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Jane Austen's Politeness on Screen: Between Ambivalent Submission and Defiant Self-Assertion

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ABSTRACT: In Jane Austen's novels much of the action takes place at social gatherings, where good manners and rigorous formalities are the arbitrator of social acceptance or exclusion, and help to maintain social hierarchy and social identities. The cinematic adaptations of Austen's works announce a change in the fabric of society and the conceptions of politeness. By promoting self-knowledge and independence, these films take the part of the characters, who speak their minds without paying too much attention to good manners and politeness, which are considered as a hindrance to the expression of feelings and as a slavish following of rules verging on hypocrisy.

Keywords: politeness, Jane Austen, conversation, hierarchy, language, silence, social class, cinematic adaptation.

RESUMEN: En las novelas de Jane Austen gran parte de la acción tiene lugar en las reuniones sociales, en las que las buenas maneras y las estrictas formalidades sirven para arbitrar la aceptación o exclusión sociales, al tiempo que colaboran en la salvaguarda de la jerarquía social y las identidades sociales. Las adaptaciones cinematográficas de las obras de Austen proponen una revisión del tejido social y los conceptos de cortesía de la época mediante el énfasis en el autoconocimiento y la independencia de los personajes principales. De esta manera, las películas adoptan una perspectiva contemporánea, alineándose con aquellos personajes que se posicionan abiertamente y rechazan las buenas maneras y la cortesía, a las que se considera un impedimento para la expresión de los propios sentimientos, así como una adherencia incondicional a las normas sociales que raya en la hipocresía.

Palabras clave: cortesía, Jane Austen, conversación, jerarquía, lenguaje, silencio, clase social, adaptación cinematográfica.

The times in which Jane Austen lived were rich in radical events –the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Napoleonic wars, imperial expansion– which are not reflected in her novels.[1] More important were the bourgeois principles on which society was founded featuring in her works –love, attraction, marriage, emotions, jealousy and sexuality. Austen does not follow the literary fashion of the time either, clinging to the ideas and style of the Classical tradition and its sound values, as well as to a rational approach to life, although such a worldview was fast giving way to a more emotional approach, even at the time when she was writing. Jane Austen is thus alert to the significance of class and class-barriers, living as she did in a period in which the concept of class had gone under greater scrutiny than in earlier periods.[2]

The increase in the number of treatises on politeness and *savoir-vivre* published at that time can partly be put down to these social changes. Work and money enabled people from the lower classes to climb up the social ladder and challenge the prerogatives of the aristocracy, while aspiring to the same manners. The prescriptions for behaviour given in those books suggested a coherent whole dealing with: self-presentation; social relations in a world assimilated to a stage in a permanent state of performance; the place and the time of day dictating proper behaviour; and social occasions involving the whole community, as society takes precedence over the individual, and sociability over individuality.

1. Hierarchy and Structural Politeness in the Community: Respect and Benevolence

The world of Jane Austen's novels is confined to a small segment of English upper-middle-class society. The reader is made aware of a highly organised and stratified community where people are very conscious of precise class divisions and have their position determined by a subtle conglomerate of factors relating to birth, wealth and breeding.

The social spectrum of *Emma* is narrow, involving many levels and discriminations, and including a variety of occupations. The most important families belong to the landed gentry and are strongly identified with their houses:

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1. She mentions war briefly in *Pride and Prejudice* and in *Persuasion*.
2. Following the impact of the French Revolution, the structure of English society came to be examined and questioned with a new consciousness and urgency. Old values based on privileges such as birth and blood were on the verge of being replaced by more egalitarian ideals, while modes of behaviour still considered as fundamental in the eighteenth century –submission to hierarchy and etiquette, for instance– were pushed into the background for good. The film adaptations of Austen's works resort to this ambiguity to introduce a more explicit message foretelling a change in the social fabric and the conceptions of good manners.

the Woodhouses with Hartfield, Mr Knightley with Donwell Abbey, the Westons with Randalls. Most of the major scenes take place in one or other of these homes or in some public place such as the Crown Inn or one of the shops in the High Street. *Emma*'s protagonists live in a controlled and stable world circumscribed by good manners and etiquette, which become the reassuring cement of hierarchy. The Highbury equals are capable of intimate relationships with one another; but, as rank changes, the relation to the Woodhouses grows more distant: the schoolmistress is received, the poor are visited. To that avail, at the Coles' party, the less important guests are ushered in after the more important ones have already dined. In this rural and hierarchical world subscribing by assent to a stylized system of properties and duties, the slightest breach in propriety never goes unobserved. The degree of social stability, the preciseness of social expectations, the limitations on eccentric behaviour or violent action reinforce the moral order and render it significant, creating a high degree of consensus about polite behaviour: care and respect for others, the decent discharge of one's duties, and the scrupulous improvement of oneself emerge as positive features. Frivolity is disliked and benevolence valued.

Because society is not merely a backdrop, but an integral part of Jane Austen's novels, the social forms depicted are of particular significance. The reader of *Emma* is given details of everyday rituals such as tea, dinner, the forms of card parties, dinner parties, picnic parties and balls; the polite course of visiting one's friends formally on arriving in a district, and before leaving; or the special procedures for visiting and inviting a newly married woman, allowing her to lead in to dinner and to be the first to dance. The observance of custom matters greatly: neglecting the carefully established ritual built up over the centuries can harm, hurt or disturb, and lead to the eviction of the social transgressor. Good manners require that one behaves towards people not as one feels about them as individuals, but as their position or predicament in life dictates: «I would always wish to pay every proper attention to a lady –and a bride, especially, is never to be neglected. More is avowedly due to *her*. A bride, you know, my dear, is always the first in company, let the others be who they may. [...] This is a matter of mere common politeness and good-breeding» (*Emma*: 230).

As the elder son of a rich family, Mr Knightley has inherited the estate of Donwell Abbey –its lands, farms and house, and the duties towards his farmers. His magnificent and orderly estate is a symbol of all that is deemed finest in the English gentleman. His uprightness in all moral and social matters is taken for granted all through the novel, and he becomes a reference in terms of politeness and good breeding. For that matter, his higher position implies a benevolence towards his tenants. Lacking the class consciousness that constrains most of the people of Highbury, Mr Knightley is at ease with all levels of society. He likes and esteems the young farmer, Robert Martin; he keeps Miss Bates and her

mother supplied with apples and runs their errands; he rescues Harriet when she is humiliated at the dance.

The American (McGrath, 1996) and the British (Lawrence, 1996-97) film adaptations present Mr Knightley in a different light. Davies's British screenplay introduces a scene in which he is seen observing the harvest on horseback, then being greeted with respect by his farmers. This addition endows him with a vigorous and mature appearance. McGrath's American Knightley, on the other hand, is good at sly irony and his acting style is understated. His reluctance to join social gatherings is unexpected coming from a gentleman: he tells Emma that he would rather not go to the ball but would prefer to stay home, «where it's cozy», while the massive Donwell Abbey stands behind him.

It is difficult to imagine the former Mr Knightley performing the scene in the British adaptation, in which Mr Knightley addresses his friends and tenants at the harvest banquet. The scene presents a particularly interesting treatment of polite relations. It starts by adhering to rules of decorum, but goes on to finish in a major breach of etiquette through a class intermingling not to be found in any novel by Jane Austen: according to the proper social conventions, Mr Knightley, both as host and as the person of the higher rank, welcomes his guests; his tenants are invited to mingle with the gentry; and Emma even seeks an introduction to Robert Martin, a moment enhanced by the sudden and unexpected silence on the soundtrack. In the novel, though, Robert Martin is introduced at Hartfield, and Emma respects him and Harriet for what they are: her «goodwill» (*Emma*: 395) is typical of the higher classes. In the film, however, class attitudes are conveyed through the character of Mrs Elton, who acts as a certain sort of scapegoat as her complaints about being among farmers are judged negatively.

Although the segregated seating at the meal is in keeping with the proprieties of the time, the dance of the three newly engaged couples flouts historical accuracy and favours the image of community and class harmony: implying the continuation of Emma's friendship with Harriet despite the class barriers, and paying tribute to the current ideology of classlessness, correspond to an updating of the novel in order to please a television audience. The concept of politeness has altered so much historically as to need a fundamental change within the narrative to achieve a pleasant image of the main characters. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Mr Knightley's benevolence towards his tenants during the harvest time would have been sufficient to accomplish so, since such a heterogeneous gathering could have been considered as a provocative breach of decorum. To the film audience, the counterbalance that is expected from the representatives of higher ranks when receiving signs of respect has to be expressed in a more visible overt way.

McGrath's *Emma* (1996) does not use such a challenging tone. By undercutting hierarchies, this adaptation makes little effort to communicate the pressures of

rank on interpersonal relations. Since the gradations of rank remain unexplained, any character's attention to them seems foolish snobbery. Camerawork pairs Emma with Harriet in the same frame, with the symmetrical two shots allowing neither young woman to be dominant. The repetitive use of window frames and doorways highlights the characters' positioning in a symmetrical composition that visually reinforces the film's egalitarian views. Politeness is not linked anymore to the observance of hierarchy and etiquette, but merely becomes a period mannerism displayed by each and every character: Harriet bows her head into Emma's lap in one scene, in a gesture that could mark her deference towards the young mistress of Hartfield, yet Emma's similar gesture in another situation goes against the manners of the time.

Emma is a reference for the people of Highbury, but crosses the boundaries of playfulness when an opportunity arises for a witticism at the expense of Miss Bates. In Jane Austen's scheme, and in that of the society that she depicts in general, it is essential that people enjoying superiority earn it by their behaviour, if they are to be admired. Thus, even a trivial insult to one who is an inferior in every sense is nearly unforgivable, which is why, at the end of the picnic, Mr Knightley's rebuke to Emma in private is as just as it is inevitable. Therefore, recognizing the justice of what he says, Emma is mortified and ashamed.

Both films change again Mr Knightley's role and significance in the scene. Lawrence's version omits his most poignant words, that Miss Bates «has sunk from the comforts she was born to; and, if she live to old age, must probably sink more» (*Emma*: 309). For McGrath, as for Austen, Emma's impoliteness and cruelty are a failure of forward-looking imagination: the inability to see that Miss Bates's life will grow more constrained, rather that richer, with time, and that comforts like companionship and faithful friendship are the only things that will endure. In McGrath's version, this scene is underscored, as if decorum was not crucial: Emma's insult follows a snub on the part of the Eltons, which makes the verbal attack on Miss Bates look like a reaction to the former one suffered by Emma, the whole affair causing the party to remain silent for a while. The action moves on quickly as if the film's concern were to prevent the audience from noticing Emma's rudeness. Through the use of a close up, the camera enhances her surprise at the heat of Mr Knightley's rebuke, who also commits a serious breach of good manners with his rough treatment of the young woman: he seizes Emma's arm while reproaching her for her insensitive rudeness to Miss Bates. Although such a proximity, combined with the underlying violence of the act, are inappropriate and unlikely of him, by understating the rules dictating propriety at the time of the diegesis, and by emphasizing the childish behaviour of Emma, who turns away from him to hide her tears while showing her full face to the audience, the screenwriter introduces a passionate Mr Knightley who can but please a modern audience.

Emma's rudeness triggers another level of politeness: she recognizes that her intelligence, wealth, and social pre-eminence require kindness rather than contempt towards Miss Bates. She awakens to the obligations of her position; since she has committed a breach of propriety, the rules of politeness demand that she now makes amends, as expressed by the terms of remorse and repentance employed: «hope to be forgiven», «true contrition», «the penitence, so justly and truly hers» (*Emma*: 311). At the outcome, Miss Bates is grateful for her visit and apologies, but Jane Fairfax avoids her and goes to lie down.

In Davies's (1996-97) screenplay adaptation, Miss Bates displays such an affectionate heart that Emma's past rudeness is all the more enhanced. In McGrath's version, however, Emma's apologies are not accepted in such a gracious manner: the camera follows Emma's entrance into the cottage, and, as a servant opens the door to the parlour, we observe Miss Bates running into an adjacent rooom: «Just tell her I'm unwell and laying down upon the bed» (McGrath, 1996). Thus, Jane's impolite refusal to meet Emma is extended to her aunt. Such a change erases the code of social conduct consolidating *Emma*'s hierarchical world, and favours a vision of England where social divisions have disappeared, which would account for the nostalgic feeling of «good old England» and the longing for the beauty of the English past through bucolic settings. Totally individual as she is, Emma, nonetheless, belongs to a community, and her existence depends upon the part that she plays and will play in it: her very mistakes arise from her ascription to that social universe; her spirited sense of herself, from her complete acceptance of the way it works.

2. Politeness in Individual Behaviour: Frankness and Hypocrisy

In the first half of the eighteenth century the equation of politeness with virtue renders the notion of sincerity progressively problematic. The controversy of the 1790s pitting Edmund Burke against Mary Wollstonecraft, who replaces Burke's civility by sincerity and challenges the ethos of politeness, framing it in terms of gender, constitutes a fundamental moment in the history of politeness.[3] Whereas Burke wants to consolidate the security of manners, Wollstonecraft considers feminine modesty as the promotion of insincerity. Politeness can mean civility, decorum and tact, as well as dissimulation, lying and hypocrisy.

Jane Austen was writing with a well-established literary tradition in mind, the tradition of the conduct novel, such as *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754) by

3. Contrast E. Burke (1790), *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, with M. Wollstonecraft (1792), *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which conduct-book female modesty appears as a way of obliging women to sacrifice morality for the show of it.

Samuel Richardson, in which a model gentleman represents an ideal code of conduct for civilised relationships. Jane Austen extends the scope of this type of didactic fiction by using her exploration of manners to examine the degrees of gentility, and to distinguish between good manners as a thoughtful consideration of others or as mere etiquette, the latter depicting in fact the slavish following of rules verging on hypocrisy. By way of example, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Miss Bingley, the personification of formal elegance, behaves in a manner entirely governed by her consciousness about propriety: in London, she is loath to accept the polite visit from Jane Bennet, whose relatives dwell in the unfashionable side of the capital. The manners that she exhibits have no sound justification and can be no substitute for her utter lack of human sympathy, thus presenting this sort of adherence to etiquette as hollow.

The politeness that governs social relations in Austen's works, such as greetings, acquires different meanings and significations according to the way in which they are displayed: hand shaking or hand kissing indicate a close relationship, while a simple smile establishes a distance. Lawrence's (1996-97) Emma habitually imagines her acquaintances playing out their parts in the little scenarios that she mentally scripts for them. In one of these, she gazes at a framed portrait of Frank which, as she looks at it, appears to come alive, with the young man smilingly greeting her and kissing her hand, a gesture indicating a surprising intimacy since they have never met before: «*The Frank of the picture metamorphoses into a lifesize Frank Churchill, with the same bold smile, clearly very taken with Emma*. [...] *He bends and kisses her hand, comes up, smiling mischievously right into her eyes*» (Birtwistle and Conklin, 1995 *a*: 97). Hand kissing suggests a certain degree of intimacy between the two characters, while Frank's intense gaze places him in the part of the seducer. The screenwriter psychoanalyzed Frank as «a clever, dangerous misogynistic charmer» (Birtwistle and Conklin, 1995 *a*: 11); and if any actor could portray Frank's dangerous aspect, that is Raymond Coulthard in Lawrence's *Emma*.[4] As it were, flirting with Emma seems to Frank to be the safest way to hide his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax, behaviour that he feels is justifiable because he does not see any signs that Emma is in love with him. He does seem to take more pleasure in sustaining these deceptions than mere necessity would require, and his teasing of Jane appears to show an inexplicably crueller streak. Indeed, the qualities that Emma admires in the persons surrounding her are being questioned by the very way in which she stresses them. Those she perceives in Frank are in fact evidence of his duplicity:

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4. Frank is incapable of always keeping up appearances –which is one of the main characteristics of a «gentleman». In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the «gentleman» was the paragon of the «polite» man and represented a model of socialisation for the English privileged classes.

> Emma felt sure that he knew how to make himself agreeable […]; he contrived to find an opportunity, while their two fathers were engaged with each other, of introducing his mother-in-law, and speaking of her with so much praise, so much warm admiration, so much gratitude for the happiness she secured to his father, and her very kind reception of himself, as was an additional proof of his knowing how to please –and of his certainly thinking it worth while to try to please her. (*Emma*: 159)

Conversation allows men and women to practice the art of pleasing: «The sexes will naturally desire to appear to each other, such as each believes the other will best like; their conversation will act reciprocally, and each sex will appear more or less rational as they perceive it will more or less recommend them to the other» (More, 1995: II, 42). Adapting one's manners according to one's surroundings is considered as an act of politeness in the sense that it shows a deference towards the prevailing good manners. However, in Jane Austen's works, it characterizes the hypocrites and the unscrupulous charmers, such as Wickham, Willoughby or Crawford: «Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his *making* friends –whether he may be equally capable of *retaining* them, is less certain». (*Pride and Prejudice*: 78). In this society where distance is imposed for characters, glances become a way to bridge the physical gap, which is why Frank's look at Emma when kissing her hand would be highly objectionable.

One of the dominant features in Jane Austen's novels is social occasion. Much of the action takes place at dances, dinner parties, on morning calls and at other similar gatherings, where good manners and rigorous formalities stand as the arbitrator of social acceptance or exclusion, and help in the preservation of social hierarchy and identities. Politeness implies the observance of social positions, deference and consideration for anyone according to their status, as well as a longing for equilibrium. Paying one's respect to a gentleman or to a lady should bring about benevolence and interest from them, thus any passive response, such as Darcy's in *Pride and Prejudice*, would be perceived as arrogance. The 1940 film adaptation altered Darcy's dialogues introducing social connotations as a result. In the novel, Darcy's refusal to dance with Elizabeth is motivated by her lack of physical attraction: «She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*; and I am in no humour at present to give consequence to young ladies who are slighted by other men» (*Pride and Prejudice*: 13). The 1940 film deviates from the novel by indicating that Elizabeth belongs to a social class lower than Darcy's: «She is tolerable enough. But I am in no humour tonight to give consequence to the middle classes at play» (Leonard, 1940). Although in the novel Elizabeth proudly insists that, as a gentleman's daughter, she is Darcy's equal, the film initially emphasizes the social gap between them, shifting the reason for Darcy's refusal from his judgement of Elizabeth's personal qualities, to her

social origins. In addition, Elizabeth's belief that Darcy's snub to Wickham is based on class prejudice enhances the importance given to the attention that should be bestowed onto the people from a lower condition: «What would you think of a man who had everything the world has to offer –birth, breeding, wealth, good looks, even charm when he chose to exercise it… What would be your opinion of a man with such gifts who refused to accept an introduction to another man who was poor and of no consequence?» (Leonard, 1940).

Adding such social connotations to Jane Austen's text highlights Darcy's arrogance in his refusal to accomplish his duty as a person of the higher rank. As such, Darcy's impolite behaviour is easy to demonstrate visually: his clothing and his gestures display his gentility, while his posture and facial expression display his pride. In Langton's 1995 adaptation, Darcy's vanity is conveyed through his lack of the polite conversation which is required on social occasions. He looks disapprovingly at everyone who is not a member of his group and makes no effort to hide his contempt. Similarly, he ostensibly refuses loudly to dance with Elizabeth because of her physical appearance with total disregard for her feelings. Such impolite dismissal[5] constitutes a breakdown in delicacy that is even more apparent for contemporary viewers unaware of the conventions of an eighteenth-century class-conscious society.

Jane Austen's most anxious concern was for every member of society to play their part with kindliness, unselfishness, intelligence and duty, the qualities which lay at the core of polite relations. In such a conception of social interaction, rules regulate people's lives in a mechanical way, which may appear artificial or lacking authenticity. Sometimes, keeping up appearances seems to be of the greatest importance: in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lydia's patched-up marriage may satisfy convention and sanction her claim to a superior position in front of her older sisters at the dining table, but Elizabeth, who constitutes the novel's central ironic consciousness, is sickened by the hypocrisy of it.

Free indirect speech allows access to the characters' thoughts, which is not possible in a film unless a voice-over is used –and such a cinematic device tends to hinder the energy of the narrative. Thus, cinematic devices have to be found in order to translate the characters' inner thoughts, specially in the repressive society in which direct verbal intercourse between two single persons of the opposite sex was to be checked. To reveal the protagonists' personalities and thoughts, Langton's (1995) BBC adaptation introduced telling glances between them, which prompted actor Colin Firth's remark as to how much his character remained silent throughout the first part of the televised adaptation: «The physical

5. In the 1940 and 1979 adaptations, Darcy is not aware of Elizabeth's presence when he gives the reasons for his refusal.

dimension is essential. He's basically a taciturn person, and what he doesn't say is much more important than what he does a lot of the time. In film, of course, we can cut to his face and see him even when he's not speaking». (Birtwistle and Conklin *b*, 1995: 99). Silence and glances define Darcy more than his words do, becoming eloquent illustrations of his pride. He avoids looking at the crowd around him at the Meryton ball and spends most of his time looking out of windows as if to distance himself from those he considers as his social inferiors. His gaze functions, not as a form of communication, but as a means of rejecting people. In fact, his impolite remark about Elizabeth's looks leads her to adopt a similar attitude: she stands up and walks past him to talk with her friend Charlotte, while his eyes follow her. In such a way, Darcy is placed in an identical situation to hers: standing on his own, he becomes the object of the gazes of the two young women, who laugh at him. After Darcy's first proposal and subsequent explanatory letter, their gazes replace verbal communication again, compensating for his silence and indicating their mutual understanding: the physical distance between them is bridged by their eyes.

Jane Austen's descriptions of the unspoken through looks, glances, and facial expressions were obviously not charged with the underlying eroticism to be found in the BBC production. The sexualized reciprocal gaze of the two protagonists actualizes their relationship beyond the words that politeness requires, replacing polite conversation for a modern viewer, even though such behaviour might have been anachronistic in Jane Austen's era.

3. Politeness through Language and Silence: Compliance or Rebellion?

In Jane Austen's novels dialogues are considered as the basis of a polished community. For Emma, who is extremely critical about how people use language, the expressions and the form of the conversation matter equally: «Mr Knightley, who had nothing of ceremony about him, was offering by his short, decided answers, an amusing contrast to the protracted apologies and civil hesitations of the other» (*Emma*: 150). While the dialogue can be lively and spontaneous, much of it is formal according to the gentility of the time. Language can reveal a character and his/her sense of propriety, although exceptions exist, for seducers use language to deceive their relatives and friends.

Another distinctive feature in Jane Austen's works is the building up of a succession of levels of courtesy that are intended to convey social ethics. Even though class boundaries are stressed in such a way, it is made clear that wealth and social position are no guarantee of gentility: Mrs Ferrars, the most ostentatiously affluent and powerful character in *Sense and Sensibility*, betrays moral grossness when she makes disparaging remarks about Elinor's decorative firescreens. The

technique employed consists in investing apparent trivia with moral status –the merest fragment of discourtesy is sufficient to reveal an entire moral character:

> Marianne could not bear this. –She was already greatly displeased with Mrs Ferrars.
> [...]
> «[...] it is Elinor of whom *we* think and speak.»
> Fanny looked very angry, and her husband was all in a fright at his sister's audacity. Elinor was much more hurt by Marianne's warmth, than she had been by what produced it; but Colonel Brandon's eyes, as they were fixed on Marianne, declared that he noticed only what was amiable in it, the affectionate heart which could not bear to see a sister slighted in the smallest point. (*Sense and Sensibility*: 199)

This passage in the novel questions accepted views on what constitutes good manners by offering two different kinds of impoliteness: Mrs Ferrars's insistence on elegance and etiquette emerges as rudeness, while Marianne's rudeness over the firescreen incident is perceived as sisterly affection. Marianne's disregard for the minutiae of social observance does more than create a rather embarrassing situation for herself. It relates crucially to a perception of self which sets personal desire above all else. The disruption in the structure of social relations can have damaging and far-reaching consequences: Brandon's ward is evicted from the world after being seduced and abandoned by Willoughby,[6] who later encourages Marianne to flout conventions. Manners form a highly complicated system of signs, and Willoughby's and Marianne's flagrant behaviour indicates to onlookers that they are to be married, which is not true. The resulting uncertainty about Marianne's status creates confusion and awkwardness to her relatives, who do not dare to ask her the truth out of their respectful observance of social rules, thus subordinating individual wishes to decorum. At Mrs Jennings's house, Marianne refuses to enter into polite conversation for she finds conformity to false patterns of behaviour dishonest. The result is an extra burden for her sister, who must compensate for Marianne's incivility.

The not-said leaves out the voices of characters that are generally feminine, as Lacan (1968: 71) would put it: «No doubt [...] we have to lend an ear to the "not-said" which lies in the holes of the discourse». Marianne refuses to speak because she is careless of social proprieties, because she will not compromise the truth for the sake of politeness, or because her «sensibility» defies representation in words. She retreats from social intercourse, refuses to pay polite visits, and finally loses the power of speech altogether out of illness and despair. Her final marriage

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6. Under the appearance of seductive and polite young men, the libertines of Jane Austen's novels, such as Willoughby, Wickham, Frank Churchill or Henry Crawford, are prepared to put the heroine's reputation at risk in the pursuit of their own pleasure.

to a man «old enough to be [her] father» (*Sense and Sensibility*: 33) constitutes her punishment.

The young lady who refuses to let strict rules govern her relations with other people and protect her from dangerous situations puts herself at risk by transgressing the unwritten law. Marianne's silences are those of nonconformity, so they escape control. On the other hand, Elinor's silences, corresponding to admirable self-command, are those of reserve, and could be mistaken for social hypocrisy due to her adherence to prudence and dissimulation: «by a little of that address, which Marianne could never condescend to practise, [Elinor] gained her own end, and pleased Lady Middleton at the same time» (*Sense and Sensibility*: 122); however, the fact is that Elinor suppresses her feelings and misleads observers from a desire to limit damage: «Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel [...]; upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell» (*Sense and Sensibility*: 104). Her practice of politeness is less self-promoting than Lucy Steele's, for instance, whose social hypocrisy is not labelled politeness but «insincerity» (*Sense and Sensibility*: 108).

Sense and Sensibility offers a moral about tact and concealment that seems to highlight the most pragmatic aspects of ethics. Elinor and Lucy adopt a plan of general civility in order to promote their own interests, but in Elinor's case, the plan is extended by her wish to protect herself, her mother and her sister from the painful consequences of excessive feelings. This trait would account for the unexpected treatment given by Emma Thompson to the Elinor character, who is presented as evolving towards self-expression. Thompson's Elinor develops from a self-sufficient powerful character to a young woman with unexpressed emotions who must learn to show them without paying attention to decorum. Elinor's emotional self-restraint in the novel is replaced with a number of cathartic outbursts in the film: on hearing about Edward's secret engagement, Marianne reproaches Elinor with hiding her despair, and the latter loses her composure, insisting on the fact that she too has feelings; a similar reaction is displayed when she discovers that Edward is free from his engagement and ready to marry her.

The title *Sense and Sensibility* foreshadows a tension between mind and heart, judgement and feelings, policy and spontaneity, and, more generally, Classicism and Romanticism, which the film, in an attempt to appeal to a contemporary audience, inscribes within a frame in favour of self-expression. In the film, Marianne is not evicted at the end, even if this is to the detriment of decorum, preferring as it does to celebrate the very conventions of romance which the novel condemns. The transformation of the conditions in which Marianne meets Willoughby for the first time illustrates this point: on a walk in the rain with her sister, Marianne falls and twists her ankle; a passing stranger

comes to her rescue, and accomplishes two actions which would have been highly reprehensible at that time, namely, taking off her shoe then carrying her home. The scene is reminiscent of fairy tales, with Prince Charming helping the damsel in distress, also conceived as a Cinderella figure. Yet, the fact that he touches her foot and ankle endows the scene with erotic connotations that refer to the enactment of Marianne's fantasies of romantic desire: «*With great delicacy, he feels her ankle.* [...] MARIANNE *almost swoons with embarrassment and excitement mixed*» (Thompson, 1995: 86).

Offering gifts responds to organized patterns of social behaviour in the world depicted by Austen: to accept an expensive gift from a man was only permissible if he was a close relative. Such a fact is reflected in the film by the treatment given to Brandon's and Marianne's attachment, enhanced by adding scenes showing Brandon's courtship, which is performed with quiet decorum illustrating the several stages a lover should undergo. The physical language of love, in which the exchange of objects from hero to heroine represents the exchange of emotions (Brandon's early courtship of Marianne is symbolised by his giving her his hunting knife to cut reeds), conforms a process of metonymic substitution that extends to flowers, poetry reading, a pianoforte, and finally the substitution of Brandon himself for Willoughby, the libertine. Parallel scenes make direct comparisons between the courtship practices of Willoughby and Brandon, casting the latter as the unfairly disadvantaged suitor who performs the same actions of his successful rival, Willoughby. The day after Marianne's fall, Brandon comes bearing a bouquet, which Marianne absently hands over to Elinor: the flowers are placed in a vase out of Marianne's sight. When Willoughby is announced next, Brandon is quickly dismissed and Marianne must be reminded to thank him for his visit. Willoughby also gives Marianne a bunch of flowers which are placed by her side, thus the metonymic substitution of flowers for their bearers is effected. Her indifference towards Brandon's solicitude is most impolite, and she even claims the right to despise decorum in her open disclosure to Willoughby:

MARIANNE – I supposed I have erred against decorum. I should have been dull and spiritless and talked only of the weather, or the state of the road...
ELINOR – No, but Mr Willoughby can be in no doubt of your enthusiasm for him.
MARIANNE – Why should he doubt it? Why should I hide my regard?
(Thompson, 1995: 101)

Throughout the film, Marianne is rude to the –admittedly boring and mediocre– people who surround her, making no effort to talk to them, or interrupting them when she wants to protect her privacy or her sister's. The screeplay directions illustrate her character: «*rigid with resentment*» (Thompson,

1995: 36); «*dangerous*» (Thompson, 1995: 40); «*stands shifting like a spirited mare*» (Thompson, 1995: 79); «*thunders in, looking mutinous*» (Thompson, 1995: 37); «*rushes in*» (Thompson, 1995: 51); or «*her great cry rings across the room*» (Thompson, 1995: 142), on seeing Willoughby at the ball. Her extravagant behaviour is not in keeping with the attitude one would expect from a young lady of breeding, particularly in public places. At the ball, the reactions of the dancers, who turn around to stare at her, should make her realize her lack of good manners, but her inclination in favour of sensibility makes her despise those who support coldness and concealment.

One of Jane Austen's aims in *Sense and Sensibility* is to show the consequences of an excessive sensibility through the figure of Marianne, the legatee of a philosophy of sentiment which leads the young heroine to behave in an inadequate way. In both novel and film, Marianne realizes that her ideas about life are ill-founded, gradually maturing, sheding her prejudices, and developing her sense as well as her good manners. She even imitates Elinor's quiet behaviour and polite conversation during Edward's visit: «*There is an awful silence*. MARIANNE *tries to help*: "I hope you have left Mrs Ferrars well?"» (Thompson, 1995: 196-197).

Two seemingly opposing views emerge: Jane Austen asserts the importance of natural feeling with its unpredictable gusts of sympathy, while simultaneously writing about the importance of controlling the expression of feeling for the sake of social and moral order. In the film, however, the ecstatic emotionality of Marianne is made to stand out against the sham, the shallow and the inarticulate feelings of Lucy, Willoughby and Edward. In fact, Marianne's romanticism and the screenwriter's rewriting of the Brandon and Edward characters constitute the basis of a romantic film infused with the very passion that Jane Austen condemns. In inserting both protest and passion into the narrative, the screenwriter resituates the story in a cultural context radically different from the polite decorum prevailing in Austen's polished society. Since our contemporary cultural context favours the image of the rebel, other film adaptations, such as *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) or *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), rewrite certain dialogues in order to offer the public a heroine that is both outspoken and independent in her choices.

Finally, politeness is related to Jane Austen's narratives themselves. The texts remain silent over certain issues that were considered shocking at the time, such as the seduction of Brandon's ward in *Sense and Sensibility,*[7] or Maria's adultery in *Mansfield Park* (2000), which establish themselves as subplots that complicate the main narrative by presenting secrets, things unsaid and voices unheard. These gaps disappear in the cinematic adaptations, illustrating the

7. The scene involving Brandon's pregnant ward ended on the cutting-room floor for time reasons.

changes in the audiences' sensibilities. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price opens the wrong door and, hence, sees what she should not: a scene of sexual intercourse involving her married cousin and a neighbour, suggesting, thus, that Maria's adultery does not occur within a safe and «polite» distance from the secure home, but within the walls of Mansfield Park itself.

For Austen, politeness is a moral obligation, while manners, constructed as the social constraint that bridles individual desire, seems to represent a subtle but widespread hypocrisy imposing certain penalties, but also promising social and moral rewards. As such, even though politeness and good manners should be natural, they are also the result of years of discipline aimed at the suppression of true feeling. Austen answers related questions about power and deception by foregrounding the qualities of self-command and self-restraint in tempering such hypocrisy. Her heroines experience the psychological costs of self-concealment as well as its tactical advantages; the pains they endure are associated with what a modern audience would call repression. By promoting self-knowledge and independence, the cinematic adaptations, on the other hand, take the part of the characters, who speak their minds without paying too much attention to good manners and politeness, the latter considered as a hindrance to the expression of feelings and sensibilities.

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