In Joy L & Lim J (eds.) *Women's Literary Education, 1690-1850*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 215-235. https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-women-s-literary-education-c-1690-1850.html

Emotional Regulation: Jane Austen, Jane West, and Mary Brunton

Katie Halsey and Jennifer Robertson (University of Stirling)

I often wonder how *you* can find time for what you do, in addition to the care of the House; – and how good Mrs West cd have written such Books & collected so many hard works, with all her family cares, is still more a matter of astonishment! Composition seems to me Impossible, with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb.

Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 8-9 September, 1816.[1]

I am looking over [Mary Brunton's] Self Control again, & my opinion is confirmed of its' being an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it. I declare I do not know whether Laura's passage down the American River, is not the most natural, possible, every-day thing she ever does.

Jane Austen to Cassandra Austen, 11-12 October, 1813.[2]

Jane Austen's remarks about her contemporaries Mary Brunton and Jane West are characteristically double-edged, and in both cases tinged with both admiration, and professional jealousy. *Self Control*, not Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was, as Anthony Mandal reminds us, the runaway success of 1811, while 'good Mrs. West's' *Letters to a Young Lady*, published in the same year, immediately went through four editions in 1811 alone.[3] In the competitive literary marketplace of the 1810s, Austen's success was much more modest. Perhaps the more overtly didactic work of West and Brunton had a more immediate and obvious appeal to the readership; perhaps their publishers simply did a better job at marketing their works. In West's case, of course, she was already a known name by 1811, in the genres of both conduct literature and the novel, and that, in itself, might have been enough to guarantee greater success than could be expected for the debut novel of an anonymous Hampshire lady. But the key point to note is that all three writers were competing for a share of the same market and readership, and that they were benefiting from a particular kind of anti-Jacobin public feeling that, by the 1810s, had come to associate sensibility and emotional freedom with the French Revolution and its terrifying aftermath, and reason, sense and emotional regulation with its opposition. Matthew Grenby identifies the popularity of the anti-Jacobin novel in the 1790s and 1800s as an expression of 'the almost hegemonic political conservatism that characterised Britain from the mid 1790s until after Waterloo', and suggests that 'in a fiercely competitive market there was no alternative' to an anti-Jacobin stance for a writer who wished to sell novels.[4]

In this political atmosphere, emotional regulation – in particular emotional *self*-regulation – therefore had both a political and a personal dimension, allowing writers such as West, Brunton and Hannah More to conflate the national and patriotic with the personal and domestic, in the process arguing forcefully for the importance of a

[1] All references to Jane Austen's letters are from *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. Deirdre Le Faye, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); hereafter *Letters*. *Letters,* p. 321

[2] *Letters*, p. 234.

[3] Anthony Mandal, 'Introduction' in *Self Control,* ed. Anthony Mandal (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2014), p. xiii. This will be the edition cited for the remainder of this essay.

[4] Matthew Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 169 & 171.

female education that emphasised rigour, regulation and self-control to avoid the excesses and the ravages caused, as they saw it, by the emotional volatility and laxity of the French. As Hannah More suggested, the role of 'women of rank and fortune' in a 'moment of alarm and peril' was to 'oppose a bold and noble *unanimity* to the most tremendous confederacies against religion, and order, and governments, which the world ever saw'.[5] The 'patriotism at once firm and feminine' that More advocated was rooted in 'propriety' and 'discretion' – synonyms for emotional self-regulation – and in this she was typical.[6] In this chapter, we will consider Austen, West and Brunton as authors within this context, focusing on their treatment of the theme of emotional regulation. Our discussion will centre on Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Sense and Sensibility*, considering the ways in which these two works constitute a conversation with those of West and Brunton on the subject of self-control, self-discipline and regulation of the emotions. All four novels deal to some extent with the problems arising from the tension that can exist between an individual's attempts at emotional self-regulation and their reception in an imperfect world.

Much has, of course, been written on Austen's politics, and it is important to state at the outset that in suggesting her works should be considered within an anti-Jacobin context, we are not characterising her as a straightforwardly conservative author, in the line of, for example, Marilyn Butler.[7] Nor, on the other hand, would we endorse the suggestion of a 'radical Austen' recently proposed by Helena Kelly.[8] Instead, in this chapter we will attempt to show the ways in which Austen's treatment of the theme of emotional self-regulation takes its place in a much more dynamic, nuanced and important conversation between women writers of educational fiction than has usually been recognised. In so doing, we hope to demonstrate both her congruences with, and differences from her more straightforwardly Evangelical or didactic contemporaries.

For women, frequently characterised as a softer and more 'naturally' emotional sex, a political and philosophical environment that rejected the value of sensibility had a particular, and particularly personal resonance. And across the political spectrum, women writers engaged with the question of the role of the emotions in a woman's character, temper and education. Writers as superficially different as Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, and Hannah More agreed on the fundamental importance of regulating the emotions in their didactic works. The necessity for emotional self-regulation became, in fact, one area in which women writers, whatever their political affiliation, could agree. Wollstonecraft, for example, describes the best education as 'such an attention to a child as will slowly sharpen the senses, form the temper, regulate the passions as they begin to ferment, and set the understanding to work before the body arrives at maturity'.[9] From the opposite end of the political spectrum, Hannah More devotes an entire chapter of her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* to the inculcation of habits of self-regulation, arguing that 'she

[5] Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols, 9th edn (London: Cadell and Davies, 1801; first published 1799), vol 1, pp. 4-6.
[6] *Ibid*, pp. 6-8.
[7] See, for example, Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), *passim.*
[8] See Helena Kelly, *Jane Austen the Secret Radical* (London: Icon Books, 2016), *passim.*
[9] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1994; repr. 2008; first published 1792), p.86.

who has been accustomed to have an early habit of restraint exercised over all her appetites and temper; she who has been used to set bounds to her desires as a general principle' will be able to direct 'all the faculties of the understanding, and all the qualities of the heart, to keep their proper places and due bounds, to observe their just proportions, and maintain their right station, relation, order, and dependence.'[10]

As Louise Joy has pointed out, however, the form of the novel was particularly suited not to the regulation of emotion, but to the subjective expression of emotion.[11] Anti-Jacobin didactic fiction therefore struggles with an inherent tension between the appeal of a character's emotional self-revelation to a novel's readers, and the need to provide a didactic message which checks or counters emotional excess. Hence the large number of novels of the 1790s and afterwards which make use of a pair of contrasting heroines – one sensible, virtuous and rewarded; one passionate, sensitive and punished. This structure allows a writer both to appeal to and gratify a reader's wish for vicarious passionate emotion (via access to the internal workings of the mind of a 'heroine of sensibility'), and to ensure that such emotion is regulated (via the contrasted example of the virtuously self-regulating behaviour of a 'heroine of sense'). Such is the structure of Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791), of Jane West's *A Gossip's Story* (1796), and at first glance, of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) which, as Janet Todd reminds us, in its very title recalls the polarised philosophical debates of the 1790s, during which it was written.[12] Austen did not, however, as Brian Southam rightly says, title the novel *Sense and Sensibility* until it was revised from its original epistolary form in 1797 – the earlier version was in fact called 'Elinor and Marianne'. It does not seem impossible to imagine that, as Austen revised her earlier work, she deliberately retitled and recast it in a seemingly more didactic, and thus saleable, form. Our contention is that in doing so, she was making a deliberate, and, to her contemporary readers, recognisable, allusion to other didactic works, and in particular, to *A Gossip's Story*, published the previous year, with its pointed and explicit endorsement of 'sense', and rejection of 'sensibility'.

A number of critics, among them Marilyn Butler, Devoney Looser, Melinda O'Connell and Caitlin Kelly, have pointed out the similarities in structure, plot, names, and theme in *A Gossip's Story* and *Sense and Sensibility*.[13] Both works, for example, feature a pair of contrasting sisters, one of whom is a paragon of sensibility named Marianne, and the other who embodies rationality and emotional control. Both make use of an accident to bring their Mariannes into contact with the men with whom they fall in love, and who eventually prove unworthy as either suitor or husband. Both of the heroines of 'sense' (Louisa Dudley in *A Gossip's Story* and Elinor Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*) are rewarded with happy marriages, and both of these marry suitors who were previously in love with other women. Both authors also share, it seems, a belief in the importance of emotional self-regulation. These similarities are enough to suggest, as J.M.S. Tompkins does, that *A Gossip's*

---

[10] *Strictures,* vol. 1, pp. 158; 166.

[11] See Louise Joy, 'Novel Feelings: Emma Courtney's Point of View', *European Romantic Review*, 21:2 (2010), 221-234.

[12] Janet Todd, *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 50-64.

[13] Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas,* pp. 100-101; Looser, O'Connell and Kelly, 'Introduction', *A Gossip's* Story, ed. Devoney Looser, Melinda O'Connell and Caitlin Kelly (Richmond, Va.: Valancourt Books, 2016; first published 1796), pp. xi-xii. This edition will be the one cited throughout the remainder of this essay.

Story is 'not exactly the source but the starting-point of *Sense and Sensibility*'.[14] The differences in the two works, however, are substantial enough to imply that *A Gossip's Story* suggested various ideas to Jane Austen with which she disagreed vigorously enough to wish to rewrite the novel in her own way. Support for this assertion comes not only from internal evidence in the novels, but also from Austen's letters, in which she tells her niece Anna Lefroy in a letter of 28 September 1814, 'I am quite determined, however, not to be pleased with Mrs. West's "*Alicia De Lacy*," should I ever meet with it, which I hope I shall not. I think I *can* be stout against anything written by Mrs. West.'[15] It also chimes with what we know about Austen's creative practice, in which the impetus for creation is often a critical or parodic view of another author's work which gives rise to a comedic and sometimes deeply critical treatment of that work.[16]

Perhaps the most important differences between *Sense and Sensibility* and *A Gossip's Story* are the extent to which the straightforwardly didactic aim of West's work is complicated in *Sense and Sensibility*, and the ways in which each author uses the structural device of a pair of superficially contrasting heroines. The epigraph to *A Gossip's Story* announces to its readers that 'The following pages intended, under the disguise of an artless History, to illustrate the Advantages of CONSISTENCY, FORTITUDE, and the DOMESTICK VIRTUES; and to expose to ridicule CAPRICE, AFFECTED SENSIBILITY, and an IDLE CENSORIOUS HUMOUR'.[17] *A Gossip's Story* goes on to associate its two heroines fairly straightforwardly with these characteristics – Louisa becoming emblematic of consistency, fortitude and the domestic virtues, while Marianne displays caprice and affected sensibility in high measure. Throughout *A Gossip's Story*, West consistently presents Louisa as the epitome of emotional self-regulation, with 'a disposition to improve both in moral and mental excellence', and 'an informed, well-regulated mind' (pp. 15& 17), and Marianne as the opposite ('tremblingly alive to all the softer passions' and 'peculiarly unfit to encounter even those common calamities humanity must endure' (p.17)). It is important to note that both Louisa and Marianne feel deeply; their difference is in how they manage to control and regulate passionate emotion. However, West emphasises their differences, rather than their basic similarity, at all times in order to show fortitude rewarded and unregulated sensibility punished. Austen, on the other hand, is at pains from the first pages of *Sense and Sensibility* to comment on the similarities between Elinor and Marianne, as well as their differences. Elinor, for example, has *both* 'strength of understanding and coolness of judgment' *and* 'an excellent heart'[18]. Like her sister Marianne, Elinor's 'disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong' (p.7). Marianne, like Elinor, is 'sensible and clever' (p.7); the difference between them is that Elinor can (and does) regulate her emotions, while Marianne has resolved not to do so. Here we see a key and important difference between West's characterisation and Austen's – in West's novel, Marianne *cannot* regulate her emotions; in Austen's, Marianne *will* not. *Sense and Sensibility*, then,

---

[14] J. M. S. Tompkins, '*Elinor and Marianne*: A Note on Jane Austen,' *Review of English Studies* 16.61 (Jan. 1940): 33-43 (33).
[15] *Letters,* p. 277-8.
[16] See Olivia Murphy, *Jane Austen The Reader: The Artist as Critic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), for a full articulation of the integration of critical and creative practice in Austen's works.
[17] *A Gossip's Story*, p.2.
[18] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility,* ed. Edward Copeland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; first published 1811), p.7. This will be the edition cited throughout this essay.

presents us with a possibility which is effectively denied to West's Marianne Dudley: the possibility that a character of deep sensibility might develop and change.

And as the two novels play out, another key difference appears: Marianne Dashwood conquers herself because of, not in spite of, her strong emotions. These two differences come to define the fates of the two 'heroines of sensibility'. Marianne Dashwood begins to regulate her emotional life when she recognises, understands, and comes to respect her sister Elinor's painful attempts at emotional control. Her love for Elinor, and for her mother, enables this understanding, and her capacity for emotion is eventually the means of her eventual happiness: 'Marianne found her own happiness in forming his [her husband, Colonel Brandon's] … Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby' (p.430). Marianne Dudley, on the other hand, although quite as generous, sincere and charming as her Austenian counterpart, is denied either a second chance or a happy ending because her author is determined to show, as her epigraph demonstrates, that an overly-passionate disposition, and a belief in romantic notions, must end badly. Austen agrees with West that sensibility can be dangerous to its possessor, but for her, it is also necessary. This is demonstrated not only in Marianne's happy ending, but in the creation of characters, such as Fanny Dashwood and Lucy Steele, who are totally devoid of sensibility or feeling, and treated with devastating irony. Where West demonstrates the disastrous effects of sensibility, then, *Sense and Sensibility* shows us that without true sensibility – that is, the ability to feel with and for others – the world is a cold and alarming place.

West presents the solution to the ills arising from sensibility as an explicitly religious one. Christianity, she reminds her readers, teaches us 'to *curb* our passions, and to *moderate* our desires; to expect with diffidence, enjoy with gratitude and resign with submission. (p.31; italics West's). Throughout *A Gossip's Story*, Louisa fully lives up to these precepts, even under the most extreme emotional pressure, while Marianne is regularly cast down by the most trivial of emotional hardships. Louisa reaps the rewards of piety, as we see when, leaving her father's deathbed, she takes refuge in the library of the house in which he is staying:

> She returned the books to their places and after a minute's pause sunk upon her knees. Grief has been termed the parent of eloquence; – it is peculiarly so in an informed well-regulated mind. She raised her eyes, the feelings of her agitated soul animated every impassioned feature. Her snowy hands remained clasped in anguish, and regardless of the tears which fell copiously upon them. In the warm flow of unstudied elocution her lips expressed the piety of a seraph, chastised by the humble awe of a weak dependent mortal. She supplicated Heaven to spare her father, her only friend and comfort; but she asked with submission. She painted an orphan's sorrows; but not with the dark colourings of despair. Her mind appeared to gather strength from her divine employment; her tears ceased to flow; a serene sweetness beamed in her countenance, and when she rose from her knees to retire, her whole form seemed inspired with supernatural intelligence, and expressed the most lively resemblance of superior beings which the human imagination can form. (p.219)

Louisa's piety comforts and inspires her to an almost angelic transformation, and West rewards her heroine not only with the delights of religion, but with a husband, who, on seeing this scene in the library, forgets his earlier unsuccessful love for her sister, and determines to marry Louisa. Since she has secretly loved him since she met

him, it is clear that her Christian virtue and 'informed well-regulated mind' are being rewarded with both spiritual and earthly happiness – Mr Pelham is extremely rich, kindly and devoted, and 'her own prospects were peculiarly brilliant', we are told (p.228). Her sister Marianne, on the other hand, ends the book 'entirely broken'. 'Her early and severe disappointment preyed upon her heart; she no longer felt any inclination for amusement, or any desire to excel, and her thoughts continually wandered within the gloomy pale of her own calamity' (p. 227).

Austen's treatment of the theme of self-regulation is significantly different. As we have already seen, *her* Marianne ends up rich, happy and adored by her husband. While she does, to some extent, learn to regulate her emotions, she never does so completely ('Marianne could never love by halves' (p.430)). So Austen's 'heroine of sensibility' retains both the capacity and the practice of passionate feeling until the end, and she is not punished for it. Rather the reverse, in fact. And, while her 'heroine of sense', Elinor, does of course get her own happy ending with Edward Ferrars, there is no blinding moment of near-angelic transfiguration for her. Instead, Austen shows us the painful cost of emotional regulation throughout *Sense and Sensibility,* most memorably in the scene where Elinor has to reveal her prior knowledge of Lucy and Edward's engagement to Marianne. Here, she speaks eloquently of the suffering she has endured:

> I have known myself to be divided from Edward for ever, without hearing one circumstance that could make me less desire the connection. – Nothing has proved him unworthy; nor has any thing declared him indifferent to me. – I have had to contend against the unkindness of his sister and the insolence of his mother; and have suffered the punishment of an attachment, without enjoying its advantages. – And all this has been going on at a time, when, as you too well know, it has not been my only unhappiness. – If you can think me capable of ever feeling – surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now.* The composure of mind with which I have brought myself at present to consider the matter, the consolation that I have been willing to admit, have been the effect of constant and painful exertion […]I was *very* unhappy. (p.299; italics Austen's).

Even in the happiest moment of the novel, when Edward proposes to her, we learn that Elinor 'was oppressed, she was overcome by her own felicity […] it required several hours to give sedateness to her spirits, or any degree of tranquility to her heart' (p.412) Unlike West's novel, which triumphantly demonstrates the rewards of emotional self-regulation, in *Sense and Sensibility* Austen is at pains to show its costs without ever explicitly commending its rewards. If we consider the means by which Austen brings about the marriage, we might realise that Elinor's happy union with Edward owes nothing to her own emotional control, and everything to Lucy Steele's amoral pursuit of wealth.

This is not to say that Austen rejects the idea that emotional self-regulation is either important or necessary – indeed the narrative voice, which so often presents us with Elinor's worldview, encourages us to see the world as Elinor does, and to see Elinor's own self-control as both admirable and, to some extent exemplary. But on the level of the structure and the plot – which is where Austen is so markedly in conversation with West – we can perceive a criticism of any kind of morality that sees the world so simply in black and white, and an attempt to use the form of the novel to present a more nuanced view of the world.

Although Austen never again presented her readers with a plot so strikingly like that of a predecessor, in *Mansfield Park*, she entered into a second conversation with another author on the subject of emotional regulation, this time with Mary Brunton. Evidence in the letters demonstrates that Austen had read Brunton's *Self Control* at least twice, and probably three times by the time she embarked upon writing *Mansfield Park*.[19] Notably, as with *A Gossip's Story,* the evidence in Austen's letters suggests a critical engagement with *Self Control*, which manifested itself in a desire to improve on the original. In 1811, Austen had found Brunton's novel to be 'an excellently-meant, elegantly-written Work, without anything of Nature or Probability in it.'[20] By November of 1814, the year of *Mansfield Park's* publication, she was joking to her niece Anna that she hoped to write 'a close Imitation' of *Self Control.*[21] It seems within the realms of possibility that her joking allusion was to a work she had in fact *already* written, and which was in the forefront of her mind in 1814, and thus that *Mansfield Park* is a challenge to some of the things she found unpalatable in *Self Control. Mansfield Park*'s repeated emphasis on the painful cost of emotional self-regulation harks back to Elinor Dashwood's heartfelt outburst in *Sense and Sensibility* (discussed above), but it also goes further than that novel in questioning the tenets that are confidently proposed as universal truths in *Self Control.*

In *Self Control*, the reader is presented with precisely the sort of heroine the structures of novels like *A Gossip's Story* allow them to avoid: both sentiment and reason coalesce in the perfect form of Laura Montreville. Despite her occasional lapses into intense sensibility, Laura is a paragon of virtue, never (consciously) allowing her emotions to overpower her superior sense. Laura is taught the importance of self-regulation by her friend and mother-manqué, Mrs Douglas. The latter compensates for the educational failings of her actual, ill-tempered and dissatisfied mother who is more concerned with making her daughter accomplished than rational.

From the outset it is clear that Mrs Douglas's instruction is of an Evangelical tenor:

> By degrees she taught [Laura] to know and to love the Author of her being, to adore him as the bestower of all her innocent pleasures, to seek his favour, or to tremble at his disapprobation in every hour of her life. (*Self Control*, p.7)

Laura also has, by nature, a 'grave and contemplative turn of mind' and is easily schooled in the 'habit of self-examination' (p.8). The reader is assured that Laura's occasional propensity for sentimental enthusiasm is always kept in check by her own superior rationality. Throughout the novel she is often on the brink of being overwhelmed by her feelings, only to pull herself back through the exertion of her own reason. Tears are checked just as they are about to fall, feelings are suppressed the very instant they are felt. It is only when feelings are so unbearably strong that they affect her ability to function physically that they overpower her completely– usually resulting into a temporary loss of consciousness. When, for example, she encounters her suitor, Hargrave, in London (having believed him to have forgotten

---

[19] *Letters*, pp. 186, 234 & 283.
[20] *Letters*, p. 234.
[21] *Letters,* p. 283.

her), she faints against him as she is, 'weakened by the fatigue and emotion of the two preceeding days, [and] overcome by the sudden conviction that she had not been willfully neglected (p. 122). Although she later recalls her behavior with regret, she consoles herself that 'her weakness had been merely that of body, to which the will gave no consent' (p. 129). The text thus excuses its heroine's loss of sense and reason by blaming it on an overwhelmingly powerful physical reaction to mental stress. Similarly, as we have seen, Elinor Dashwood is overcome with such intense emotion that it becomes a physical as much as a mental phenomenon.

Throughout the course of *Self Control* Laura has recourse to fainting as a desperate solution to a situation that she finds impossible to negotiate successfully through the application of self-regulation. The faint in this context can be read as a means of creating a kind of emotional hinterland where the application of reason is impossible and therefore its absence is not a moral failure on Laura's part. *Self Control* thus tacitly acknowledges the idea that self-regulation is, at best, a highly problematic means by which a woman might negotiate an imperfect, patriarchal world. Through Hargrave's relentless pursuit of Laura, the novel betrays its obvious debt to Richardson's *Clarissa*; in particular in its reduction of the heroine's field of experience to a claustrophobic microcosm of male sexual aggression. The novel thus posits (albeit unintentionally) the idea that self-regulation is useless as a form of self-defence when a woman is faced with the intractable force of ruthless male sexual aggression.

As in *Clarissa*, Laura is further tormented by the fact that her aggressor's pursuit appears to be sanctioned. Laura's father chastises Laura for her continued resistance. As they face the grim reality of poverty, he tells her that it is no time for her 'frivolous scruples' (p.142). Laura responds that 'reason and religion alike condemn' a marriage to Hargrave (p.142). Montreville responds by admonishing her that

> in this instance you forge shakles for yourself, and then call them the restraints of religion and reason. It were absurd to argue the reasonableness of preferring wealth and title, with the man of your choice, to a solitary struggle with poverty, or a humbling dependence of strangers. And now, my dear girl, can any precept of religion be tortured into a restriction on the freedom of your choice? (p. 143)

The paternal concern that prompts Motreville's advice is not, in and of itself, unacceptable. In *A Gossip's Story*, we see that even the kindly – and equally impecunious – Mr Dudley urges Louisa to consider carefully the proposal of the morally ambiguous Sir William Milton. As we shall see, both scenes find an echo in *Mansfield Park* when Fanny is urged constantly and by various parties to overcome her scruples and marry Henry Crawford. However, as we will later demonstrate, Austen explores in a more nuanced way the great cost of personal conviction in the face of socially-sanctioned bullying – particularly when it is disguised as benign patriarchal guidance. *Self Control* fails to sustain any genuine interrogation of the consequences to the individual in the face of this kind of pressure. In this context, Laura's fainting might be read in terms of a narrative failure; Laura's lack of

consciousness signals not only her inability to resolve a situation with reason, but also the text's inability (or refusal) genuinely to confront the potential redundancy of self-regulation in the face of greater, socially-endorsed male power.

Hargrave's failure to overcome Laura's moral repugnance leads him to abduct her and ship her to the wilds of Canada, where, like *Clarissa*'s Lovelace, he intends to have her by any means necessary. Laura famously – or infamously – escapes in a canoe (this was the adventure that Austen found so improbable in 1811) but she finds no real resolution to her troubles when she returns home until her fiendish and unprincipled suitor clears her name in his deathbed confession. In a rather chilling final assertion of his real power over Laura, Hargrave writes in his confession that 'he who was her [Laura's] murderer, was her avenger too' (p. 355). This suggests, as when the text excuses Montreville, that the power of patriarchal society is such that even when it is wrong, it is still unassailable. Again we will see that *Mansfield Park* comes to a similar conclusion in a more subtle way, via its representation of Sir Thomas Bertram's 'absolute power'.[22] *Self Control*'s central message about the importance of self-regulation as a way of negotiating the world successfully is thus seriously undermined, but remains uninterrogated.

Brunton was resolutely clear in her intention that *Self Control* should be read as an endorsement of self-regulation. In her dedication to the poet and playwright Joanna Baillie, Brunton wrote that:

> The regulation of the passions is the province, it is the triumph of RELIGION. In the character of Laura Montreville, the religious principle is exhibited as rejecting the bribes of ambition; bestowing fortitude in want and sorrow; as restraining just displeasure; or overcoming constitutional timidity; conquering misplaced affection; and triumphing over the fear of death and of disgrace. (*Self Control* p.2)

Laura certainly does exert herself admirably throughout her various trials. The narrative is at pains to stress that Laura also strives constantly to conquer her clearly 'misplaced affection' for Hargrave through ceaseless self-reflection and mastery not only of her emotions, but of a strong physical attraction to him. She struggles, for example, 'in an evil hour for her resolution' when she encounters 'the fine eyes of Hargrave suffused with tears' (p.125). Laura is not blind to her fault and readily admits to Hargrave that she might 'not always be able to listen to reason and duty rather than to you' (p.135). By admitting the force of her physical attraction, the narrative emphasizes the equal force of her emotional self-regulation.

However, the issue of self-regulation as a form of self-defence is complicated as Hargrave's pursuit grows increasingly aggressive. Despite Brunton's clearly stated intention, the narrative betrays her, as emotional regulation fails hopelessly in its purpose in the face of sexual aggression. Futhermore, Laura's attraction to Hargrave is arguably finally killed not by her mastery of her emotions, but by the fact that his

[22] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ed. John Wiltshire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005; first published 1814), p. 326.

brutality turns her love to hatred and fear. We can draw a parallel here with Elinor Dashwood's experience: just as Elinor's happy outcome is the result of Lucy Steele's social climbing rather than her own stoicism, so Laura's final escape from Hargrave is the result of a happily placed canoe on the St Lawrence river rather than her own emotional restraint. By the end of the novel, Laura's suffering is cast not as an unfortunate consequence of existing in an imperfect world, but rather as a route to eternal happiness in the next. Here Brunton and West are clearly aligned and in a scene not dissimilar to that described earlier in which Louisa Dudley emerges beatified from a period of intense prayer, Laura finds more than mere comfort in religion:

> The raptures of faith beamed on her soul…Her countenance elevated as in hope; her eyes cast upwards; her hands clasped; her lips half open in the unfinished adoration; her face brightened with a smile…she was found by her attendant. Awe-struck, the woman paused, and at a reverend distance gazed upon the seraph… (p. 343)

Laura is beatified through suffering and this is her true reward. It is interesting to contrast this portrait of ecstatic religious experience with the tempered one in which her ultimate worldly reward – marriage to DeCourcy – is described. Although Laura receives her due share of earthly contentment, the moment of intense spiritual ecstasy brought on by deep suffering actually offers the true climax of her experience. There is a palpable sense of anti-climax in the final lines, in which emotion has been regulated almost to the point of non-existence.

The rather drastic *deus-ex-machina* of the canoe, together with a hurried adumbration of Laura's worldly reward, could suggest the narrative's possible uneasiness with its own conclusion. Alternatively, it might suggest the opposite – complete confidence in the inevitability of a reward for continued self-control, even in the most trying of circumstances. If this latter supposition is true, the sudden and truncated ending would imply to the novel's readers that the rewards of self-regulation are so inevitable as to hardly warrant much explanation or interrogation. Either way, for all Brunton's assurance of purpose, *Self Control* raises more questions than it answers and it is via the gaps of these unexamined questions that *Mansfield Park* inserts itself into a debate about the purpose and cost to women of emotional self-regulation. Our contention is that Austen's novel takes further the hints identified in *Self Control* that women are powerless and cannot assert regulated selves against an entrenched patriarchal system. Through Fanny, *Mansfield Park* interrogates the sad irony that regulating the self, far from being a beatifying experience, comes at great cost to the individual.

Like *Self Control* and *A Gossip's Story*, *Mansfield Park* ostensibly endorses the need for emotional regulation in order to navigate an often hostile world. Fanny Price, like Laura Montreville and Louisa Dudley, is apparently temperamentally pre-disposed to introspection, religiosity, self-examination and self-regulation. However, Fanny is a far more complex embodiment of self-regulation than either Louisa Dudley or Laura Montreville, partly because she must pit her moral integrity against a much more

nuanced depiction of society's attempts to overwhelm it.[23] Fanny may be temperamentally suited to the rigors of constant emotional vigilance, but it is also ultimately forced on her by circumstances beyond her control; as a poor dependent on wealthy relations, she simply cannot afford to give vent to her emotions. Her value to the Bertrams is based on her usefulness as an uncomplaining drudge. She is useful to her cousins, Julia and Maria, when their games 'were sometimes of a nature to make a third very useful, especially when that third was of an obliging, yielding temper…' (*Mansfield Park*, p. 19). She functions as a kind of lady-in-waiting to Lady Bertram, and she is infamously treated almost as a servant by Mrs Norris who despises Fanny for no better reason than the fact that she is poor and timid. Self-regulation is therefore essential to sustain her role as a quiet and uncomplaining household help. However, unlike those by West and Brunton, Austen's novel is more keenly aware that self-regulation, although necessary, is by no means an uncomplicated or painless process. It is through Fanny's relationships with Henry Crawford and Sir Thomas Bertram in particular, that *Mansfield Park* concerns itself with those complexities revealed, but uninterrogated, by *Self-Control*.

Henry Crawford is an apparently charming young man of taste and education. Fanny's strong and instinctive dislike is the result of her own superior moral judgement that leads her to believe that there is real moral laxity beneath his seemingly harmless flirtations with her cousins Maria (who is engaged to marry Mr Rushworth) and Julia. Henry claims genuinely to fall in love Fanny eventually, but his pursuit of her begins with a calculated decision prompted by boredom in the wake of Maria Bertram's marriage and Julia's departure. He declares to his sister Mary that he shall 'amuse' himself (p. 267) by making her fall in love with him. He cannot be 'satisfied…without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart', and so he plans a campaign that will last

> but for a fortnight…and if a fortnight can kill her, she must have a constitution which nothing could save. No, I will not do her any harm, dear little soul! I only want her to look kindly on me, to give me smiles as well as blushes, to keep a chair for me by herself wherever we are and be all animation when I take it and talk to her; to think as I think, be interested in all my possessions and pleasures, try to keep me at Mansfield, and feel when I go away that she shall be never happy again. I want nothing more. (p. 269)

Despite his bantering tone, Henry's words are chilling, as they express clearly that his pursuit will be aggressive and his goal shall be total dominance over his romantic prey. In some ways his unfeeling pursuit of Fanny is more sinister than Hargrave's of Laura. Where Hargrave is supposedly fired by burning passion (which is clearly reflected in his flamboyant declarations to Laura), Henry is initially driven by a cold-blooded determination to amuse himself.

[23] For an excellent analysis of the ways in which *Mansfield Park* interrogates the structures of patriarchal power, see Claudia Johnson's *Jane Austen: Women, Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990), in particular pp. 94-120.

Henry's moral laxity repels Fanny, but to the rest of Mansfield society, he is a charming and welcome guest, and a friend. Henry Crawford is, in the words of Sir Thomas, a suitor 'with every thing to recommend him; not merely situation in life, fortune and character, but with more than common agreeableness, with address and conversation pleasing to every body' (p.364). It is precisely the fact that Henry is 'pleasing to every body' that makes him so dangerous an adversary for Fanny, and far more threatening a villain than Hargrave. Hargrave's violent declarations are arguably designed to repel the reader as much as the heroine. Henry's pleasing manners and his 'moral taste' (p. 274) however, allow him an almost chameleon-like ability to transform himself into the kind of suitor who might appeal to Fanny's fastidious taste. Henry's eloquence, his ability appropriately to moderate and modulate his desires and his expression of them is in marked contrast to Hargrave's impassioned outbursts; where Hargrave assaults, Henry insinuates and his threat to Fanny may not seem so great precisely because it is so cleverly disguised.

Where Fanny sees distressingly insidious encroachment, however, everyone around her sees merely the attentive behaviour of a highly eligible young man in love. The fact that everyone is allied with Henry makes his courtship feel intensely claustrophobic. At one point, Fanny exclaims in desperation, 'If Mr. Crawford would but go away!' (p.359). Henry is 'determined…to have the glory, as well as the felicity, of forcing her to love him' (p.376). For this reason 'he would not despair; he would not desist' (p. 376). What is possibly most frightening about Henry is the fact that, unlike Hargrave, his relentless pursuit is endorsed and encouraged by everyone who claims to have Fanny's best interests at heart. We see how Lady Pelham's promotion of Laura's aggrandizement and her wicked machinations are here absorbed and normalised into acceptable and supposedly benign societal pragmatism that dictates that an impoverished young woman ought not to reject an eligible man. Fanny's rejection of Henry Crawford may be governed by the emotional regulation (and its attendant moral acuity) demanded of her by society, but her actions are simultaneously condemned as stubborn wrong-headedness. Even her supposed ally – the equally religious Edmund – applauds Fanny for having been 'upright and disinterested' in her rejection of Crawford, but urges her to reconsider her feelings:

> the matter does not end here. Crawford's is no common attachment, he perseveres, with the hope of creating that regard which had not been created before. This, we know, must be a work of time. But (with an affectionate smile), let him succeed at last, Fanny, let him succeed at last. *You have proved yourself upright and disinterested, prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted*; and then you will be the perfect mode of a woman, which I have always believed you born for. (p. 402; italics mine)

Edmund, with no apparent awareness of the irony of his words, voices the terrible bind in which Fanny finds herself: she must maintain control of her emotions while simultaneously allowing them to be overcome. Fanny's troubles illustrate how impossible a standard 'the perfect mode of a woman' is to maintain.

Fanny rejects Henry's proposal because she does not and cannot love him but Sir Thomas is confounded:

> I know he spoke to you yesterday, and (as far as I understand), received as much encouragement to proceed as a well-judging young woman could permit herself to give. I was very much pleased with what I collected to have been your behavior on the occasion; it shewed a discretion highly to be commended. But now, when he has made his overtures so properly, and honourably – what are your scruples *now*? (p.363)

Fanny is adamant that she gave Henry no encouragement and the exchange that follows illustrates clearly the gulf that exists between Fanny's sense of what is right and society's expectations of a young woman of what Sir Thomas calls 'mediocrity of condition' (p.361). There is a darkly comedic tone to their conversation as each fails to fathom the other's interpretation of Henry's proposal. Sir Thomas claims that Henry has made his overtures 'properly and honourably' (p. 363) and that Fanny cannot, therefore, have any real objection. Fanny is rightly disturbed by the fact that Henry, according to Sir Thomas, found encouragement in her absolute rejection. Her rejection is taken here as a kind of subterfuge, or a tacit agreement to enter into a courtship game in which a decent young woman must respond to a proposal with such extreme circumspection that her answer cannot be taken at face value. In other words, Henry, like Hargrave, refuses to take no for an answer. Fanny must contend not only with the obtuseness of one man, but with the accumulated weight of opinion of a society that does not believe in the rationality of women, even while it urges its dictates upon them.

For all Hargrave's aggression, then, *Self Control* does not posit an all-pervading sense of threat to the morally superior heroine in quite the same way that *Mansfield Park* does. Both Laura Montreville and Louisa Dudley are empowered by their intense religious feeling to the extent that they are occasionally capable of subduing and overpowering those around them. Fanny is not so empowered. Laura's religious convictions also lend her a degree of confidence in her own convictions that allows her to defy her suitor more openly than Fanny can. For example, Laura frequently refuses to meet Hargrave, while Fanny has no alternative but to see Henry whenever he chooses to visit. The fact that she has no option for privacy, retreat or escape is perfectly highlighted when Sir Thomas invades what is meant to be her own private room in the attic in order to speak to her of Henry's proposal. Fanny's entrapment may not be as dramatically portrayed as Laura's kidnapping by Hargrave, but it is no less threatening. And it is far more difficult to escape, not least because of Fanny's lowly, dependent status. *Mansfield Park* throws the ludicrous nature of Laura's escape by canoe into sharp relief by showing that Fanny's experience is far closer to the deadly reality of life for many women.

For Fanny, unlike Laura, there is no alternative, like-minded family into which she can be absorbed through marriage; Fanny can be rewarded only by marriage into the very family who have made her suffer. This absorption is ostensibly presented to the

reader as a happy ending. In the final chapter, the narrative appears to endorse the idea that Fanny has at last found her just reward:

> My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, *must* have been very happy in spite of everything. She *must* have been a happy creature of all that she felt or *thought she felt*, for the distress of those around her. She had sources of delight that *must* force their way. She was returned to Mansfield Park, she was useful, she was beloved; she was safe from Mr Crawford…(p. 533; italics mine).

However, the apparent certainty of Fanny's well-deserved happy ending is undermined by the very language that seems to endorse it: that she 'must' be happy leaves room for the possibility that she is not. That there is a distinction made between what she feels and what she thinks she feels suggests that the text is very aware that Fanny's return to Mansfield is not quite such an unqualified reward for her moral integrity as the reader might choose it to be. In *Self Control*, Laura's true reward is the beatification earned through her intense earthly suffering; *Mansfield Park* eschews such spiritual reward. Furthermore, where *Self Control* seems to posit earthly contentment as a real and legitimate reward for spiritual suffering, *Mansfield Park* offers no such consolation. Just as Laura's escape from Hargrave relies on the *deus-ex-machina* of a convenient canoe, so Fanny's escape from Henry relies on his sexual incontinence. Had he not run away with Maria Rushworth, had he 'persevered, and uprightly, Fanny must have been his reward' (p. 540).

Austen's insistence on this alternative ending thus encourages a nervousness about the actual ending of *Mansfield Park.* She reminds her readers once again of the potential costs of emotional self-regulation, and the ambivalent nature of its rewards. Just as, in *Sense and Sensibility,* she rejects the straightforward dichotomy of sense rewarded and sensibility punished, in *Mansfield Park* she similarly rejects the idea that emotional self-regulation brings an inevitable prize. In Austen's conversations with Brunton and West, then, we see at least as much interest in the negative consequences of emotional self-regulation as in its oft-trumpeted rewards. Like Wollstonecraft, Austen recognizes the necessity of emotional self-regulation as a protective mechanism for vulnerable women in a patriarchal world, but she cannot fully endorse it in the ways that West and Brunton attempt to do. For her sister novelists, suffering is transformative, and emotional self-regulation not only politically necessary, but proof of spiritual excellence. But for Austen, verisimilitude always trumps didacticism, and her novels suggest instead that the costs of emotional self-regulation do not always bring commensurate rewards in this world, whatever may happen in the next. In her *Strictures,* Hannah More suggests that 'a judicious unrelaxing, but steady and gentle curb on [girls'] tempers and passions can alone ensure their peace and establish their principles', arguing that only 'an early habitual restraint' will ensure the 'future character and happiness of women'.[24] Austen, on the other hand, reminds us that rather than necessarily ensuring their 'peace' and 'happiness', women's

---

[24] *Strictures*, vol. 1, p. 181.

emotional regulation comes instead at the price of 'constant and painful exertion'.[25] Herein lies Austen's central and important contribution to her contemporaries' conversations about emotional regulation. Rather than taking for granted the fact that emotional self-regulation will empower women as Wollstonecraft, West, More and Brunton all, in their different ways, do, Austen instead interrogates this assumption by testing it out in what we might now think of as a series of 'real-world' scenarios. In so doing, she finds it lacking.

---

[25] *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 299.