'Neither musical nor affecting to be so': the question of taste in *Sense and Sensibility*

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The question of aesthetic taste and its relationship to moral worth was a common subject of eighteenth-century moralists and philosophers. Hermione Lee quotes Shaftesbury, Burke and Hume to show that, in the eighteenth century, ‘it was felt that taste for art, taste for literature, and taste or nature, were related, and were all three suggestive of one's moral worth.’¹ Critics have varied in the extent to which they see Jane Austen endorsing this view. Gilbert Ryle sees a ‘prevailing correlation between sense of duty, sense of propriety and aesthetic taste. Most of her people who lack any one of these three, lack the other two as well.’² But the exceptions must include the key figures of Henry and Mary Crawford in *Mansfield Park*, who are too important to be brushed aside, and Mrs Jennings in *Sense and Sensibility*, is who lacks aesthetic taste, and has only a very basic sense of propriety, but certainly is not deficient in her duty and has moreover the undoubted moral virtue of a kind and practically helpful disposition. It is true that all Jane Austen’s truly admirable characters combine all three qualities: all the heroes have them, and the heroines either attain them or have them to start with; but there are certainly many instances of characters who have one or two of these qualities without the rest. I am inclined to agree with Hermione Lee when she says that this was a "habit of thought of which Jane Austen was both aware and wary. Firmly accepting the fundamental idea of a relationship between taste

and morality, she was thoroughly satirical of the excesses to which that idea could lead". Of all her characters, the one who most completely represents and illustrates the dangers of believing that sensibility to art, literature and nature equate with moral virtue is Marianne Dashwood.

Marianne is musical, Elinor is not. This is one of the explicit ways in which Jane Austen distinguishes between her two heroines in *Sense and Sensibility*. Elinor has a talent for drawing, so she is not at all deficient in artistic sensibilities, but she has a much more pragmatic, down-to-earth attitude to the picturesque than Marianne. She enjoys ironically undercutting Marianne's rhapsodies – for example, when Marianne is describing the joys of autumn at Norland, Elinor says: "It is not everyone...who has your passion for dead leaves" (SS 88).

Music itself in *Sense and Sensibility* has a somewhat ambiguous significance. Firstly, it is certainly a respectable and acceptable element in a young woman's education, though not an essential one, as Elinor's lack of interest shows. Playing and singing and other accomplishments like drawing and embroidery, are regarded by some, like their half-brother John, merely as assets in the marriage market. But Mrs Dashwood, who is certainly no Mrs Bennet obsessed with marrying off her daughters, encourages them to occupy their time perfecting these accomplishments, to the surprise of Sir John Middleton, "who was not in the habit of seeing much occupation at home" (SS 40). These activities are worthwhile in their own right, and the discipline they represent is important in forming the girls’ characters. When Elinor and Marianne go to London, Mrs Dashwood and Margaret intend to "go on so quietly and happily together with our books and our music" (SS 55). Nevertheless, the attractiveness of musicianship to a potential husband is demonstrated without ironic overtones when Marianne first plays the piano at the Middletons': Colonel Brandon is immediately interested and listens "without being in raptures" while paying her "only the compliment of

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3 Lee 83.
attention" (SS 35). And, of course, when Willoughby arrives on the scene, music is one of the many tastes he is discovered to have in common with Marianne, and their pleasure in singing duets promotes their romantic attachment. But we know already that Marianne enjoys music for its own sake, and that she sees it as a taste to be shared with a lover ("the same music must charm us both" [SS17]), rather than a means of ensnaring a husband.

Music, then, for a marriageable young woman, can have the dual role of an educational discipline and a personal adornment – an addition to the charms with which a husband may be attracted. But it can also be a dangerous indulgence for a devotee of sensibility. After Willoughby leaves Barton, Marianne spends the days wandering around Allenham and crying, and the evening passed off in the equal indulgence of feeling. She played over every favourite song that she had been used to play to Willoughby, every air in which their voices had been oftenest joined, and sat at the instrument gazing on every line of music that he had written out for her, till her heart was so heavy that no further sadness could be gained; and this nourishment of grief was every day applied. She spent whole hours at the pianoforte alternately singing and crying, her voice often totally suspended by her tears (SS 83)

Marianne's excessive indulgence of grief, her refusal to make any effort to control her feelings, at this early stage, is linked with her later indisposition when Willoughby rejects her in London, and the serious illness she courts by walking in the rain at Cleveland. Although we see her feelings are genuine, her elevation of sensibility over every sensible standard of behavior seems at first to be almost a game. To her, it is perhaps part of the story of her love affair which she plans to talk over in happier days when she is reunited with Willoughby. But when there is no happy reunion, she is unable to find another way of behaving: she has...
learned to play the role of the injured heroine of sensibility, and though Elinor
tries to teach, she her cannot learn the self-discipline and fortitude which would
help her cope when the hardest blows come. She therefore sinks under these
blows and only her nearly fatal illness can teach her the lesson of sense over
sensibility. This is shown, on her return to Barton, in clear contrast to the
passage quoted above:

After dinner she would try her pianoforte. She went to it; but the music on
which her eye first rested was an opera, procured for her by Willoughby
containing some of their favourite duets, and bearing on its outward leaf
her own name in his handwriting–. That would not do. – She shook her
head, put the music aside, and after running over the keys for a minute
complained of feebleness in her fingers, and closed the instrument again;
declaring however with firmness as she did so, that she should in future
practice much. (SS 342)

Music has become for her, in her new, mature frame of mind, more of a discipline
than an indulgence, she plans to rise at six and "divide every moment between
music and reading" (SS 343). Reading in Jane Austen is usually a sign of
seriousness, and this linking of the two arts gives music an equal status. An
interesting sidelight might be to speculate whether Marianne, unlike Lady
Middleton, and indeed most married women in the novels, would continue to play
after her marriage. The brides who abandon their accomplishments, like Mrs
Elton and Lady Middleton, are thereby revealed to have been using music only to
promote matrimony: they have no abiding or genuine interest in music or art for
its own sake. Marianne is not of their ilk. Music, I believe, would continue to play
an important part in her married life, as recreation and even perhaps an
emotional release – she does not lose all her sensibility – and also for the
enjoyment of her husband, to whom she becomes, eventually, completely,
developed. So for Marianne, music can work for good or ill; it can be an indulgence
of grief or a means of self-discipline; it can attract a worthless suitor or a worthy husband.

For Elinor, music has no such meaning. "Elinor was neither musical, nor affecting to be so" (SS 250). As Elinor is something of a moral yardstick in the novel, it is tempting to interpret this as a repudiation of music, until we read that her worthless brother John is not musical either. The telling phrase is "nor affecting to be so". Affectation is always a target for Jane Austen's satire, and the clear message here is that Elinor knows herself and her tastes, and makes no pretence to like what she has no interest in. Elinor has developed, at an early age, the ability to discriminate between tact and insincerity. Although "the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it" (SS 122) is always hers, her lies are those demanded by civility, unlike the insincere flattery of Lucy Steele, which is motivated purely by self-interest. There is also a contrast implicit between Elinor's honest lack of interest and Lady Middleton's affected musical taste, displayed by her pretence of listening when Marianne plays without noticing what music she is playing. Elinor's attitude to music echoes passages in Jane Austen's letters, where she expresses indifference to singing in particular and concerts in general, "being what Nature made me on that article". She seemed to believe that musical taste was inborn, and there was no moral value attached to it: her argument with Mr Haden over what appears to be a quotation from *The Merchant of Venice* shows her taking the part of the unmusical, perhaps in defence not so much of herself as of other members of her family who, according to her nephew, "were less fond of music". Other letters show approval of people who honestly admit not liking music, which could be interpreted as a dislike of affectation, and a sympathy for differing tastes, rather than a dislike of music on her own part.

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5 Letters 43.
One scene in *Sense and Sensibility* shows an incidental but nevertheless quite significant role that music played in the drawing room. Elinor is able to talk to Lucy privately only under cover of Marianne's playing, in the midst of the Middleton's oppressively sociable family party. A pianist of even elementary standard may very often have been useful to occupy the idle evening hours, to cover awkward silences, or as in this case allow a confidential conversation, in a society where people may have been compelled to spend their time in uncongenial company.

*Mansfield Park* invites comparison with *Sense and Sensibility*, because of the serious moral tone that appears to set them apart from the lighter-hearted novels, and the superficial similarities of Fanny and Elinor; two dutiful and unmusical heroines. However, Elinor and Fanny have as many differences as similarities, even in their musical tastes. Elinor does not enjoy music, whereas Fanny is genuinely drawn to the music when Mary Crawford plays to her, despite her jealousy of Edmund’s admiration of Mary. The first time she hears the harp, she is "full of wonder at the performance, and...not wanting in taste" (MP207), and later, at the Grants' dinner party, she is happy to listen to the harp rather than take part in the other amusements of cards and conversation (MP 227). Elinor in the same situation would be looking about her for some other occupation. Moreover, there are several interesting similarities between Fanny and Marianne. Their musical skills are in sharp contrast, as are their personalities, but their tastes have much in common. Pam Perkins writes: "In their strength of romantic feeling the two women are remarkably alike";⁷ and further, "Fanny and Marianne are both atypical Austen heroines in that they prefer landscape to people.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, music has some significance in showing the extremes of sensibility in Marianne, who can submerge herself completely when playing

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the piano, and of affectation and insincerity in characters like Lady Middleton. Music has some social usefulness, but can be a bore to those who are not musically inclined. Practising music is a discipline for the young, but it can also be a dangerous indulgence for sensitive young minds. Austen uses the change in Marianne's attitude to music to mirror a more profound change in her attitude to herself and her world. Musicianship is neither a vice nor a virtue: Marianne is musical by nature, and Elinor is not; and these characteristics are used to reflect other qualities like honesty in Elinor, and youthful imprudence and eventual maturity in Marianne, and to give a deeper insight into their characters and personalities.