want to argue that Wollstonecraft’s own narrative “capacity to develop” was “forestalled” due to her inability to escape sensibility’s pervasive influence in both her fiction and polemic, exchanging what Barker-Benfield states was her opinion on sensibility with an analysis of how sensibility, and thus affect, pervades her writings. If sensibility as ideology was as deeply ingrained into eighteenth-century culture as Wollstonecraft herself seems to suggest, removing emotion and affect from the constructional foundations of “woman” could have been a lost cause, leaving Wollstonecraft to undertake an impossible task.

What women read in the eighteenth century was, and is, a crucial element for critics—including Wollstonecraft, who is widely acknowledged as one of the originators of modern feminism—in the determination of how sensibility affected the construction of
the feminine social identity. Jacqueline Pearson suggests that though the literacy rate of women was lower than that of men at the time, it was on the rise. Yet, “[e]ven when they acquired literacy, books and time to read,” there were concerns that “reading often leads women and girls astray. Their reading provides thumb-nail sketches of fictional female characters, sharpening contrasts between sensible and foolish, virtuous and vicious” (Pearson 5). The ideological rumblings of what constituted “proper” womanhood played out in the pages of what women perused; as Markman Ellis writes, “Self-consciously addressing the negotiation of virtue and fiction, this controversy over novel reading is an ideological dispute, a battle over the nature of the fictional. An ideology of reading, implicit to the culture of sensibility, is developed and elaborated in the enduring debate in fiction and in criticism, in conduct books and in the magazines” (43). The “culture of sensibility,” as both Ellis and Barker-Benfield term it, revolved around the distinction of emotional capacities between men and women; though men could be struck by sensibility and remain manly, women were thought to be un-womanly if they did not possess the trait. Essentially, states Ann Jessie Van Sant, by “[p]roviding a means of linking mental and emotional experience with physiology—or understanding the connections … between the varying meanings of feel—[sensibility] also helped to … make difficult to separate, the ideas of heart, soul, and mind” (14). The body’s somatic responses to emotional stimuli, and therefore the ability to be affected, were intrinsically linked to eighteenth-century culture and, most importantly, the literature produced by that culture.
Even Wollstonecraft, as outspoken against the inculcation of sensibility in women as she is, is unable to escape its presence in either her fiction or her political work. While she published political tracts which condemn a certain type and frequency of novel reading, she also writes novels herself, thereby undercutting her own argument. Her choice of genre in developing her fictional works contrasts with the statements regarding feminine reading habits that she makes in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*; “Novels, music, poetry, and gallantry, all tend to make women creatures of sensation,” Wollstonecraft writes, “and their character is thus formed in the mould of folly during the time they are acquiring accomplishments … This overstretched sensibility naturally relaxes the other powers of the mind, and prevents intellect from attaining that sovereignty which it ought to attain” (*VRW* 66). Though, as Paul Goring argues, the novels that Wollstonecraft denigrates were amusing and prompted readers to engage in proper behavior in their reactions to sentimental fiction, that so-called proper behavior was expressed via the conventions of sensibility, rendering readers more deeply entrenched in the paradigm of sensational conduct, thus proving Wollstonecraft’s point (Goring 142-3). Reason, overpowered and lost among the “sensations” women were encouraged to develop, was restricted from the process of forming the woman of the eighteenth century. Without reason or the ability to better her own position, woman is forced to accept what she has been told about her lot in life: “the sexes ought not to be compared: man was made to reason, woman to feel: and that together, flesh and spirit, they make the most perfect whole, by blending happily reason and sensibility into
one character” (Wollstonecraft *VRW* 67-8). Without man, woman is incomplete; she will be unfulfilled if she attempts to live without her “natural” counterpart, thus leaving her lacking subjectivity in a culture that locates a woman’s subjectivity within that of the man in her life.

In her discussion of the constitution of the feminine subject during this period, Armstrong writes:

> The popular concepts of subjectivity and sensibility resembled Locke’s theory that human understanding developed through an exchange between the individual mind and the world of objects, an exchange mediated by language … Conduct books for women, as well as fiction in the tradition of Richardson, worked within the same framework as Locke, but they constructed a more specialized and less material form of subjectivity, which they designated as female. If the Lockean subject began as a white sheet of paper on which objects could be understood in sets of spatial relations, then pedagogical literature for women mapped out a field of knowledge that would produce a specifically female form of subjectivity. (14)

Conduct books, therefore, as well as novels, perpetuate the constitution of a distinctly feminine subject, one for whom, according to Wollstonecraft, “[p]leasure is the business of … life … and while it continues to be so, little can be expected of such weak beings” (*VRW* 59). These females, obsessed with pleasure, lacking in common sense,
are constructed as men wish them to be. The fact that, Barker-Benfield claims, “[a] high value was placed on this greater sensibility” and “men said they found women’s greater sensibility a source of attraction,” however, provides social pressure against Wollstonecraft’s arguments (28); if men require sensibility in a partner, according to this ideology, women have almost no recourse but to propagate a certain level of the “womanly virtues,” one of which is sensibility. Yet, for the victim of such an inculcation, Wollstonecraft argues, “virtue becomes a relative idea, having no other foundation than utility, and of that utility, men pretend arbitrarily to judge, shaping it to their own convenience” (*VRW* 55). This is the touchstone of her rationalization for a need to change women’s educations in *A Vindication*; if women are to become sentient beings and functioning members of society, as she fully believes they can be, they must throw off the yoke of conduct books’ emphasis on heightened sensibility where “[s]elf-indulgence, the ‘luxury’ of feeling was at the heart of the culture” (Barker-Benfield xxvi, emphasis mine).

The physical nature of sensibility, and therefore of affect and emotion, causes a disjunction between Wollstonecraft’s plea for rationality in the educational process of women and the methods by which she advocates for it. Elsbeth Probyn suggests that “[w]riting is a corporeal activity. We work ideas through our bodies; we write through our bodies, hoping to get into the bodies of our readers. We study and write about society not as an abstraction but as composed of actual bodies in proximity to other bodies” (76). More simply put, writing is meant to produce affect; though it may come
from our minds, writing itself is a physical process that deals with and yields physical effects. If, as Armstrong states, “a modern, gendered form of subjectivity developed first as a feminine discourse in certain literature for women,” in order to appeal to or transform that subjectivity, and therefore the construction of the feminine, Wollstonecraft was forced by necessity to interact with and utilize the attributes of the ideology that engenders the paradigm (Armstrong 14). To protest sensibility, therefore, she needed to affect her readers; “emotion,” Keith Opdahl says, “is a mode of consciousness that expresses meaning. ... The mind receives sensations as something, in a context of meaning that we know as a feeling. Significantly, the emotion not only coexists with the sensation, providing it with shape and significance, but is one with it” (65). Without sensation, emotion would be meaningless and consciousness would be unable to integrate rational thought and the outside world; the rational beings whom Wollstonecraft wishes women to be, therefore, would have no possible way to form—nor would their male counterparts, for that matter. Affect, which “is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects,” as Sara Ahmed writes, is essential for any interpretation of literature, even beyond Wollstonecraft’s works, to impact the reader (29).

Through her consistently negative renderings of the woman of sensibility, Wollstonecraft endeavors to encourage her readers to effect a change in their actions through what could be termed shame: “I once knew a woman of fashion,” she writes in *A Vindication,*
who was more than commonly proud of her delicacy and sensibility. She thought a distinguishing taste and puny appetite the height of all human perfection, and acted accordingly. —I have seen this weak sophisticated being neglect all the duties of life, yet recline with self-complacency on a sofa, and boast of her want of appetite as a proof of the delicacy that extended to, or, perhaps, arose from, her exquisite sensibility … Yet, at the moment, I have seen her insult a worthy old gentlewoman, whom unexpected misfortunes had made dependent on her ostentatious bounty, and who, in better days, had claims on her gratitude. (47-48)

Though she does not clarify what exactly “duties of life” this creature of sensibility “neglects,” Wollstonecraft emphasizes the shame that should come from ignoring them simply through her use of “all” and “duty.” What does this woman do if she does not perform her “duties,” a term that carries the weight of obligation and responsibility? Added to the “insult” of an elderly woman of rank, suffering under “unexpected misfortunes” and “dependent,” this ostentatious lady can claim only to be ungracious. This description seems only meant to effect shame, not only in the woman to whom it refers, but to any woman who may have behaved in this manner, or wallowed in similar “delicacy and sensibility.” Wollstonecraft, in attempting to shame the woman of sensibility, intends to create a new type of feminine subjectivity. “[S]hame is … not defined by prohibition (nor, as a result, by repression),” claim Eve Kosofsky Sedgewick and Adam Frank in *Shame and its Sisters*; “[s]hame floods into being as a moment, a
disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constructing indentificatory communication. … But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity’’ (36). Part of the identity of her fellow women that Wollstonecraft deplores is ‘‘a romantic twist of the mind, which has been very properly termed sentimental,’’ and which she attributes to the reading of ‘‘the reveries of the stupid novelists’’ (VRW 192). She encourages her readers to use shame to rectify such amusements:

The best method, I believe, that can be adopted to correct a fondness for novels is to ridicule them: not indiscriminately, for then it would have little effect; but, if a judicious person, with some turn for humour, would read several to a young girl, and point out both by tones, and apt comparisons with pathetic incidents and heroic characters in history, how foolishly and ridiculously they caricatured human nature, just opinions might be substituted instead of romantic sentiments. (195, emphases mine)

The caricature Wollstonecraft herself produces in advocating for a remedy for ‘‘a fondness for novels’’ is that of a teacher instructing a student; in reading novels and then comparing fiction to history, she promotes shame as an effective device, since how can anyone feel any other affect when her taste in reading material is being ‘‘ridiculed’’? ‘‘If distress is the affect of suffering,’’ Sedgwick and Frank write, ‘‘shame is the affect of indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation’’ (133). A ridiculed person is an alienated person, the transformational qualities of shame fostered by a desire to fit in.
By affecting her readers through shame, Wollstonecraft may affect a reconstitution of subjectivity and female identity that diverges from sensibility as its defining feature. Yet, despite her adamant refusal to promote sensibility as a virtue, stimulating affect—and therefore sensibility itself—is absolutely crucial to Wollstonecraft’s purpose.

Further highlighting the necessity of sensibility in Wollstonecraft’s work, Ellis writes,

As many readers of Wollstonecraft have noted, there is an inconsistency between the analysis of sentimentalism in her fiction and her polemic. This inconsistency does not simply represent a failure on Wollstonecraft’s part; rather, it seems that Wollstonecraft both challenges and reproduces the conventions of the sentimental novel. The deployment of sensibility against itself is prefigured in the essayists’ debate on sentimental fiction in the 1780s: analyses make it clear that the moral ambivalence of sensibility is also the source of its peculiar force.

(213-214)

The paradox in which Wollstonecraft, like other critics before her, was mired, where in order to affect the evolution of women’s attitudes regarding sensibility she must purposely invoke that sensibility, suggests that she was fully aware of “its peculiar force.” Laurie Langbauer suggests that Wollstonecraft struggled with how she was to revise the feminine subject: “A Vindication … is a political tract that quite deliberately takes the form of a conduct book” (112-119). Yet, despite its use of the conduct book
style, one which Armstrong argues formed the foundation of female identity and
subjectivity in the eighteenth century, the tract seems to have accomplished little in
terms of reducing the popularity of sensibility as an ideology to which women adhered.
Armstrong states that “[i]n forming the conceptual foundation upon which the national
curriculum was based [ie. the conduct book], a particular ideal of the self thus became
commonplace, and as gendered forms of identity determined more and more how
people learned to think of themselves as well as of others, that self became the dominant
social reality” (21). Without the other conduct books against which to create a
discourse, Wollstonecraft’s political tract becomes lost in a sea of the novels she
dismissed and ridiculed. The “gendered self” of woman that relied on sensibility as its
identifying trait had become “commonplace” in “the dominant social reality” of the late
eighteenth century. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* seems to imply Wollstonecraft
fully intends to produce a work of fiction which will validate not only her own
argument about the worthlessness of certain foolish novels, but also her idea that
women can be free from their dependence on men.

What is interesting about Wollstonecraft’s works of fiction is not only that she wrote
them on either end of a decade, but that, despite her intentions, both seem to fall into the
sentimental conventions she adamantly attempts to avoid. More than the other works I
examine in this project, I think Wollstonecraft’s novels fit into what Armstrong
suggests about domestic fiction; “[r]ather than refer to individuals who already existed
as such and who carried on relationships according to novelistic conventions,”
Armstrong says, “domestic fiction took great care to distinguish itself from the kinds of fiction that predominated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” (9). Wollstonecraft specifically claims that her work will not echo the sentimentality rampant in the majority of the other books published in the last half of the century. Immediately, in the Advertisement for *Mary*, as Burney did a decade earlier in *Evelina*, Wollstonecraft states her intention to have created characters unlike those who had gone before:

IN delineating the Heroine of this Fiction, the Author attempts to develop a character different from those generally portrayed. This woman is neither a Clarissa, a Lady G——, nor a Sophie. …

In an artless tale, without episodes, the mind of a woman, who has thinking powers is displayed. The female organs have been thought too weak for this arduous employment; and experience seems to justify the assertion. Without arguing physically about possibilities—in a fiction, such a being may be allowed to exist. (3)

Wollstonecraft creates a character capable of thinking, who is not “a Clarissa, a Lady G——, nor a Sophie,” heroines constructed by men and who epitomize the woman of sensibility. She is not one of these “exemplary females whose very different careers are defined by the love plot,” writes Claudia Johnson, “and whose subjection by and to patriarchal ideology, through the operations of sentimentality, is registered along their nerves and bodies” (*EB* 49). Mary, therefore, is meant to be a woman free of the ideology of sensibility perpetuated by a male author and the construction of the
feminine as merely a salve to men’s desires; she should be the picture of the woman Wollstonecraft later states in *A Vindication* she wishes all women could be.

The irony of *Mary’s* Advertisement rests in the fact that Wollstonecraft’s heroine does in fact succumb to the weaknesses of sensibility and the “love plot,” as Johnson calls it; Mary may possess “thinking powers,” but they are just as often overwhelmed by her sympathy and she is frequently affected by the suffering of those around her. “With sarcasm rather more ponderous than sportive, Wollstonecraft distinguishes herself and her fiction from sentimental novels by ridiculing the affectivity of women who read them, pretending momentarily to give them what they want,” Johnson writes of *Mary*, suggesting that Wollstonecraft initially attempts to maintain her distance from sensibility; “Mary, we are to understand, will not cater to the repressed sexual desire of female readers. But it does,” as Wollstonecraft quickly diverges from her thinking heroine to one who is wrapped in her own feelings (*EB* 51). Mary’s interaction with her friend Ann is in fact littered with affect: “her delicate mind could not bear to obtrude her affections, or receive love as an alms, the offspring of pity. … She would then imagine that she looked sickly or unhappy … In this manner was her sensibility called forth, and exercised, by her mother’s illness, her friend’s misfortunes, and her own unsettled mind” (11). Repeatedly through the novel, Mary is overwhelmed by her own sympathy with others, moving from a heroine with “thinking powers” to one who is mired in feelings and emotions, affected by every suffering person she meets. Despite her early marriage to a gentleman who owns the neighboring property and her own inheritance of
her family’s estate, Mary travels the world, eventually falling in love with a dying man, drawn to him by her sensibility: “Henry’s illness was not alarming, it was rather pleasing, as it gave Mary an excuse to herself for shewing him how much her was interested about him; and giving little artless proofs of affection, which the purity of her heart made her never wish to restrain” (M 30). In Mary, the question of whether Mary’s “death by sensibility”—she essentially dies of sorrow, literally making herself ill, after she is left alone following the deaths of her two friends—or her rejection of a marriage not based on affect-ion is the worse fate plays into the ideology of sensibility through which Wollstonecraft constructs her characters. Mary completely abandons any notion of rational thought by the conclusion, lost in her desire for love and a person with whom she can sympathize: “I cannot live without loving,” she thinks, yet “love leads to madness” (57). Her precipitate jump from thinking creature to woman of overt sensibility seems to suggest Wollstonecraft intends to satirize sensibility in Mary; yet, her reliance on the language of sensibility throughout the novel limits the effectiveness of her satire. Perhaps the fault lies with her use of sensibility itself: “[b]ecause sensibility was so difficult to define and its implications so difficult to work out,” Stephen Cox writes, “its argument very frequently turned on discrimination … As a type of moral and political argument, sensibility was tragically or comically flawed” (80). Wollstonecraft’s use of sensibility as a “political argument” in Mary fails because of the flaws in its definition; by applying it so indiscriminately, after initially suggesting Mary should be a thinking woman, Wollstonecraft boxes herself into a
narrative corner and does not achieve the spectatorial distance, the “in-between-ness” as Greg Seigworth and Melissa Gregg call it, that is necessary to produce a critical affect of sensibility and which results in confusion, rather than a well-rounded satire (Gregg and Seigworth 1).

In *The Wrongs of Woman*, however, instead of claiming that her heroine is a new kind of woman, different from previous heroines, she writes in her preface, “I have rather endeavored to pourtray passions than manners … the history ought rather to be considered, as of woman, than of an individual” (67). Despite the unfinished quality and provocative subject matter of her book—Maria is imprisoned after she leaves her husband and indulges in an extramarital affair with a fellow inmate, both of which actions would have been considered beyond the pale for a woman at the time—Wollstonecraft does indeed attempt to find a way in which to distinguish *The Wrongs of Woman* from the other novels before and after it. As Susan Lanser suggests, “the various and conflicting conclusions Wollstonecraft attempted before her death signify her struggle to construct a narrative of female community and to authorize a female voice that would speak not simply for herself but, she imagined, for all women” (231). This text is certainly not the “fanciful” narratives which dominated the time and Wollstonecraft herself states that her purpose keeps her imagination under wraps: “In many instances I could have made the incidents more dramatic, would I have sacrificed my main object, the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society … this view restrained my
fancy” (WW 67). Lanser highlights the irony of Wollstonecraft’s statement here: “[a]lthough the essay form in which Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* required no major transformation to suit Wollstonecraft’s feminist ideas, the novel did not yield easily in either plot or voice to [the] discourse” she wished to disseminate (236). Despite her attempt to depict a different sort of heroine, as she did earlier in *Mary*, and show a feminine sensibility mixed with reason, her narrative frequently suffers from the overexcited sensations she bestows on Maria, Darnford, and even occasionally Jemima.

Though Maria’s imprisonment is made easier by her ability to convince Jemima, her keeper, that she is in fact not insane, this is more due to Jemima’s feeling sorry for her than the judicious application of reason: “Though she failed immediately to rouse a lively sense of injustice in the mind of her guard, because it had been sophisticated into misanthropy, [Maria] touched [Jemima’s] heart” (WW 73). The narrator clearly expresses Maria’s sanity through free-indirect thought, but Maria is repetitively caught in despondency when she remembers the daughter from whom she is separated; despite this, she remains on guard for an opportunity to win Jemima to her cause: “Jemima indeed displayed a strange mixture of interest and suspicion … Jemima’s countenance, and dark hints, seemed to say, ‘You are an extraordinary woman; but let me consider, this may only be one of your lucid intervals.’ Nay, the very energy of Maria’s character, made her suspect that the extraordinary animation she perceived might be the effect of madness” (75-76). Unable to use her reason to convince her jailer to help her escape and
relegated to finding solace in books, the only method she retains of affecting Jemima is her affect; by displaying sensibility—in her melancholy, her frantic writing and reading, her grief—Maria affects Jemima. Similarly, Jemima’s narrative affects Maria:

Active as love was in the heart of Maria, the story she had just heard made her thoughts take a wider range. … Thinking of Jemima’s peculiar fate and her own, she was led to consider the oppressed states of women, and to lament that she had given birth to a daughter. Sleep fled from her eyelids, while she dwelt on the wretchedness of unprotected infancy, till sympathy with Jemima changed to agony, when it seemed probably that her own baby might even now be in the very state she so forcibly described. (107)

The similarity of her own circumstance with Jemima’s—losing a child, threatened with no recourse but to sell her body, living in an asylum—arouses Maria’s pity, swamping her in affective sensibility. Certainly Jemima’s tone is matter-of-fact and unemotional as she narrates her life for Maria and Darnford, but Maria cannot help but feel in response. Wollstonecraft claims not to have exaggerated in dramatizing the events she depicts in her novel, yet rather than creating a conglomerate of female voices who express the turmoil of being subjugated beneath patriarchy, she chooses to overload Jemima with every pitiable circumstance imaginable. Her fancy seems to fly free here. In this way, Lanser suggests, “[t]he novel … shift[s] its narrative authority from authorial to personal voice and from separate but corroborating private voices to a voice both public
and communal. Because the public voice ... is in important ways only a fiction, however, the project of constructing a ‘we’ leads the novel into a narrative impasse that amounts to self-silencing” (231). Wollstonecraft’s attempt to block sensibility and affect fails because the public voice she constructs through Jemima and Maria’s narratives, rather than presenting facts through dispassion, are instead interrupted and recapitulated via a return to the voice of an authorial narrator, who emphasizes pity, sorrow, and sympathy—i.e. as Joseph Bartolomeo defines it, “a literal feeling with characters”—which contradicts Wollstonecraft’s argument (109, emphasis mine). Indeed, Maria’s last fully articulated words are negated by a domineering judge who denigrates “women’s feelings,” indicating an unfavorable judgement for Maria and her lover is in the near future; “the judge denies Maria effective voice just as the law has denied her the right to appear in court,” Lanser argues, “he undermines the public (philosophical and legal) nature of her speech by relegating it to the discourse of ‘feelings,’ the stereotypical quintessence of private female voice” (234). Rather than speaking with reason, Maria is left without narrative authority, therefore, displacing Wollstonecraft’s discursive trajectory from a replacement of sensibility with reason to the inescapable net of affect.

For all Wollstonecraft’s desire to produce a work that does not promote sensibility, she is trapped by what society deems the dominant culture. Both A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and The Wrongs of Woman (as well as Mary, which is a blatantly more sentimental text, and purposely so) are rife with sensibility. Langbauer argues that Wollstonecraft

48
specifically lays the blame for the cultural construction of women at the feet of the tale-bearers: she especially indicts sentimental romances as providing nothing but such [romantic] plots, catering to ignorance, inflaming imagination at the expense of reason, and materially contributing to women’s degradation... *A Vindication* revises sentimental stereotypes precisely by insisting on them, repeating them with a difference … [and] locating women’s struggle in “a revolution of female manners.” (112-119)

In order to start this revolution, therefore, Wollstonecraft must join in the battle by using language and methods with which her audience is familiar; she must choose how to *affect* them, undercutting her own argument in order to further it. She must emphasize certain aspects of sensibility in order to make them ridiculous, and in doing so, she does not rely on inversion, or even satire, devices which require a return to the norm. Instead, she infiltrates the ideology through the use of affect, by appealing to the emotions she wishes to temper with reason. I think Wollstonecraft’s success in rejecting sensibility is not what she would hope it to have been, however. As Langbauer suggests, Wollstonecraft’s narrative strategies are overturned by “the idea that no one can avoid working within, and so re-enforcing, systems of power, but the understanding that we all must do so is crucial; it allows us to see and to open up, if not subvert, those systems” (7-8). Wollstonecraft’s own construction within the ideology of the culture of sensibility causes her fiction to stumble at the crossroads between sensibility and
reason; in order to affect change, she needed to affect people. Perhaps she would have
achieved her goal in *The Wrongs of Woman*, had she been able to finish the work. Yet,
Lanser claims, “the various and conflicting conclusions Wollstonecraft attempted before
her death signify her struggle” to portray the history of woman as she wished (231).
Sensibility, rather than fading away in Wollstonecraft’s work, is instead allowed to
flourish.
CHAPTER THREE
FLUTTERING NERVES AND FAINTING FITS: PERFORMANCES OF SENSIBILITY IN PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

[Austen’s] example suggests that the feminine sensibility was in some ways better equipped to reveal the intricacies of personal relationships and was therefore at a real advantage in the realm of the novel.

—Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel

Certainly illness and signs of physical weakness are essential to the vocabulary of sentimentalism, but what is typically understated or ignored is the manner in which illness and weakness are mediated through conventions and frameworks which have as much in common with the stage as with the sickbed. The ailing patient certainly proves an appealing analogy for sentimentalism’s men and women of feeling ... staging of somatic eloquence, it can be said, is the basis of such fiction’s importance within eighteenth-century politics—it was a means of constructing the gaze of readers ... It is in this way that fictional bodies of sentiment contributed to the shaping of the eighteenth-century expressions of ‘polite reading’.

—Paul Goring, The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture

Criticism on the eighteenth-century novel does not lack for analyses of Jane Austen’s oeuvre; Ian Watt, Michael McKeon, Nancy Armstrong, Claudia Johnson, Marilyn Butler, and countless others have contributed to the debate over Austen’s role in perpetuating a continually forming genre. But for all we may find on Austen and on Pride and Prejudice specifically, there is little that incorporates sensibility into a discussion of what might be Austen’s most popular novel. The majority of criticism dealing specifically with sensibility in her work revolves around Sense and Sensibility.
instead, with a smattering of commentaries on *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* to round out the sentimental mix. To neglect sensibility and its companion affect (the inevitable connection of which I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this work), therefore, does something of a disservice to the emotional depth and richness of *Pride and Prejudice*. Emotions, both obvious and concealed, as well as the interpretation of them—and thus the affect created by their discovery—are the driving force behind Austen’s plot. As Opdahl writes, “[to] Austen, people are nothing less than emotional beings who know one another as emotional beings: her characters reveal their identities in what they feel and judge others on the basis of what they feel. And the emotions they perceive in others determine the emotions that they feel” (125). Part, if not the full sum, of why this particular novel has remained as well-loved as it has, then, is perhaps due to the affect it has on its audience. What I focus on in this chapter, however, is once again not how an audience might perceive the novel, but how exactly the characters perceive the emotions of other characters and, to return to the title of this thesis, how Mr. Bennet determines that he “ought to feel it” when Lydia elopes (Austen 194, emphasis mine). His statement implies that a certain judgment and type of feeling—a specific affect—is appropriate for the particular situation in which his family, and he, find themselves. He expresses a perceived obligation for the performance of affect; it is in the performance of emotion and its affect on other characters that Austen demonstrates the ideology of sensibility. *Pride and Prejudice* may not commonly be considered a “novel of sensibility,” but in the performances of sentimental behavior Austen’s characters
establish the picture of a female figure whose legitimacy and power lies within her ability to feel and to communicate those feelings.

If, as Claudia Johnson writes in *Equivocal Beings*, “what and how one feels is a matter of public consequence, and as such subject to one’s own as well as to other people’s surveillance,” we must assume that the expression of those feelings—and their affect—comes through performance; “[during] the 1790s, in short, sentimentality is politics made intimate” (2). The ability to “[participate] in the reform of society,” Markman Ellis suggests—to see politics at work, that is—resides in the pages of sentimental fiction and in the expression of affect (48). For Paul Goring, “[s]entimental fiction insists upon an association between visible emotionalism and modern virtue,” emphasizing the connection between performance—“visible emotionalism”—and propriety in the construction of the eighteenth-century individual:

Where the social effect of fiction is concerned, it is not sufficient to examine only the type of body language depicted; we must attend also to what that language does in the fiction and the way in which it is mediated for the readers. And in sentimental fiction the body is conventionally rendered eloquent by being seen to be eloquent in the presence of fictional witnesses. It is largely this key narrative strategy that lends sentimental fiction its ‘theatrical’ character—expressive bodies are rarely depicted in solitary isolation, but rather appear before a viewing figure (or several) whose own responses provide a testimony of
the virtue on display. (153)

While the performance of sensibility (“the body … being seen to be eloquent in the presence of fictional witnesses”) does affect the affect of sentimental fiction, the meditation—coming in the form of narrative style—of those performances plays a role as well. Barbara Benedict suggests that “irony serves to edit sympathy and didacticism so that the reader does not, in fact, feel what the hero is portrayed as feeling,” therefore creating a distance which would (somewhat ironically) actually increase the likelihood of affect occurring, while D.A. Miller attributes the voice of Austen’s ironic narrator to her use of free indirect thought, suggesting that the irony is both necessary and presupposed (Benedict 12; Miller 60). This type of “[narration] comes,” he writes, “as near to the character’s psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it” (59). That collapse can be seen in the epistolary tradition; Joseph Bray suggests the “way that the epistolary novel probes the consciousnesses of its characters did indeed have a formative influence on Austen’s third-person style. In particular, the interaction between the narrating and experiencing selves of eighteenth-century letter-writers is transferred in her novels to the dynamic between the narrator and the character” (109). Dovetailing with this supposition is Bray’s argument for Pride and Prejudice to have originally existed as an epistolary novel; the remnants of the genre lie in the multiple letters and notes that add to the narrative, thirteen total (124). Despite the shift in generic conventions that may have occurred during Austen’s revision process prior to the novel’s publication and any potential loss of expression of the freedom of emotion
that can be attributed to the epistolary, he claims,

free indirect thought allows consciousness to challenge the narrative frame, as the perspectives of character and narrator engage in sometimes fraught debate. The style does not restrict or regulate subjectivity but rather reveals the tensions which drive it. The form of third-person narrative which replaced the epistolary in Austen’s novels is no less conducive to individual freedom of thought and the subversion of authority. (117)

If, therefore, the epistolary novel was a vehicle for the dissemination of an ideology of sensibility, the affect of a novel containing free indirect thought, such as Austen’s works as well as those of many other novelists in the late eighteenth century (though Austen has perhaps been most closely associated with the convention), was no less powerful. As Michael McKeon puts it, “[free] indirect discourse is less an ideology than a method of achieving a broad and subtle range of ideological possibilities” (707). Sensibility and its partner affect are just as easily disseminated via Austen’s ironic narrator as Burney’s sensitive letter-writer.

What is at stake in this particular discussion, then, is whether or not *Pride and Prejudice* is in fact a novel of sensibility, and whether Elizabeth Bennet would qualify as a sentimental heroine. To answer both questions positively, as I do, necessitates the engagement of sympathy and affect in an argument of her behavior. “Like Adam Smith,” McKeon writes in *The Secret History of Domesticity*, “Austen would have us
understand that both self-knowledge and ethical sociability require the sympathetic internalization of the other’s point of view as if it were one’s own” (717). In order to fully comprehend the people with whom she interacts, and thus learn and grow herself (as she does through the course of the novel), Elizabeth must interpret their actions and emotive performances as if she herself is experiencing those same feelings. Her path to gaining both “self-knowledge and ethical sociability” stem from, as McKeon writes, her “sympathetic internalization of the other’s point of view as if it were one’s own,” demonstrated repeatedly through her constant inclination to direct and revise her sisters’ behavior (717). She feels compassion for Jane when Mr. Bingley leaves Hertfordshire for London, and she attempts to suggest to Lydia and Kitty the “proper” way to act because she places herself into their positions—in fact, as an unmarried young lady who also admittedly finds dance amusing and officers attractive, she is already in their shoes—and imagines how she would feel should she act as they do (as she must in order to feel Smithian sympathy). Though not without a certain degree of sympathy at the beginning of the novel, what she feels is more reflective of herself and her own subjectivity, rather than a true fellow-feeling. She maintains a distinct lack of self-knowledge because she cannot, at this point, fully internalize the point of view of the other. It is Elizabeth’s reaction to Darcy’s letter at Rosings Park that leads to her more sympathetic understanding of his character, despite her earlier attempts to “make it out” during the dance they share at Mr. Bingley’s ball at Netherfield Park (Austen 64).

While the letter itself creates an affective distance—Greg Seigworth and Melissa
Gregg’s “in-between-ness”—the rich and deep expression of its affect on Elizabeth comes more through the narrator’s use of free indirect speech than through Darcy’s words (Gregg and Seigworth 1). “Be not alarmed, madam, on receiving this letter,” Darcy writes,

by the apprehension of its containing any repetition of those sentiments, or renewal of those offers, which were last night so disgusting to you. I write without any intention of paining you, or humbling myself, by dwelling on wishes, which, for the happiness of both, cannot be too soon forgotten; and the effort which the formation, and the perusal of this letter might occasion, should have been spared, had not my character required it to be written and read. You must therefore, pardon the freedom with which I demand your attention; your feelings, I know, will bestow it unwillingly, but I demand it of your justice. (Austen 129)

This opening seems designed to evoke affect; he uses emotive terms—“sentiment,” “disgusting,” “paining,” “humbling,” “happiness,” “feelings”—constantly and without hesitation. Yet as the letter continues, Darcy reverses his tendency towards overt sentimentality and instead employs a more detached narrative voice. Through his explanation of his reasons for preventing a match between Jane and Mr. Bingley and his defense of his conduct toward Mr. Wickham, Darcy’s temporal separation from the incidents in question allows him to structure his narrative as a persuasive, and therefore affective, text for Elizabeth to read. The missive itself functions as a performance,
conveying emotion as an extension of Darcy’s presentation to her—“with a look of haughty composure … [and] a slight bow”—and as a constant, physical reminder of him (129). Austen’s narrator leaves little doubt as to whether or not Elizabeth is affected by the letter. “But such as [the contents] were, it may well be supposed” by all, the narrator assumes, “how eagerly she went through them, and what a contrariety of emotions they excited” (134). Contradictorily, however, though “[her] feelings as she read them were scarcely to be defined,” immediately the narrator states that Elizabeth is amazed, prejudiced, eager, impatient, “too angry to have any wish of doing him justice,” and unsatisfied (134). Again and again, Elizabeth performs sensibility, if indeed we understand Samuel Johnson’s definition of the term as “quickness of feeling” (596). Her feelings come and go as she reads, with no time for her to consider them:

her feelings were yet more acutely painful and more difficult of definition. Astonishment, apprehension, and even horror, oppressed her. She wished to discredit it entirely, repeatedly exclaiming, “This must be false! This cannot be! This must be the grossest falsehood!”—and when she had gone through the whole letter, though scarcely knowing any thing of the last page or two, put it hastily away, protesting that she would not regard it, that would never look in it again.

In this perturbed state of mind, with thoughts that could rest on nothing, she walked on; but it would not do; in half a minute the letter was unfolded again, and collecting herself as well as she could, she again
began the mortifying perusal of all that related to Wickham. (Austen 135)

Picking up the letter and putting it down, rejecting it, yet inevitably drawn to it, Elizabeth’s performance reflects her agitation. Though her raw emotions may be “difficult of definition,” they project through her behavior more than the list of feelings given by the narrator.

It is only when she forces herself to put aside her immediate reaction and distance herself from her own emotions that she is finally able to assume the separation that allows for the creation of a sympathy based on spectatorship. After all, if, as Sarah Ahmed states, “[we] judge something to be good or bad according to how it affects us, whether it gives us pleasure or pain,” Wickham’s near elopement with Miss Darcy has no affect on Elizabeth (31). She herself is neither pleased nor damaged by this incident (neither is Miss Darcy, as it happens, but, as Mr. Darcy claims, that was only through a judicious accident and his subsequent intervention); what affect Elizabeth may feel must be stoked by sympathy with the younger lady, based in imagination, which does not become fully developed until Elizabeth disregards how she herself feels and indulges in true fellow-feeling. With her reading and re-reading of Darcy’s letter—each pass furthering the temporal in-between-ness of affect—she feels more and differently: “when she remembered how unjustly she had condemned and upbraided him, her anger was turned against herself; and his disappointed feelings became the subject of compassion” (Austen 140). More importantly than the “gratitude” and “respect” he now
inspires in her, however, is what amounts to shame:

In her own past behaviour, there was a constant source of vexation and regret; and in the unhappy defects of her family a subject of yet heavier chagrin. They were hopeless of remedy. Her father, contented with laughing at them, would never exert himself to restrain the wild giddiness of his youngest daughters; and her mother, with manner so far from right herself, was entirely insensible of the evil. (140)

Elizabeth may “still [be] full of indignation,” but Darcy’s affect upon her sensibility is enough to elicit shame (140). “Shame,” Eve Sedgwick writes, “floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constructing identificatory communication … But in interrupting identification, shame, too, makes identity. In fact, shame and identity remain in very dynamic relation to one another, at once deconstituting and foundational” (TF 36). If shame can both dismantle and produce identity, the sympathy Elizabeth feels for Darcy following the disruption his letter causes her emotions is constituted by that shame. Her identity as a young lady and her heightened power as a subject from this point forward is founded upon this incident.

The extent to which Elizabeth’s performance of sensibility positively proliferates is perhaps best shown in contrast to the most obvious case of a character performing sensibility in *Pride and Prejudice*: Mrs. Bennet. Austen immediately paints a picture of her heroine’s mother as insipid and stupid. “She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper,” her narrator informs the reader in the first
chapter; “[when] she was discontented she fancied herself nervous” (Austen 4). Mrs. Bennet’s fluttering nerves and pains at her side demonstrate in full force not only the weakening qualities of a sensibility she believes she should feel, but also the way in which she must show it. Just as Burney does in her earlier work in *Evelina*, Austen conveys decided familiarity with what Ellis terms “the repertoire of conventions associated with the sentimental rhetoric of the body: fainting, weeping, sighing, hand-holding, mute gestures, the beat of the pulse, blushing—and so on” (14). This is particularly true in Mrs. Bennet’s tirade of woe upon learning of her youngest daughter’s ruin:

> Mrs. Bennet, to whose apartment they all repaired, after a few moments conversation together, received them exactly as might be expected; with tears and lamentations of regret, invectives against the villanous conduct of Wickham, and complaints of her own sufferings and ill usage, blaming every body but the person to whose ill judging indulgence of the errors of her daughter must be principally owing. …

> “Oh! my dear brother,” replied Mrs. Bennet, “that is exactly what I could most wish for. And now do, when you get to town, find them out, wherever they may be; and if they are not married already, *make* them marry. And as for wedding clothes, do not let them wait for that, but tell Lydia she shall have as much money as she chuses, to buy them after they are married. And, above all things, keep Mr. Bennet from fighting.
Tell him what a dreadful state I am in,—that I am frightened out of my wits; and have such tremblings, such flutterings, all over me, such spasms in my side, and pains in my head, and such beatings at heart, that I can get no rest by night nor by day. And tell my dear Lydia, not to give any directions about her clothes, till she has seen me, for she does not know which are the best wearhouses.” (Austen 186-187)

Carrying on as she does, Mrs. Bennet affects a certain type of sensibility, one where her suffering is plain, which in another character—Evelina perhaps, or even her daughter Jane—might imply that she feels deeply; yet the manner in which she displays her emotions (i.e. her performance) falls under affectation, as it is obviously more vocal and attention-seeking than deeply felt. Goring suggests that “illness and signs of physical weakness,” like those Mrs. Bennet demonstrates in the above scene, “are essential to the vocabulary of sentimentalism, but what is typically understated or ignored is the manner in which illness and weakness are mediated through conventions and frameworks which have as much in common with the stage as with the sickbed” (144). Mrs. Bennet’s bedchamber is her stage, her daughters her captive audience. Rather than displaying sensibility in its correlation with sympathy, Mrs. Bennet has no fellow-feeling. “If I had been able”; “I am sure”; “I always thought”; “what will become of us?”; with the exception of a few exclamations of “poor dear Lydia,” what Mrs. Bennet has to say is all about herself (Austen 186).

Elizabeth’s own reaction to first reading Jane’s letter detailing Lydia’s predicament is
actually quite similar to her mother’s in terms of “illness and weakness”; the difference, to drive home Goring’s point, is in how Austen frames the episodes. Though both women are at the center of their respective stages, the emphasis they place on their own feelings separates them. Elizabeth “[looks] so miserably ill,” and “[bursts] into tears as she [alludes] to it” (179). Most importantly, rather than blather effusively about her suffering, “for a few minutes [she] could not speak another word”; her emotions overcome her ability to communicate verbally and her physical performance must make up for the lack of spoken language (179). Though she realizes the effect Lydia’s actions have on her own situation, Elizabeth remains able to perform social graces: “self, though it would intrude, could not engross her. Lydia—the humiliation, the misery, she was bringing on them all, soon swallowed up every private care; and covering her face with her handkerchief, Elizabeth was soon lost to everything else; and after a pause of several minutes, was only recalled to a sense of her situation by the voice of her companion” (180). Distracted and upset as she is, she responds correctly and politely to Mr. Darcy, without demanding further attention, as her mother does of her own spectators. For Elizabeth’s performances of sensibility—her affects—the lack or loss of language is just as important as the blatant staging of convention sensibility (weeping, blushing, and so forth) and more effective in producing affect in those observing her. In *Shame and Its Sisters*, a mediation of Silvan Tomkins’ work on affect, Sedgwick and Adam Frank highlight the importance of speech in affective performance:

speech is necessarily a major vehicle of the expression of his affects.
Words are not a substitute for the experience of affect but a major learned medium ... Not only does speech enable the individual to express and intensify or reduce his own affects but it enables him also to evoke affects from others, to intensify the affects of others, or to muffle and reduce them. (95-96)

Words, then, affect affect: the type, the amount, the volume. Mrs. Bennet’s whining does affect her audience; that affect is of the negative variety, however, framed by the narrator as ironic and self-serving, rather than sympathetic. In contrast, Elizabeth’s loss of voice and inability to produce language serves to heighten her positive affect on her audience, her performance of sensibility accentuated by her lack of words to communicate.

Nancy Armstrong, in _Desire and Domestic Fiction_, discusses _Emma_, another of Austen’s novels, in relation to the power of words: “when there seems to be an absence of words, one has the sense of language reborn, not borrowed and used, as it emerges directly from the individuals in question, word by word, each loaded at least with real meaning, because each is fixed on a feeling that already exists before the individual finds words and occasion to pronounce it” (152). Just as Emma and Mr. Knightley do not express their emotions at the climax of their courtship, Darcy and Elizabeth too lack the language to articulate their feelings for each other. Their emotions have been constituted prior to their interaction; their performances, particularly Elizabeth’s, rely on sympathy for affect:
Elizabeth feeling all the more than common awkwardness and anxiety of his situation, now forced herself to speak; and immediately, though not very fluently, gave him to understand, that her sentiments had undergone so material a change, since the period to which he alluded, as to make her receive with gratitude and pleasure, his present assurances. The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before; and he expressed himself on the occasion as sensibly and as warmly as a man violently in love can be supposed to do. Had Elizabeth been able to encounter his eye, she might have seen how well the expression of heart-felt delight, diffused over his face, became him; but, though she could not look, she could listen and he told her of feelings, which in proving of what importance she was to him, made his affection every moment more valuable.

They walked on, without knowing in what direction. There was too much to be thought, and felt, and said, for attention to any other objects.

(239)

Unable to look at Darcy, Elizabeth’s sensibility here—“too much to be … felt”—stems directly from fellow-feeling, rather than imagination based on spectacle. Affect relies on words that the reader cannot read, on language that exists prior to the emotion that prompts speaking “words and occasion to pronounce” them (Armstrong 152). “This,” Armstrong writes, “is the language of pure desire uncolored by any form of value other
than its own. It discloses the core of the individual, at least of individuals who have such a core, and the core of the novel as well, that is, the motivations that all along have been silently shaping behavior” (152). Sympathy and fellow-feeling, then, have formed Elizabeth’s desire and constituted her position as a subject. Without affect and the emotional performance of sensibility, Elizabeth would remain locked in the same trap as her mother, lacking “both [the] self-knowledge and ethical sociability” that arises from “sympathetic internalization of the other’s point of view” (McKeon 717).

This assessment of Elizabeth is in opposition to other criticism regarding Austen’s presentation of sentimentality. Janet Todd, for instance, states:

One of the most sustained attacks on the female sentimental novel came from Jane Austen, all of whose works … form part of the debate of sentimentalism. In her novels the cliches of sentimental fiction are overturned … The sentimental style and methods are equally ridiculed … parodies the ecstatic tone of sensibility … and she mocks the characters who are overwhelmed by their sensitive and palpitating bodies. (144-145)

Todd’s appraisal of Austen’s parody of excessive sensibility—particularly as it pertains to “[mocking] the characters who are overwhelmed by their sensitive and palpitating bodies”—echoes my own observations regarding Mrs. Bennet’s character. But I would counter with the argument that Lady Catherine is just as satirized on the opposite end of the scale; as a woman with no discernible sensibility whatsoever and whose sole
concern seems to be a dynastic marriage between Mr. Darcy and her daughter, her self-aggrandizing performance of wealth and rank overemphasizes and affectively discounts the very qualities she wishes to extoll. Ironically, however, McKeon points out that “Lady Catherine’s selfish recourse to the criterion of ‘feeling’ joins Lydia’s at the opposite end of a spectrum that has become a circle whose normative center is the domain of domesticity that, we are given to understand, will prevail at Pemberley” (698-699). Elizabeth’s feelings are negotiable, it seems, though Lady Catherine’s are not. In conjunction with her mother’s overly anti-sentimental presence, Miss Anne DeBurgh may embody the conventions of sensibility, with her poor health and the suffering she must endure as the only progeny of Lady Catherine, but she is a nonentity. Her lack of language, unlike Elizabeth’s, does not stem from an effusion of feeling; it is simply lacking, just as she herself is. While Mrs. Bennet may act irrationally, two of her daughters, Jane and Elizabeth are presented as being rational, as well as susceptible to a “quickness of feeling” (even when, as in Elizabeth’s case, that feeling may quickly be wrong), one is rational to a fault, and two more at least have good health, if not strong personalities (S. Johnson 596). Austen may, as Todd suggests, satirize Mrs. Bennet’s sensibility in *Pride and Prejudice*, but she is more ambivalent towards the convention than a sample size of one character’s portrayal might imply. Her construction of a female figure of authority, instead, relies on performances of sensibility and affect as ideology; that is, in Armstrong’s terms, “the novel maintains the continuity of traditional political authority while appearing to broaden its social base by
granting Elizabeth authority of a strictly female kind” (53).

Claudia Johnson writes in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* that by “endowing … Elizabeth Bennet with rich and unapologetic senses of self-consequence, Austen defies every dictum about female propriety and deference propounded in the sermons and conduct books which have been thought to shape her opinions on all important matters” (xxiii). And yet, Austen does not elude the sensibility and sympathy that constitute “female propriety and deference” with which she endows Elizabeth in addition to self-consequence. Rather, the emotional discourse, specifically that based on affective performance and which is part and parcel of sensibility, is fluid in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth must eventually succumb to that sensibility, not only through her appreciation of the wilds of Derbyshire, or the aesthetic pleasures of Pemberley, but through her ability to conform to the ideology of fellow-feeling which marks the “proper” woman of the eighteenth century. Instead of concretely countering the image of “female” as constituted by eighteenth-century conduct books, as Johnson suggests, Elizabeth can be considered “a figure” who Armstrong claims [emerges] from the categories that organize these manuals. A figure of female subjectivity, a grammar really, awaited the substance that the novel and its readers, along with countless individuals educated according to the model of the new woman, would eventually provide. ... Because they appeared to have no political bias, these rules took on the power of natural law, and as a result, they presented—in actuality, still
present—readers with ideology in its most powerful form. (60)

She participates in constituting the ideological female of sensibility. Her lack of language and affective performances provide the “grammar” of “female subjectivity” through which to perpetuate the figure of a sympathetic woman of feeling. Even when she attempts to move beyond conventional generic means, Austen still, as Armstrong puts it, “helped to establish the woman’s authority over a specific domain of knowledge—that of the emotions” (43) and to continue to constitute the eighteenth-century female and her ideology of sensibility. Elizabeth Bennet is a character for whom the performance of sensibility is a pervasive influence on her constitution as a character.
CONCLUSION

I am saying the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies.

—Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*

This recognition that sensibility is both “a fashion” and “was fashionable”, testifies to its cultural centrality, but also establishes it as essentially unstable.

—Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*

The construction of the eighteenth-century female figures prominently in the literature of the age, particularly the “novels of sensibility” written in the later half of the century. Sensibility was a familiar concept, appearing as a topic of Sunday morning sermons, as featured debates in periodicals, and as a sub-genre of novel. Intimately intertwined with growing gender separations between the Habermasian public and private spheres, sensibility emerged as a cultural phenomenon peculiar to feminized behaviors and located within domestic activities. Usually associated with feeling—a term that includes not only emotion, but the body’s physicality as well—sensibility pervaded eighteenth-century society, inspiring sympathy for suffering and charity work, as well as sparking conflict over the education of women. Through the inculcation of an “ideal woman,” sensibility became ideology, as well as a source of feminine authority. Nancy Armstrong argues that conduct books and, later, what she terms “domestic fiction,” were the vehicles for disseminating a discourse whereby female identity was located in their ability to feel—i.e. in their sensibility:
On the grounds that her sexual identity has been suppressed by a class that valued her chiefly for material reasons rather than for herself, the rhetoric of conduct books produced a subject who in fact had no material body at all. This rhetoric replaced the material body with a metaphysical body made largely of words, albeit words constituting a material form of power in their own right. The modern female body comprised a grammar of subjectivity capable of regulating desire, pleasure, the ordinary care of the body, the conduct of courtship, the division of labor, and the dynamic of family relationships. (95)

Feminine power, then, rested on the ability to perform sensibility, as the product of this “grammar of subjectivity.” Exactly what constituted a woman who embodied the correct, desirable, and feminine sort of sensibility lays the foundation for my analysis of Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, *Mary*, and *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria*, and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*.

Each of these works questions where sensibility and reason can and should intersect, in what manner they should be performed, and in what context are they appropriate. In doing so, these writers affect their readers; by constructing characters’ emotions and reactions to other characters—in other words, the way they affect and are affected—Burney, Austen, and Wollstonecraft all suggest that sensibility should be moderated. As Barbara Benedict writes, “[m]any of the fictions written during the second half of the eighteenth century … control of the reader’s response to feeling by means of language
and structural conventions that conjure a social context and the conventional values of restraint, discrimination, and moral hierarchy” (10). These authors present their arguments through distinctly different methods in an effort to “control [their] reader’s response”: Burney utilizes the epistolary style, producing affect through the mediated narration of her heroine’s adventures in courtship; Wollstonecraft attacks unmitigated and misplaced sensibility through polemic and satire; Austen demonstrates the differences in the performance of sensibility, contrasting effusive and affected sensibility with dignified, quiet sensibility influenced by fellow-feeling. Though their styles and intents are vastly disparate, as is the affect of their work, all three women’s writing emphasizes the role of sensibility within the social construction of the eighteenth-century female figure.
NOTES

1. These authors are those specifically mentioned by Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*; I would argue that several other novelists, including Burney and Wollstonecraft, among others produced work of a quality warranting praise, despite Watt’s exclusion of them from his analysis.

2. To explore a more in-depth discussion of these motives is, as I see it, beyond the scope of my research; I think it is enough to understand that affect does drive motive. That said, however, I do want to note that while I do not delve into the murky abyss of human motivation here, affect does play a distinctly important role in how characters interact in the texts with which I work.

3. Although, given the nature of the periodical as a text, would the publishers’ correspondents have been unaware of the possibility of the exposure of their letters? One must wonder, however, whether, like the authors of letters to the editor in today’s periodical publications, those who wrote to Steele and Addison might not have wanted their sentiments published and contributed to the newsletters with the full knowledge that their letters would be viewed by the reading public. This opens the possibility for both affect and affectation to play a role in what exactly these “public coauthors” and “private writers” wrote; that is, what constituted the truth (McKeon 81). From where, then, does the authenticity, and therefore author-ity, of the letters’ contents, and therefore their affect, originate if both the letters and the letter-writers could have been falsified by either the editors or the correspondents?
4. Though issues of gender and what constituted “masculine” versus “feminine” in the eighteenth century are rife in discussions of sensibility, as are issues of class and race; a thorough study of them is beyond the scope of my project at this time.

5. Dr. John Gregory’s conduct book, *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* (1774), is one which Wollstonecraft frequently quotes and critiques as she argues against the eighteenth century education for women: “my objection extends to the whole purport of these books, which tend, in my opinion, to degrade one half of the human species, and render women pleasing at the expense of every solid virtue” (*VRW* 25).

6. This is perhaps an inappropriate term for Wollstonecraft’s fiction; she took great care not to title either book a “novel” in an attempt to avoid any connection between sensibility and novels and her own fiction from the start.

7. I refer here to the “Author’s Preface”; since Wollstonecraft died before completing the novel, when William Godwin published the fragment, he added a “Preface,” as well as several textual notes and edits in an attempt to make the work more intelligible. Godwin writes, in reference to the editorial additions and corrections:

   In revising these sheets for the press, it was necessary for the editor, in some places, to connect the more finished parts with the pages of an older copy, and a line or two in addition sometimes appeared requisite for that purpose. … it being the editor’s most earnest desire … to give the public the words, as well as ideas, of the real author. (*WW* 65-66)
8. Bray implies that in revising “First Impressions,” an epistolary novel, into *Pride and Prejudice*, the novel with third person point of view possessed of a narrative voice rife with irony, therefore, Austen produces a text that many critics would believe could potentially distance the reader from the emotion expressed by the characters; Barbara Benedict suggests that

> From the 1770s, however, sentimental fictions become more pessimistic about the liberating effect of feeling, and structure their sentiment within detached narratives. in all these texts, however, the conventions of plot, character and language that structure genre work to separate the reader from too unbridled an identification with the sentimental characters in the story and to criticize excess and feminine feeling. (17-18)

9. This is not to be confused with Austen’s narrator’s voice. Though the overall narration stems from one source, in this letter, we see Darcy’s writing and not the writing of an ironic narrator utilizing free indirect thought (or perhaps produced by it, if we accept Miller’s suggestion about the inevitability of irony and this narrative style). Letters written by a character, rather than the narrator, create another set of experiencing and narrating selves, which, like Evelina, may be “torn between the fevered passion of their experiencing self and the calm reason of their narrating self, … [experiencing] turbulent and sometimes unresolvable psychological crises” but still “[offered] the opportunity for reasoned, rational thought as characters order their experiences and present them” (Bray 81).
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