



Unlocking the Rape: An Analysis of Austen's Use of Pope's Symbolism in *Sense and Sensibility*

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EARLY IN THE STORY OF *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood allows her beloved Willoughby to “cut off a long lock of her hair” (60), as a younger sister later reports. At least one critic has noticed “the oblique contrast between Marianne . . . and Pope’s painted Belinda” (*Suloway* 45), including the repetition of the word “lock” twice during sister Margaret’s retelling (60). An analysis of *Sense and Sensibility* in light of the text of “The Rape of the Lock” reveals that Austen appropriates symbols, scenes, and characters from the poem with great regularity. Where Austen’s message differs from Pope’s is in presenting the goal of restraint. Austen is less concerned for the general good of society than for the safety of each individual woman. The regulation of passion is, for her, a practice best recommended to women to help them avoid the “dementia and decay of the wronged woman,” as Claudia Johnson puts it (160).

Marianne Dashwood and Pope’s Belinda are young, marriageable girls consumed by “ruling passions,” which at first glance appear to be nearly opposite. Belinda’s desire is for power over the male sex and unlimited opportunity to exercise her coquettishness. Pope describes her “shining Ringlets” (11.22), which aim at “the Destruction of Mankind” (11.19); she “Burns to encounter” (11.26) potential “Slaves” (11.23). Marianne, on the other hand, is dedicated to the ideal of fidelity

to one perfect man. “I require so much!” she cries to her mother. “His person and manners must ornament his goodness with every possible charm.” (18). When Willoughby deserts Marianne, the author dryly comments that Marianne feels morally obliged to suffer insomnia (83).

It is of course not at all clear that Marianne’s obsession is very different from Belinda’s. Sulloway mentions that contemporary conduct books “informed women that the cult of sensibility was often a mask for selfishness” and characterizes Marianne herself as selfish (126-27). Certainly both heroines exhibit a tendency to become self-absorbed. Belinda spends twenty-eight-lines worth of attention on her own appearance in Canto 1. Marianne, although described by Sir John as “a monstrous pretty girl” (108), scorns such ploys and coquettishness in general (she takes Sir John to task for his phrase “making a conquest” [45]), but she is not above signaling her own self-absorption by persistent neglect of her appearance.

In her own way, Marianne is just as fond of power as Belinda—she consistently avoids playing cards, for example, but the avoidance becomes a means of control in itself, by forcing her sister Elinor to perform Marianne’s social duties for her. Marianne’s addiction to fidelity has unexpectedly trapped her in the role of supplicator, unlike Belinda who sees herself as a combatant. Marianne follows her lover to London like a dog and insists she is “cruelly used; but not by Willoughby” (189). Belinda takes the more direct route of poking her suitor with a hairpin (Pope v.88).

Because the lock is given voluntarily in Austen’s version, the “Screams of Horror” that Pope has Belinda utter (111.156) are noticeably absent (although Marianne will reproduce them later in the story). Otherwise, details of the incident are much the same. There is an audience in both cases. Marianne’s hair is “tumbled down her back” (60) just as Belinda’s locks hang “behind” (Pope 11.20); one lock is taken after tea, one stolen after coffee; neither is taken on the first try, but only after repeated supplications (by Willoughby) or attempts (by the Baron).

Like Belinda, Marianne suffers a fall, a reduction in her power. Marianne receives full as much warning as Belinda receives from Ariel, but because there is “an Earthly Lover lurking at her Heart” (Pope 111.144), Marianne pays her advisors no more attention than the sleeping Belinda does. Marianne is, in fact, in a “dream of felicity” (58)

when Willoughby wants to shower her with inappropriate presents and does not want “to awaken...to comprehend all the unhappy truths” (58) Elinor tells her.

Although Elinor is Ariel’s chief counterpart in Austen’s version, some of Willoughby’s own actions function as warnings of his intent. His abrupt departure for London without making a formal proposal should warn Marianne that his love is suspect; instead she is eager to follow him and writes to him repeatedly without any reply. The situation is similar in “The Rape of the Lock” in Canto 111, where Belinda’s presentiment of defeat at cards spurs her on to win (and gloat), which causes the Baron to retaliate disastrously.

Long anticipated by the reader, Marianne finally descends into her own “Cave of Spleen”—in this case, Mrs. Jennings’s spare bedroom. Belinda’s screams are reproduced here when Austen states that Marianne has “almost screamed in agony” (182). The scream is precipitated by the return of Marianne’s hair and letters. The insulting letter that accompanies the lock, assuring Marianne that her power is gone, is couched in the same polite and formal language as the Baron’s refusal to return Belinda’s hair. “I have just had the honour of receiving your letter,” writes Willoughby, and “I obey your commands” (183). The Baron claims that “it grieves me much” not to return the hair at Sir Plume’s request (1v:130). Both replies, of course, refuse each heroine what she wants.

John Willoughby returns the lock at the instigation of another woman, just as the Baron is prompted to his action by Clarissa. Sophia Grey, Willoughby’s fiancée, does much to “assist” her “Knight” (Pope 111.129). Her way to “present the Spear” (Pope 111.130) is to dictate the letter Willoughby sends to Marianne. “I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to” (328), Willoughby confesses to Elinor. However, Sophia does force Willoughby to take the step that makes Marianne acknowledge reality in place of illusion. Though in Belinda’s case it fails, Sophia eventually gives Marianne new wisdom about relationships and self-control.

Useful as Sophia may be as a *point d’appui* for Marianne’s initiation into adulthood, it is Elinor who consistently protects and teaches Marianne, taking on roles filled in Pope’s work by Ariel, Clarissa, Thalestris, and others. Elinor and Mrs. Jennings are reminiscent of Pope’s “Two Handmaids” (1v:25), “differing far on Figure and in Face”

(iv:26). Mrs. Jennings is an unshakably good-natured “ancient Maid” (iv:27), offering Constantia wine and dried cherries to the anguished Marianne, while Elinor, a year older than “Affectation” (iv:31), dispenses sound advice while supporting Marianne through a variety of swoons, fevers, and fits of hysterics.

Marianne begins her descent in a window seat, writing to Willoughby “before . . . the sun had gained any power over a cold gloomy morning in January” (180). She writes through “a continual flow of tears” and wakes Elinor with her “agitation and sobs,” moving to “excessive affliction” and “frequent bursts of grief” in the space of two paragraphs. Her excesses recall Pope’s description of the contents of the Goddess of Spleen’s bag of passions, where eight manifestations of female emotion are listed in three lines (iv:84–86).

When Marianne slides off her bed in a faint, she is caught and held by Elinor in much the same way Belinda is “sunk in Thalestris’ Arms” (iv:89). Elinor’s urgings resemble Thalestris’s when she tells Marianne to let her enemies “be cheated of their malignant triumph . . . by seeing how nobly the consciousness of your own innocence and good intentions supports your spirits” (189). Unlike Thalestris’s words, Elinor’s speech does not aim at continuing the conflict, and since it discourages rather than reinforces Marianne’s “ruling passion,” Elinor is unfortunately ignored.

Marianne does not translate depression into anger as Belinda does; in fact, Austen’s heroine remains “in Beauteous Grief” (Pope iv:143) for most of the rest of the novel until eventually her physical state responds to her emotional exhaustion. The hallucinatory psychological lines 40 to 54 in Canto iv of “The Rape of the Lock” become real for Marianne when she reaches the Palmers’ Cleveland estate and slides into “a putrid fever” (330) as a result of her self-indulgence in abandoning all care of herself to obsess about Willoughby.

Marianne becomes more and more delusional, thinking her mother is with her, and unaware where she herself is. When Marianne does recover and return to society, however, it is not to further antagonize it but to resubmit herself to its rules—for reasons Austen makes clear.

Pope’s sense of Belinda’s duty in her particular station, as reflected in Clarissa’s speech, is that she submit to what is really a physical attack (however mild) with “good Sense” (v:16) and “good

Humour" (v:30). The fate Pope reserves for women who ignore his advice is that "she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid" (v:97). This is no doubt an unpleasant prospect for a woman who enjoys flirtation as much as Belinda does, and possibly the most psychologically convincing argument one could offer a coquette. Austen, however, sees the stakes as somewhat higher.

"One of the lessons of the book," writes LeRoy W. Smith of *Sense and Sensibility*, "is that for a woman to surrender even to normal heterosexual emotion may prove a fatal error" (72). Austen does not find the prospect of being an old maid quite as terrible as Pope seems to; Austen is more concerned with the fact that those who do not scorn men are just as apt to die as maids, often far more unpleasantly.

That Austen was aware of the convention of the dying Clarissa-like penitent is apparent from a passage in *Emma*, where the narrator remarks that "Goldsmith tells us, that when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally recommended" (387).

Some of the characters in *Sense and Sensibility* seem to want Marianne to become a Clarissa figure—and these characters are almost all men. Colonel Brandon believes he will "see Marianne no more" (310), Sir John reports her dying, and Mrs. Jennings mourns "the early death of a girl so young" (313). Willoughby especially lets his imagination run away with him when he recalls his last sight of Marianne at a ball "beautiful as an angel... Marianne's sweet face as white as death" and feels that "it was a comfort to me to imagine that I knew exactly how she would appear to those, who saw her last in this world" (327).

But Marianne does not die. She lives to illustrate, in her post-recovery speeches, what Austen advises rather than death or complete submission to societal expectations.

Austen advocates the use of the mind for women's self-protection, as well as the exercise of good sense and humor Pope recommends. "Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction," Marianne says. "My illness... has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection" (345). Austen's expectations of women's intelligence differ from Pope's, who assumes it must be "disagreeable for women to have to puzzle out hard words" (78).

Much as Austen cautions against the loss of character, she does

not quite believe that death is necessary to “expiate” (Richardson 516), as Richard Lovelace calls it in *Clarissa*, immorality. Very few fallen women in Austen’s novels do die. They are saved by last minute marriages, like Lydia Bennett, or sent to foreign countries like Mrs. Rushworth. Only one woman, Colonel Brandon’s Eliza, actually dies, and she has also had an illegitimate child. This daughter, who has a child but is unmarried, is spared. Lydia Cipriani in her paper “The Wages of Sin” notes that for Victorian writers “some sort of salvation, limited and temporary as it was, was available to the young unmarried victim, but not to the adulterous wife” (15), and we may see Austen’s attitude toward her heroines as an early indication of this tendency.

Austen admired Pope’s work—she once remarked, “There has been one infallible Pope in the world” (*Letters* 26 October 1813), and attempted to write heroic couplets herself, informally (*Letters* 26 July 1809). She almost certainly made some of the references consciously. Whether or not all allusions to Pope are deliberate is impossible to say, but if Selden and Widdowson’s definition is correct, Bloom’s “Anxiety of Influence” is in full operation in *Sense and Sensibility*. As a “misreading” of Pope “to produce a new interpretation” (Selden and Widdowson 153), the novel succeeds. Austen must “deny paternity” not only for herself artistically, but for a whole group of people, in that she “denies” the patriarchal solution of death for the unpure female.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen manages to use Pope’s symbols to create the sense that while society’s rules may not have changed since 1717, options for women have. Women need not choose between blind conformity to society and blind allegiance to emotion, but may use their intelligence and willpower to seek both happiness and safety.

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