Privacy, Dissimulation, and Propriety: Frances Burney and Jane Austen

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Good manners constitute a tax paid by individuals to society, a widely condoned form of hypocrisy. Late in Frances Burney's second novel, *Cecilia*, a male character articulates this view by means of examples morally disturbing in their very familiarity:

> are we not kept silent when we wish to reprove by the fear of offending? and made speak where we wish to be silent by the desire of obliging? do we not bow to the scoundrel as low as to the man of honour? are we not by mere forms kept standing when tired? made give place to those we despise? and smiles to those we hate? or if we refuse these attentions, are we not regarded as savages, and shut out of society?[1]

Appropriate manners, by this interpretation, entail elisions of individual judgment and feeling. Socially conforming behaviour depends on suppressed utterance.

The so-called novel of manners, however, in its late-eighteenth-century refinement, explored personal uses of social convention that hint at a further meaning for conformity. Burney and Jane Austen, like their contemporaries, investigate in their fiction the ambiguities of privacy. For women seeking privacy, they suggest—at any rate, for upper-class women—flawless

1 Frances Burney, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress*, ed. Peter Sabor and Margaret Anne Doody (1782; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 735.

manners provide concealment. In the guise of social conformity, women guard their difference: their officially unacceptable personal opinions, desires, and feelings. Several of the social impositions adduced by Burney's Mr Monckton—silence instead of reproach, bows to scoundrels, smiles for the hated—in fact comprise forms of concealment. Mr Monckton does not acknowledge their personal value, except in negative terms, nor, in general, do other fictional characters. Yet the narrative rendition of compliance often reveals such value.

If everyone who has left testimony from eighteenth-century England at least pays lip service to the necessity for good manners (which served, above all, as a marker of social class), evidence of attitudes towards privacy is more ambiguous. In eighteenth-century Britain, in a time and a place marked by intensifying individualism, architectural developments suggested increasing concern for physical privacy. New arrangements in great houses separated servants from masters and turned bedrooms into places where one could be alone. Concurrently, both imaginative and didactic literature investigated—often in devious ways—privacy as an issue. By no means, however, did such investigations necessarily assume privacy's value.

The very concept of privacy raises questions about the proper balance between responsibility to oneself and to other people. Given a society that values social relations as potential moral discipline, the idea of privacy contains danger. Those who claim the right to be alone, or even to keep things to themselves, might meditate bad deeds or entertain bad thoughts, and *no one would know*. Privacy may lead to delusion, as Dr Johnson suggested in his fable of the mad astronomer, convinced of his own vast power because he rarely sees other people. Desire for privacy might imply selfishness or irresponsibility. Such possibilities, at any rate, were alive in the minds of eighteenth-century writers about the subject. Not that a negative view of privacy entirely displaced a positive one. On the contrary, awareness of the emotional, and conceivably even the moral, value of privacy informs virtually all eighteenth-century discussions of the issue, at least in the context of imaginative literature. To focus on the specific situation of upper-class British women, as conveyed by such discussions, illuminates the perplexities of privacy—a luxury, of course, largely confined to the upper classes. For such women, novels, diaries, letters, and conduct manuals suggest, physical privacy was hard to come by. Even if they slept alone, without the company of a sister, cousin, aunt, friend, or servant (and relatively few did), women did not customarily retreat to their rooms except to sleep. Virginia Woolf's vision of personal space that makes female creativ-

ity possible seems inconceivable in this period for women of the privileged classes whose lives have left records literal or fictional.

Lacking rooms of their own, such women needed to discover psychic and social strategies for self-protection. Physical privacy requires a space to get away to. Psychic privacy relies on more complicated and ambiguous resources, one of them provided by the elaborate structures of social convention. Going through motions prescribed by etiquette might free a paragon of good behaviour to think her own thoughts, feel her own feelings, and reveal nothing except her excellent social training. But early woman writers, as well as their male counterparts, grasped the inevitable corollary to the fact that one might hide behind a façade of social compliance. If one person could hide, so could another, so could everyone. Awareness of the dangers of social hypocrisy attended consciousness of its useful possibilities. "The most basic attribute of self-definition," according to a *New Yorker* article on the erosion of legal safeguards for privacy, "is the ability to control the face we present to the world."[2] But if other people can also regulate their faces, we risk universal falsity. Perhaps one can never trust the messages conveyed by countenances literal or metaphorical.

Understanding the ambiguities of self-representation, eighteenth-century writers at once celebrated and deplored the consequences of the human ability to control the face offered to the world. Moralists and mentors of conduct for women brooded over the dangers of false appearance. Lady Sarah Pennington, for instance, warns her daughter:

> You are just entering, my dear girl, into a world full of deceit and falshood, where few persons or things appear in their true character. Vice hides her deformity with the borrowed garb of virtue; and, though discernible to an intelligent and careful observer, by the unbecoming awkwardness of her deportment under it, she passes on thousands undetected. ... Thus one general mask disguises the whole face of things, and it requires a long experience, and a penetrating judgment, to discover the truth.[3]

The mother's view about governing one's face differs according to who does the governing. She worries about the "general mask," yet she consistently advises her daughter to discipline the appearance she herself presents—in effect, to hide behind her own mask. Thus: "The great art of

2 Jeffrey Rosen, "Annals of Law: Is Nothing Private?" *New Yorker* (1 June 1998), 39.

3 Lady [Sarah] Pennington, *An Unfortunate Mother's Advice to her Absent Daughters*, in *The Young Lady's Pocket Library, or Parental Monitor* (1761, 1790; Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995), p. 64. References are to this edition.

pleasing is to appear pleased with others; suffer not then an ill-bred absence of thought, or a contemptuous sneer, ever to betray a conscious superiority of understanding, always productive of ill-nature and dislike" (p. 92). The girl should *appear*, not necessarily *feel*, pleased with others; she should not "betray" the sense of superiority she may actually, and justifiably, feel. Behind the disguise of mandated social behaviour, her emotions remain her private preserve. Her awareness that others operate the same way, however, may generate anxiety, presumably in her as well as in her guide.

Given the concern about false appearances shared by many didactic writers, it is unsurprising that they should on occasion oppose "virtue" to social conformity. Virtue subsists, it sometimes appears, only in privacy. "The virtues that make a figure in the world do not fall to the women's share; their virtues are of a simple and peaceable nature: Fame will have nothing to do with us. ... I think it best to avoid the world, and making a figure, which always strike at modesty, and be contented with being one's own spectator."[4] "The world" one should avoid constitutes a realm of social performance and falsity. With no spectators but the self, the young woman presumably will feel less tempted to manipulate appearances, resting secure in her "modesty." But the recommendation to avoid the world resonates with poignance stemming not only from the resigned relinquishment of "fame" (which has apparently rejected women before they can reject it) but from the renunciation of even the possibility of an external spectator. The really good woman, according to this prescription, has no one to look at her. No one to look—but also, it may follow, no one to share, support, participate. The privacy that insures modesty seems to entail isolation. It implies the root meaning of the word "privacy," hinting deprivation as well as safety.

Moreover, as Adam Smith understood, the spectatorship of the self depends on knowledge of others. One watches oneself by in effect imagining someone else watching. The young woman who judges her own virtue in isolation from the world presumably brings to bear the values embedded in writings by just such moralists as the one making the recommendation. For a twenty-first-century reader, to encounter the minute prescriptions of eighteenth-century conduct-books entails a suffocating sense of surveillance. Hardly a trivial component of a woman's conduct or appearance escapes commentary. The eyes upon her belong to men who are constantly judging. In the world, they assess her value in the marriage market.

4 Anne-Thérèse, Marchioness de Lambert, *Advice of a Mother to her Daughter*, in *The Young Lady's Pocket Library, or Parental Monitor*, p. 141.

If she rejects the world, the eye of the moralist will yet rest upon her, if only within her own imagination. Although women find it hard to attain physical privacy, they also face difficulties in winning its psychic equivalent.

But good manners can help. Their value to women depends on their double valence, both social and individual. In addition to providing opportunity for self-concealment and thus for separation, manners help one fulfil the moral responsibility of relating to others. A 1735 treatise begins by defining good manners as "a Science in instructing how to dispose all our Words and Actions in their proper and true places." It continues by equating "the Rules of Good Breeding and Civility" with "the Rules of true Generosity."[5] Going through the motions of polite behaviour—guarding against bad breath, cutting one's food into small pieces, avoiding monologue and boisterous speech—will somehow generate moral excellence: true generosity.

Yet the procedures advocated in this detailed and exhaustive manual often approach dissimulation. One characteristic instance involves table manners:

> The Man of Manners picks not the best, but rather takes the worst out of the Dish, and gets of every thing, unless it be forced upon him, always the most indifferent Share. By this Civility, the best remains for others; which being a Compliment to all that are present, every body is pleased with it; the more they love themselves, the more they are forc'd to approve of his Behaviour; and Gratitude stepping in, they are obliged almost, whether they will or not, to think favourably of him. After this, it is that the well-bred Man insinuates himself in the Esteem of all the Companies he comes in; and if he gets nothing else by it, the Pleasure he receives in reflecting on the Applause, which he knows is secretly given him, is, to a proud Man, more than an Equivalent for his former Self-denial, and overpays Self-love with Interest, the Loss it sustained in his Complaisance to others. (p. 9)

The prescription for proper behaviour relies not on moral principles but on an economics of self-love organized by a pseudo-commercial transaction in which the "well-bred Man" gives food, gets pleasure, and calculates equivalences and interest on the exchange.

Conduct-books as a group provide clear evidence of the paradoxical relation between distaste for and practice of dissimulation, a relation that provides a frequent subject for novelistic treatment. The anonymous author

5 *The Man of Manners; or, Plebeian Polish'd: Being Plain and Familiar Rules for a modest and Genteel Behaviour, on most of the ordinary Occasions of Life*, 3rd ed. (London, 1735), preface. References are to this edition.

of the manual on manners clearly remains unaware of the contradiction between his insistence on politeness as a moral manifestation and his calculations of gain and loss based largely on "Applause." Eighteenth-century novelists, on the other hand, often investigate, directly or indirectly, just such contradictions, at least tacitly acknowledging the personal value of social hypocrisy. Novels of manners delineate a complex dynamic of concealment and revelation. Burney, for instance, in her series of fictional investigations into the lives of young women, shows herself recurrently concerned with the problem of privacy as a peculiarly female issue to be considered in the context of social imperatives for behaviour. If conduct-books emphasize the moralist as watcher, Burney delineates in excruciating detail the experience of feeling forever watched by men and women who are already well established in society, the sense of being constantly assessed for deviations from the social norms of the upper classes. In *The Wanderer*, not published until 1814, but largely written long before, she links social conformity to questions of literal economic survival, demonstrates that privacy in some of its forms serves both social and personal ends, and conveys the urgency of dissimulation.

The explicit association of privacy with personal integrity belongs to a later period than Burney's. But if the word has for Burney less complicated resonance than it would later develop, she shares preoccupations that we now condense into the notion of privacy. This fact, hinted in the earlier novels, becomes emphatic in *The Wanderer*, which reveals how dramatically a woman's scanty resources diminish if she lacks obvious markers of high social class. In the world as it is, the poor have no right to privacy, Burney tells us, describing the encroachments that steadily threaten the "female Robinson Crusoe" whose efforts at survival provide the novel's subject.

Juliet, the heroine of *The Wanderer*, in the end turns out to be well born and well off, and she, like her fictional predecessors, makes a good marriage. But most of the novel explores the young woman's predicament during a prolonged period when her birth, her wealth, and her marital situation remain unknown. A refugee from France during the Revolution, she arrives in England not only anonymous and penniless but disguised in blackface—an eloquent emblem of her condition as social outcast. Although she soon washes her face and turns into a beauty, she remains a helpless outsider until the saving revelations at the novel's end.

By conventional literary standards, *The Wanderer* is not a very good novel. Lapsing often into wooden verbosity, it abounds in extravagances of plot and in cardboard characters. But it is in a full and passionate sense a novel of ideas, exploring the practical politics of women's lives in a

way unusual—perhaps unique—among writers not overtly committed to revolutionary doctrines. Unlike her contemporary Mary Wollstonecraft, Burney claims her concern merely to recommend propriety. In a letter to her father prefixed to *The Wanderer*, she emphatically denies any political interest or intention. She professes to focus, rather, on conduct, pointing out that "an exteriour the most frivolous may enwrap illustrations of conduct, that the most rigid preceptor need not deem dangerous to entrust to his pupils," and claiming that her aim is "to make pleasant the path of propriety."[6] But her narrative reveals the writer's interest also in making delicate discriminations about the actualities of women's lives, discriminations apparent despite the plot's implausibilities.

In the context of inquiry into the female situation, privacy becomes crucial. Juliet's acknowledged right to privacy varies according to her perceived social status, which itself varies with the vicissitudes of plot. Her initial destitution and isolation, together with the mystery about her name, give everyone the right to ask her intimate questions. Throughout her struggle, she finds herself subject to onslaughts of inquiry. She attempts to protect herself with the vague locutions of polite society, but her persecutors challenge every evasion.

The Wanderer, at its most ambitious, attempts to construct a coherent graph of female possibility. Social standing, based on wealth and rank, generates one axis of this graph; the other follows the course of personal effort. *Female* possibility is quite specifically the issue (the novel's subtitle is *Female Difficulties*). Virtually every woman in *The Wanderer* needs to work for what she has not or to defend what she has. Juliet has especially complicated problems, often articulated through her efforts at privacy. Her journey to England begins as it continues, with a verbal assault by her fellow passengers in a boat escaping from Revolutionary France. "Why does she not say who she is at once?" the irascible Mrs Maple cries, adding, "I give nothing to people that I know nothing of" (p. 29). Mrs Ireton, whose "companion" the Incognita briefly becomes, makes a concerted effort to get information, but the stranger's "birth, her name, her connexions, her actual situation, and her object in making the voyage, resisted inquiry, eluded insinuation, and baffled conjecture" (p. 41). Mrs Ireton nonetheless takes her as companion because "her manners were so strikingly elevated above her attire" (p. 41).

Juliet's manners, then, help from the beginning to protect her against the various forms of inquiry, insinuation, and conjecture. Providing a socially

6 Frances Burney, *The Wanderer: or, Female Difficulties*, ed. Margaret Anne Doody, Robert L. Mack, and Peter Sabor (1814; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 9. References are to this edition.

acceptable mask, they continue to repel the interrogations of everyone with whom she comes in contact—a statement that by no means implies that they cause such interrogations to cease. The right to privacy, understood as control over personal information, does not pertain to the socially powerless.

A major narrative crisis, difficult in its nature for twenty-first-century readers to take with full seriousness, elucidates the complex and crucial nexus of manners and privacy in the novel's world. It is worth examining at length, for it clarifies the social functions of privacy for upper-class women. If the poor are considered to have no right to personal privacy, those higher on the social scale may find themselves restricted by quite a different kind of privacy, socially constructed and ordained for social ends.

In this crucial episode, Juliet, desperate for money, has been persuaded and bullied into consenting to give a public musical performance. She has previously appeared with great success on the stage, but only in amateur theatricals—and even then, she was compelled to perform. Now, though, she is about to present herself as a paid public performer. She feels many qualms; she resists the possibility as long as she can. Finally she agrees to offer herself thus to public view. At this juncture—shortly before the scheduled concert—she receives a long letter from Harleigh, who loves her and whom she loves, although circumstances prevent her from revealing the fact explicitly. The letter strongly urges her to "deliberate, before you finally adopt a measure to which you confess your repugnance." He does not know her actual "situation," Harleigh acknowledges, "but where information is with-held, conjecture is active; and while I see your accomplishments, while I am fascinated by your manners, I judge your education, and, thence, your connections, and original style of life" (p. 343). In other words, her manners and accomplishments lead Harleigh to assign her to a high social class. He pleads with her on the basis of the class to which her family of origin putatively belongs:

> Wound not the customs of their ancestors, the received notions of the world, the hitherto acknowledged boundaries of elegant life! Or, if your tenderness for the feelings—say the failings, if you please,—the prejudices, the weaknesses of others, has no weight, let, at least, your own ideas of personal propriety, your just pride, your conscious worth, point out to you the path in society which you are so eminently formed to tread. ... Remember ... that your example may be pleaded by those who are not gifted, like you, with extraordinary powers for sustaining its consequences; by those who have neither your virtues to bear them through the trials and vicissitudes of public enterprise; nor your motives for encountering dangers so manifest; nor your apologies—pardon the word!—for deviating, alone and unsupported as you appear, from the long-beaten track of female timidity. (p. 343)

Harleigh conveys forcefully a sense of extraordinary danger attending Juliet's projected endeavour: danger to her social standing; to her "female timidity," a locution that Juliet herself promptly translates as "delicacy," one of the most highly valued attributes of her sex; and to her position as moral exemplar.

The danger comes from exposure and from the decisive crossing of gender boundaries implicit in assuming a *public* position, deviating from proper female privacy. *Delicacy*, in the sense that Juliet intends, means, according to the *OED*, "A refined sense of what is becoming, modest, or proper; sensitiveness to the feelings of modesty, shame, etc.; delicate regard for the feelings of others." It registers an internalized sense of propriety, the quality that separates Juliet's kind of good manners from the variety practised by those for whom manners constitute only artifice—a distinction the narrator explicitly makes. Delicacy, the basis of the good manners derived from "sympathy," is an intuitive quality marking the genuine lady. The slightly covert reproach that she may abandon it in giving a concert devastates Juliet.

The distinction between the good manners "formed by the habits of high life" and the spontaneous manners inspired by "benevolence of mind," to use the narrator's language (p. 135), occurs frequently in eighteenth-century moral discourse, reflecting anxiety about the aspect of hypocrisy hinted by such courtesy manuals as the one recommending a performance of generosity at table for the sake of self-love. The narrator wants the reader to understand Juliet's manners as conveying not only her good breeding but her good heart: emotional self-revelation as well as social mask.

If this is the case, though, Juliet runs great risks in any deviation from conventional propriety. Harleigh's letter says, in effect, that surely she already knows, by the power of her delicate intuition of propriety, the wrongness of what she proposes to do. If she does not know this, she must lack the intuitive quality itself. "Delicacy" keeps a woman from violating important boundaries. Harleigh makes it altogether clear, through his discussion of "family," that a woman's marital possibilities depend on her perceived propriety. Juliet risks "unsexing" herself if she compromises her "delicacy"—and the identification between "delicacy" and "female timidity" is precisely to the point. To give a public concert implies courage and self-determination, willingness to expose oneself, quite at odds with the standard of delicacy.

Obviously, in a society where appearances are everything, willingness to offer oneself to public view, to perform before an audience, openly to accept payment—all abrogate the principles of proper female self-representation. Thomas Gisborne specifies the dangers, for women, of

even private performance: "To encourage vanity; to excite a thirst of applause and admiration on account of attainments which, if they are to be thus exhibited, it would commonly have been far better for the individual not to possess; to destroy diffidence."[7] Exhibition before an audience transgresses the limits of female privacy, the privacy declared by a consistent socially ordained practice of concealment, the privacy that Juliet has so systematically preserved in her steady performance of propriety.

Reacting intensely to Harleigh's warnings, Juliet acknowledges the importance, for a woman, of controlling appearances and hints that such control becomes more difficult without the protection of a male. But circumstances rescue her. Juliet need not, after all, compromise her delicacy by performing in public; she can continue to acknowledge no interest in spectators and to preserve her psychic privacy by means of her flawless propriety. The novel reiterates the value of this most urgent kind of female privacy partly by the negative example of Elinor Joddrell, a revolutionary spirit whose willing relinquishment of privacy declares her advanced ideas but also predicts the madness that will overtake her. An enthusiast for the principles of the French Revolution, Elinor believes in openness. When she decides that she loves Harleigh, she says so—only to be promptly overcome by "native shame" (p. 154), assumed to be the natural possession of females, who find it hard to cast off commitment to the privacy of the heart. Elinor calls loud attention to genuine social inequity, but she pays a high price. The outcome of her attempts at freedom implies that to hide and subdue emotion, to preserve emotional privacy, is a woman's safest course. Elinor's feelings, her body, and finally her mind, reduced to utter incoherence, testify that the cost of violating such privacy is too high to pay.

As for Juliet, after her resolute course of concealment she ultimately achieves the freedom to acknowledge her love for Harleigh and to marry him, rewarded for self-repression and for undeviating "delicacy." In a final scene of attempted encroachment, a rich and nasty old woman accuses her of theft and demands to search her workbag. Juliet refuses. Her unaffected "self-possession" abashes her accuser and reminds the reader once more about the connection of privacy, propriety, and integrity. In some sense, the logic of the narrative would suggest, Elinor Joddrell violates *herself* in violating convention.

That is to say that *The Wanderer* firmly supports social as well as moral propriety, understanding both as not only a form of restriction but also a

7 Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, in *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment* (1797; London: William Pickering, 1996), 2:175.

form of protection for women. In calling it a "novel of ideas," I alluded not only to its apparent attempt to engage with large issues about the social limitation of women, but to its serious investigation of this matter of propriety. "Conservative" in her firm commitment to established principles of behaviour, Burney dares a good deal in her willingness to ask questions about them. She uses her concern with female privacy to focus an inquiry into the experiential relation between women and the restrictions that control them. She gives to Elinor's inveighing against conventional limits eloquence, force, and even truth. But Juliet's history elucidates the distance of Elinor's view from the whole truth. By the nature of her propriety, Juliet reveals to discriminating watchers not only her commitment to guarding the privacy of her heart and mind but the value of what she guards. Propriety conceals, but social convention maintains that it can also indirectly reveal the emotional integrity and sensitivity constituting the foundation of female virtue. By refusing to display her heart, a woman testifies her sense of its worth.

In her treatment of manners in *The Wanderer*, Burney insists on the interdependence of society and its individual members. The intricate rules of propriety work, particularly on women, as an instrument of control, generating a culture of minute surveillance and censure. They in effect mandate hypocrisy, prescribing obsessive attention to appearances. Yet a woman can paradoxically evade the policing function of convention by demonstrating that her conformity is actually a "natural" emanation of the benevolent heart, attesting sympathetic awareness of others and their needs. If Juliet employs for her own purposes all the forms of polite society, she does so, the text insists, not as dissimulation, not as mere conformity, but as an expression of her native goodness. Virtue resides not in seclusion but in conventional good behaviour.

Observers in the world, then, can assess virtue by social performance. Yet Juliet demonstrates how a woman may turn even so oppressive a system to her own ends. In using the forms of propriety to protect the privacy of her feelings, she partly follows the social imperative of concealing at least the erotic impulses of a woman's heart. But she guards more than romantic feelings, assigned a range of emotional responses including discouragement, anxiety, contempt, anger, and mockery—all of which she hides from view, preserving selfhood by holding on to her own reactions. Thus she maintains herself as an individual even while conforming to the dictates of her social order.

Like the conduct manuals, *The Wanderer* conveys an ambivalent view of privacy's possible uses. But it suppresses concern about hypocrisy. Burney claims the urgency for women of preserving some intact inner realm as

a vital preliminary to any sense of control or autonomy. Presumably recognizing that physical privacy for well-bred women was hardly conceivable, she explores instead the degree to which perfect social conformity, the triumphant practice of good manners, can provide its psychological equivalent. But her view is not altogether optimistic. Social convention may protect a woman's inner life, but its policing can entail a compelled privacy of decorum, which forbids any expression of feelings and demands that the proper female possess the "delicacy" willingly to forego public appearance. Although personally willed privacy constitutes freedom, its socially ordained equivalent epitomizes the demands that generate "female difficulties," guaranteeing the futility of Juliet's quest for financial independence and the personal autonomy that would accompany it. Juliet's manners may invoke no dissimulation, but society forces on her a self-suppression that reflects the established pretence that a woman can flourish only in relative confinement.

To posit a connection between good manners and virtuous feeling is not the only satisfactory solution to the problem of dissimulation. Burney herself, in *Cecilia*, imagining a response to Mr Monckton's speech about social hypocrisy, suggested the view that such hypocrisy really carries no moral valence.

> "All these," answered Belfield, "are so merely matters of ceremony, that the concession can neither cost pain to the proud, nor give pleasure to the vain. The bow is to the coat, the attention is to the rank, and the fear of offending ought to extend to all mankind. Homage such as this infringes not our sincerity, since it is as much a matter of course as the dress that we wear." (p. 735)

In other words, one must distinguish between the kind of self-disguise that serves immediate self-interest—the kind that Fielding, in *Joseph Andrews*, terms "affectation"—and the kind that belongs to accepted social ritual, imagined as irrelevant to claims of virtue.

Jane Austen confronts the problem with more daring, raising the possibility that deliberate, personally chosen dissimulation, far from marking moral weakness, may play a fundamental part in the maintenance of ethical responsibility. In *Sense and Sensibility* (its first version written in the 1790s), that novel of secrets, Austen discriminates the precise social importance of privacy. She also demonstrates that women find a carefully constructed realm of personal privacy essential to preserving an equally constructed individuality.

An exemplary instance of the irreproachable dissimulation of good manners, enlisted for a personal end, occurs when Elinor Dashwood—consistently mocked by her sister Marianne for her adherence to social

forms—manages successfully to arrange a private conversation with Lucy Steele, the professed fiancée of Edward Ferrars, whom Elinor herself loves. Attending a tedious social gathering at the Middletons', Elinor makes for herself the opportunity of conversation by politely offering to help Lucy in the work of making a filigree basket for Lady Middleton's daughter. Marianne has previously announced her detestation of card playing and has walked off to the pianoforte, leaving Lady Middleton to look "as if she thanked heaven that *she* had never made so rude a speech."[8] The narrator explicitly comments on the superior expediency of Elinor's methods: "thus by a little of that address, which Marianne could never condescend to practise, [she] gained her own end, and pleased Lady Middleton at the same time" (p. 145). The forms of politeness conceal her private purposes, protect her private feelings, and enable her to enlarge her store of information by talking with Lucy. There is no suggestion that these forms emanate from her sympathy or concern for others. Their employment for dissimulation and disguise illustrates their practical, not their moral, value.

The subsequent conversation, partly comic in narrative effect precisely because of its reiterated attempts at deception, underlines the point. Neither Lucy nor Elinor speaks her mind or her feelings. Both rely heavily on social forms to achieve personal ends. If they remain relatively transparent to one another, at least their disguise of propriety protects them from any need openly to confront distressing feelings or to engage in obvious conflict. Lucy's purpose is to hurt and to triumph; Elinor wishes only to gain information and to guard herself. She therefore has some moral advantage, but her means resemble her opponent's.

Through almost two-thirds of *Sense and Sensibility*, Elinor unfailingly preserves social forms, employs behaviour that rarely expresses her feelings directly, and sustains her emotional life behind a psychic screen largely constructed by good manners. Marianne, open about her every impulse and emotion, is perceived by the narrator as reprehensible precisely in her openness. Her failure to preserve privacy entails her many lapses of decorum. She must learn to reform in both respects: to keep things to herself and to behave in socially mandated fashion.

More than any other of Austen's novels, *Sense and Sensibility* creates an elaborate structure of distinctions. Its somewhat schematic disposition of characters can be mapped in terms of often slight disparities of value. Those among the cast of characters with a highly developed sense of privacy include Elinor, Colonel Brandon, and Edward. Lady Middleton provides

8 Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Novels of Jane Austen*, vol. 1, ed. R.W. Chapman, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 145. References are to this edition.

an ambiguous case that furthers Austen's project of subtle differentiation. She neither pries into the affairs of others nor gratuitously reveals her own; she accepts but does not share her husband's need for constant company. Yet her lack of inner life implies that personal privacy would have little real meaning for her. Devoid of any developed sense of privacy (though not necessarily of capacity for secrecy) are Marianne, Willoughby, Mrs Jennings, and Sir John Middleton, but they differ from one another in significant respects even on the matter of privacy.

Yet another conduct-book may help to illuminate the situation of the Dashwood family. In 1743, a "Gentleman of Cambridge," adapting a French conduct manual "to the Religion, Customs, and Manners of the English Nation," wrote:

> There are Rules for all our Actions, even down to *Sleeping with a good Grace.* Life is a continual Series of Operations, both of Body and Mind, which ought to be regulated and performed with the utmost Care, and of which the Success frequently depends upon those with whom we live and converse; who are too apt to put a good or bad Construction upon them, agreeable to their own way of thinking, or to the Disposition or Affection they have towards us.[9]

The world the Dashwoods inhabit still resembles that evoked in this statement—a world in which rules exist to govern all behaviour, but in which judgment depends less on those rules than on individual interpretation. In such a social environment, deviation from the rules does not bring automatic condemnation: there is room for a Marianne, whose friends and relations will "put a good ... Construction" on her actions. Yet the moralist's account implies a more threatening large context: those beyond the immediate social circle may arrive at quite a different "Construction." The safe course is to follow the rules.

Marianne understands the discrepancy between her behaviour and her sister's as stemming from different attitudes towards the system of social rules. She scorns Elinor's conformity and concern with the opinions of others. Like Burney's Elinor Joddrell, she assesses her own deviations from norms of social conduct as evidence of a free spirit. Her fundamental objection to the idea of social compliance stems from her conviction that such compliance would subordinate her will to the desires, assumptions, and standards of others. A true Romantic, not only in her passion for dead leaves but in her passionate individualism, she accepts her own sense of rightness as sufficient guide to conduct.

9 Abbé d'Ancourt, *The Lady's Preceptor; or, A Letter to a Young Lady of Distinction upon Politeness. Taken from the French of the Abbé d'Ancourt, and Adapted to the Religion, Customs, and Manners of the English Nation*, by a gentleman of Cambridge, 2nd ed. (London, 1743), pp. 8–9.

Elinor, following a different path with no support from her family, finds strength in social responsibility. Like the most serious eighteenth-century conduct-book writers, she assumes an identity between politeness and morality connected with the imperative of self-knowledge. Elinor's better behaviour than Marianne's accompanies a higher degree of self-understanding. Moreover, her effort to take account of the needs and feelings of others reveals exactly that "complaisance" and "delicacy" so highly valued in the eighteenth century. Yet, as the conversation with Lucy shows, she also understands manners as pure artifice, means to a personal end. "Good girl" though she is, she possesses a healthy sense of self-preservation.

As many readers have realized, Austen does not in fact endorse Elinor's position entirely at the expense of Marianne's. She makes Marianne an engaging figure, even if sober judgment cannot sanction her behaviour. Her openness comprises part of her attractiveness. By comparison, Elinor can seem almost prudish, excessively controlled. Marianne expresses what she feels—not only her erotic response to Willoughby but her irritation with the Middletons, her annoyance when someone fails to admire her sister's handiwork, her boredom at trivial conversation. Apparently abandoning personal privacy, accepting risks that Elinor could not bear, she demonstrates another kind of moral courage.

The social environment of *Sense and Sensibility* lacks the human density of Burney's evoked world. No crowds beset Elinor and Marianne in Devonshire, but Austen makes it clear that even a tiny society can threaten privacy. Mrs Jennings wants to know everything about everyone; Sir John assumes the availability to view of every romance and all desire. For Marianne, other people's prying impulses hardly matter while her relationship with Willoughby proceeds as she would have it. Everyone can see, everyone is free to know. If some—notably her sister—disapprove of her behaviour, that fact does not matter either. Locked in her solipsistic love (Willoughby, she believes, duplicates her every thought and feeling), Marianne finds the rest of the world irrelevant. She neither conforms to established social standards nor cares about conformist social judgments. Her risk-taking denies the power of the community.

Elinor, in contrast, possesses not only a highly developed sense of privacy but marked sensitivity to social norms. She accepts the responsibility of covering up Marianne's violations of decorum, conducting gracious exchanges with vulgar Mrs Jennings while Marianne remains tangled in her own fantasies, creating conversations with the Steele sisters while Marianne ignores them, trying to atone to Colonel Brandon for Marianne's neglect of him. But she never reveals more than she should, about herself

or her family. She respects other people's privacy as well as her own, understanding, for instance, what it costs Colonel Brandon to reveal his early disastrous romance and preventing herself from making any effort to pry into the nature of Marianne's commitment to Willoughby.

Most notable, however, is Elinor's preservation of her own privacy as she grieves over Edward's defection, persuaded by Lucy Steele that the man who has appeared to court Elinor is in fact already committed to Lucy. As she explains after the fact, her failure to reveal her own suffering derives from her obligation to keep Lucy's secret, but it also protects her family from grief and anxiety. Elinor upholds the established system of courtesy in keeping her suffering to herself, and she demonstrates the kind of social responsibility implicit in scrupulous preservation of one's own as well as others' privacy. If Elinor and her kind refuse to gratify the curiosity of such as Mrs Jennings, they also avoid inflicting their own anxieties on others. To keep one's troubles to oneself is an act of graciousness as well as self-protection.

Much in *Sense and Sensibility* buttresses this interpretation of Elinor's relative taciturnity, beginning with the Dashwood women's arrival at Barton Cottage, when "each for the sake of the others resolved to appear happy" (p. 28). The kind of privacy that consists in reserving feelings functions for the sake of others as much as for the self. Marianne learns this truth as a result of her emotional and physical suffering and makes herself worthy of reticent Colonel Brandon by trying not to inflict her pain on her family. The corresponding truth that Elinor must learn dramatizes the other side of the equation between privacy and courtesy. It acknowledges the danger of keeping feeling within, the danger of apparent vapidity, of seeming like Lady Middleton, who feels only about her children and cares for no one, who therefore accepts no social responsibility. Unimportant in the plot, Lady Middleton fills an important place in the moral scheme of *Sense and Sensibility*. The fundamental principle of politeness (and of the kind of privacy I have been describing) is, according to Hester Chapone, the "universal duty in society to consider others more than yourself."[10] But to follow this mandate literally risks the suppression of the kind of self-love that grounds the command to love one's neighbours as oneself. As the character of Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* demonstrates, Austen was fully alert to this risk. The union of social and moral propriety demands a fine balance between the claims of the self and of others, the balance that Elinor and

10 Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind*, in *Female Education in the Age of Enlightenment* (1773; London: William Pickering, 1996), 2:178.

Marianne variously learn to achieve. Convention can be employed for self-interest, yet the interests of the community, expressed in its conventions, also threaten the fullness of the self.

According to Austen, then, preserving one's privacy, like other forms of good manners, helps to fulfil the individual's responsibility towards others but may entail dangerous self-suppression. This novelist does not appear to worry much about social hypocrisy, that obsessive concern of earlier eighteenth-century writers. Rendering the superlatively hypocritical character of Lucy Steele, the narrator expresses a casual contempt suggesting that Lucy embodies not common practices but a rare and reprehensible extreme. The moral anxiety of *Sense and Sensibility* focuses, rather, on the danger of social irresponsibility, particularly as a result of romantic solipsism, and the opposed danger of personal repression.

The kind of privacy both Burney and Austen explore does not necessarily make itself recognizable to the observer, as retreating to a room of one's own inevitably does. It consists in urgent inner retreat, in subtle forms of self-protection, in finding ways to be alone in company. Austen's insistence that such psychic retirement serves social as well as personal ends co-exists with the consciousness she shares with Burney: that the claims of the social must accompany rather than replace those of the feeling individual. Both novelists demonstrate the tension between subordinating oneself to the will of the community, as expressed in its social conventions, and using those conventions for personal purposes.[11]

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11 In earlier form, this paper was delivered as a Morgan Lecture at Dickinson College.