

The Spaces Between: Creating A
Space for Female Sexuality in France
Burney's *Evelina*, Ann Radcliffe's *The
Italian*, and Jane Austen's *Sense and
Sensibility*

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As Nancy Armstrong argues in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, "domestic fiction" was a privileged site for exploring the emerging concepts of sexuality and identity, and because most eighteenth-century novels were by and/or about women, women novelists found a certain amount of authority in this particular and important new area of thought. Of course, many novels by women contain instances of explicit sexuality, including but not limited to works by Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood. However, works that are generally read as being devoid of sexual matters are far more interesting to me. When examined for submerged meanings and subtext, such works open up to the possibility of women's sexuality. This method of reading, as explained by Catherine A. Craft in "Reworking Male Models: Aphra Behn's 'Fair Vow-Breaker,' Eliza Haywood's 'Fantomina,' and Charlotte Lennox's 'Female Quixote,'" works on an analysis of the "silences, omissions, ironies, and textual subtleties" of the text, and can reveal the "encoding of female discourse"

(822). The three works that Craft chooses to analyze in this fashion, especially *The Fair Vow-Breaker* and *Fantomina*, explore issues of sexuality rather openly, though it takes Craft's reading between the lines to demonstrate how thoroughly these texts critique a man's representation of women's sexuality. But I believe it would be beneficial to see how this method of reading plays out in texts that offers almost no discussion of sexuality at all. To that end, I have chosen to analyze Frances Burney's *Evelina*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, all of which contain heroines who exhibit almost no explicit sexual desire whatsoever.

This lack of sexuality in much fiction by women has been explained in many ways, not the least of which is the expectation of the audience. Craft acknowledges the simple fact that "many of the women who wrote did so for money and needed to be accepted by both male and female readers in order to obtain it" (821). It was only natural, then, that even "women writers who wished to be radical" were forced to do so through "hypocrisy" and "dissembling" in order to sneak past the largely male censorship (Craft 822). Readership was not their only concern, however. For instance, while Lisa L. Moore agrees with Armstrong's claim for women's authority on issues of sexuality and subjectivity, she adds that for these women writers, "the representation of sexual desire of the heroine was a central narrative problem" (693). As Moore explains it:

...in order to adequately fulfill the new bourgeois mandate of marrying for love rather than for money, the heroine had to feel desire for the hero; but in order to remain virtuous enough to be an example of female perfection, that desire had to be invisible or at

least manageable until after the marriage itself had taken place – after, that is, the novel had ended. Thus, the heroine's desire both could not be and had to be represented within the scope of the novel. The construction of her sexuality is thus the novel's major formal concern. (693-4)

Of course, all of these restrictions were built upon the "ideal of feminine propriety," which functioned to control or suppress what men feared to be women's voracious promiscuity and threat to property and primogeniture (Poovey 4-6).

Like the contradiction of the heroine's desire that Moore discusses, this idea of propriety was inherently contradictory. Women were not supposed to have active desires, but should instead be only the mirror of man's desire; thus, Mary Poovey states, "Desire, in effect, centers on and returns to a woman; it does not originate from her emotions, her imagination, or her body" (4). However, while this implies that women do not possess passion but only receive and mirror it, the constant need for modesty confirms the exact opposite – "for a modest demeanor served not only to assure the world that a woman's appetites were under control; it also indicated that female sexuality was still assertive enough to *require* control" (Poovey 21). In the face of these restrictions, it is no doubt difficult to explore concepts of sexuality while maintaining the propriety that preserved a woman's position in society. Yet, by examining those "silences, omissions, ironies, and textual subtleties" that Craft advocates, it is possible to see how Burney, Radcliffe, and Austen do just that.

In Frances Burney's *Evelina*, the title character is the model of feminine propriety

that Poovey explicates. She has been raised by a simple country parson, without female guidance or any exposure to society, and she is entirely innocent. Her guardian Mr. Villars calls her "innocent as an angel, and artless as purity itself" (22). And a family friend, Lady Howard, says of her: "Her character seems truly ingenuous and simple; and at the same time that nature has blessed her with an excellent understanding and great quickness of parts, she has a certain air of inexperience and innocence that is extremely interesting" (23). From this, we are meant to understand that Evelina, while innocent and ignorant of the world, is still intelligent and quick-witted – a fact we discover for ourselves when she displays a sharp eye for the comic and ridiculous in her letters. But we are also to understand that while innocence is to be praised, is in fact the perfect expression of the propriety – the ignorance of passion – that men and women alike believe is women's position; it is also dangerous in that it makes Evelina "interesting." It is precisely this innocence which makes her such an enticing object to the many men she comes in contact with in the novel. She is sexual prey; but not only that, for she is perceived as being on the marriage market, and therefore she is *willing* prey (Newton 50-51). And this is as much because of, as it is despite, her innocence and ignorance, as Poovey states: "As a proper young lady, she [Evelina] is theoretically ignorant of sexuality, but as a fully developed young woman she clearly *is* a sexual being" (26). Judith Newton adds that she is not only clearly a sexual being, but a sexual object, something to be ignored or violated at a man's whim – a fact that, according to Newton, Burney makes no effort to deny or change (51, 54-55).

There is, of course, no denying that Evelina is a sexual object – largely because of

her innocence. It is her innocence and beauty that first make her attractive to both Lord Orville and Sir Clement, who upon first seeing her, calls Evelina "the most beautiful creature I ever saw in my life" (36). The lord Evelina meets at the Pantheon immediately fixes on her as object and prey as he "fixed his eyes stedfastly on [her] face, and never once removed them to any other object during tea-time" (107). All the men, excepting possibly Lord Orville and, of course, Mr. Villars, feel they can safely assume that Evelina is sexually available, but the most persistent of these men is Sir Clement. When he rescues Evelina from the strange men at Vauxhall, he does so only to accost her himself, because he assumes that her presence there must signal her sexual availability, despite his previous knowledge of her extreme ignorance of such matters. This is at least partially because, as Poovey argues, Evelina's blushing modesty and embarrassment reveal not only her virtue and innocence, but also her "consciousness" of the "sexuality [her] virtue exists to protect" (26). This is what encourages Sir Clement to accost her when they are alone in the carriage, when "the sweet bloom upon those charming cheeks" (99) assures him that she at least understands, if she does not exactly accept, his advances.

However, this consciousness of the sexual undertones of the conversation are precisely what make Evelina more than simply the sexual object, the mirror that reflects the man's passions back at him. Though she cannot vocalize, and is perhaps not entirely aware of the possible outcomes of Sir Clement's behavior, Evelina feels enough to be frightened for her safety in the carriage. It is here, in Evelina's unspoken, perhaps unacknowledged, consciousness that opens up a space for Evelina's sexuality in the novel. Furthermore, her sexuality does not only

emerge from the discomfort and fear she feels in Sir Clement's presence, but also from the immediate and constant excitement she feels for Lord Orville's attentions.

Because, as Lisa Moore explains, the audience must be assured that Evelina will not marry Lord Orville simply for money – which would ruin her feminine perfection and the sympathy we are meant to feel for her – Evelina is presented as, though perhaps a touch snobby, entirely uninterested in money. Also, very early on she tells Mr. Villars in a letter that she quickly realized that "the rank of Lord Orville was his least recommendation, his understanding and manners being far more distinguished" (34). Understanding and manners, nevertheless, are not sufficient motives to be in love, and so Burney takes pains to subtly, almost wordlessly, demonstrate Evelina's powerful attraction to Lord Orville. Therefore, Lord Orville is "about six-and-twenty years old, gayly, but not foppishly, dressed, and indeed extremely handsome, with an air of mixed politeness and gallantry" (31). He is "sensible and spirited; his air and address were open and noble; his manners gentle, attentive, and infinitely engaging; his person is all elegance" (31). There is no mistaking the attraction she feels for Lord Orville almost instantly. Though she is always shy and quiet, she is more tongue-tied in his presence than with anyone else. After only one night dancing with him, she is convinced that he is the "most amiable man in the world" (39), and is tormented almost unbearably by the thought that he may think ill of her. She blushes at his least compliment, while the effusive praise of any other man merely makes her skeptical or satirical. The words desire or passion never escape Evelina's lips, or pen; they probably do not even occur to her. But such passion allows Evelina to continue to "admire" Lord

Orville even when sense, and Mr. Villars, warn her she should not set her sights so high, and it also allows her to so easily forgive what she believes to be Lord Orville's offensive letter to her. Burney, as a woman writer who was dependent upon the good opinions of the men around her, was not likely to push the limit and admit to sexuality openly, but she was able to demonstrate Evelina's passion for the hero nonetheless.

Finally, by making Lord Orville both idealized and somewhat feminized, Burney is able to create a fictional space in which a more affectionate female-male relationship can be imagined. Burney is very careful not to overstep the bounds of gender identification too far – Lord Orville is most definitely not a fop, as Evelina's constant comparisons between Orville and Mr. Lovel make obvious. But Lord Orville is so steadfast, amiable, and delicate as to be feminine (262), and by Volume III of the novel, he has taken on something of the female position in his relationship with Evelina. This is not to say that Evelina is the more masculine or powerful of the two, but only that Lord Orville voluntarily puts himself in Evelina's power, even as he claims the custodial role of "brother." This is evident whenever he finds reasons to doubt Evelina's propriety or honesty – the most important example of which is the episode with Mr. McCartney. Rather than assert his power to censure Evelina or tell her how to behave in what he believes would be the more proper way, he defers to her judgment, acts upon her requests, and quietly awaits her explanations.

In *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th Century*, George E. Haggerty argues that such reordering of the male position in women's fiction was one of the ways that women writers resisted restrictive and heteronormative conceptions

of desire, and build their own parameters for female desire (2-5). The portrayals of men with "professed sensibility" and any opportunities to subvert "male privilege and particularly odious forms of gendered male behavior" does much to reveal "symptoms of female desire" (4). If seen in this light, Lord Orville's feminized behavior, and his placement as a foil to the majority of men in the novel (who are self-important, ill-mannered, licensed to ignore or violate women as they please), become new boundaries for the parameters of female desire. Even Lord Orville's temporary claim to a brotherly position with Evelina is indicative of this, as Haggerty argues when male characters are debilitated or feminized in some way, it gives way to more affection, for "many of the male-female relations are brotherly and tender in surprisingly erotic ways" (7-8). All of these things allow for the possibility of imagining a female-male relationship that is built on attraction, tenderness, and affection. And despite Evelina's many faults, and the inherently oppressive nature of 18th century marriage, Evelina is rewarded for her innocence, her propriety, *and* her desire, by being allowed to marry the "Prince Charming" (Newton 53) she wished for.

Like *Evelina*, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian*, attempts to deal with the inherent contradiction of a heroine who must feel passion but also embody the ideal of feminine propriety. Ellena, the heroine of *The Italian*, is, like Evelina, beautiful, virginal, innocent, dutiful, and largely passive. When Vivaldi, the hero of the narrative, first sees Ellena, she is described in appropriately gushing praise: "The sweetness and fine expression of her voice attracted his attention to her figure, which had a distinguished air of delicacy and grace" (9) and she possesses a "countenance

more touchingly beautiful than he had dared to image" (11). She is also veiled, silent, modest, and shy of the attention that Vivaldi bestows on her. Furthermore, even when she is willing to admit her affection for Vivaldi, love seems less a matter of desire than of duty, and Ellena agonizes over the propriety of marrying Vivaldi without his parents' consent. In one scene that establishes Ellena's image as the virgin, Vivaldi witnesses her late at night on her balcony, singing a "midnight hymn to the Virgin" with "devotion almost saintly" (16).

Because of the imagery of whiteness, the veil, and Vivaldi's "respectful timidity" in his dealings with her, Ellena is portrayed as further distanced from sexuality than even Evelina was. Unlike, Evelina, who can at least imagine the sexual dangers she might face with such men as Sir Clement, Ellena is unable to even consider the possibility that Schedoni might be in her room for any other reason to protect her. And the terrors she does imagine when she hears men outside her door are violent death, rather than sexual violation. However, the complete absence of consciousness on Ellena's part does not preclude the consciousness of the novel itself toward matters of sexuality. This is evident in a myriad of ways, including but not limited to Radcliffe's employment of the "Devil/Priest syndrome," the sexual metonymy of the veil, and the displacement of sexual desire onto a woman.

In "The Radcliffean Gothic Model: A Form for Feminine Sexuality," Cynthia Griffin Wolff explicates what she calls the "Devil/Priest syndrome" as a woman's analogue to the more commonly known "Virgin/Whore syndrome." Love, Wolff explains, is generally divided into two kinds: affectionate/ asexual love and passionate/ sexual love. However, love is considered so

powerful and so dangerous, that men and women often deal with it by projecting their feelings onto the men or women around them. Thus, for men, there are two kinds of women: "'good' women whom they idealize and who have no sensual desires (and for whom, of course, the men themselves feel no sexual longings); and 'bad' women who are sexual by nature (and with whom it is permissible – perhaps even expected – to have sexual relations)" (Wolff 98). The same is true for women, who project their feelings onto two kinds of men: the "chaste" lover or Priest-like man who is entirely unthreatening and nonsexual, and the "demon" lover or Devil, who is monstrous and sexually powerful (Wolff 99-100). In both cases, the "individual who should be the main actor," in other words the man or woman whose feelings are in question, becomes "unnaturally drained" of passion (or often any active feeling at all); also, the emotions that have been projected onto other often take on a "primitive" undiluted quality (98-99). Wolff primarily applies this "Devil/Priest syndrome" to *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Romance of the Forest*, but it applies as easily to *The Italian*.

We have already established that Ellena seems "unnaturally drained" of passion – in fact, she, like most Gothic heroines, is extremely passive and exhibits almost no emotions whatsoever except fear and tame admiration for Vivaldi. Further, it is readily apparent that Vivaldi is the "chaste" Priest-like lover. This is established within the first few pages. When Vivaldi first sees Ellena and is struck by her beauty, despite (or perhaps partially because of) the veil that covers her face, he listens to her with "rapt attention," follows her almost mindlessly, and then is overcome by "respectful timidity, that mingled with his admiration, and which kept him silent" (Radcliffe 9). Here and throughout,

Vivaldi is presented a priest who worships Ellena from afar like an untouchable goddess or saint – again, we return to the image of Ellena singing a hymn to the Virgin with saintly devotion. Vivaldi is also, like Lord Orville, feminized in many respects. He is portrayed again and again as a man of delicacy and feeling, who is overcome by natural beauty and music, who is romantic despite the aristocratic practicality of his parents, with an “imagination inclined to the marvelous” (Radcliffe 401), and who furthermore, obeys any request/command Ellena makes of him. Vivaldi, then, is the epitome of the harmless, unthreatening, chaste lover.

The “demon” lover is just as apparent in Schedoni. Upon the reader’s first encounter with Schedoni, the Italian of the title, he is described as imposing, perhaps terrifying, maybe evil, but fascinating, powerful, and provocative as well. Schedoni is a man of high birth but “fallen fortune,” severe and silent, intelligent, with a tall, thin, striking figure, and bearing the “traces of many passions” (42-3). On top of this, he has thrown a “veil over his origins” and many have conjectured about his past, giving him a decided air of mystery. This is a compelling man, and Ellena is immediately aware of it upon meeting him. But, he is also the monster of the novel. It is necessary that he be powerfully compelling for the underlying sexual charge of the narrative, but it is also necessary that Ellena be immediately and inexplicably repulsed by him. The women in Gothic novels always react to the demon lover with instinctive aversion, and such is the case with Ellena. When she first sees him, she believes him to be merely a monk and runs to him for help from Spalatro, but the moment she clearly sees his face she realizes that “his air and countenance were equally repulsive”

and “there was something also terrific in the silent stalk of so gigantic a form; it announced both power and treachery” (256). Ellena, though she does not know that this is the man who is persecuting her on the Marchesa’s orders, immediately shrinks from him in unreasoning fear.

This unreasoning fear, this instinctive aversion is, according to Wolff, always justified after the fact when it is discovered that the demon lover is a relation: an uncle, a step-father, sometimes the biological father – “this spectre of incest [...] hangs over the entire tale” (Wolff 103). This is necessary because the narrative must resolve the conflict of love/passion in the “direction of ‘chastity’” (103). The narrative allows the female reader to “indulge sexual feelings of immense power” while simultaneously reassuring her that these emotions are, in fact, under control by ultimately marrying the heroine off the harmless chaste lover (Wolff 104). While this ending admittedly cuts the sexually transgressive narrative off in favor of the more socially accepted view of women’s purity and chastity, the very presence of the “Devil/Priest syndrome” within the tale creates a place within the split for women to experience a “portion of her own longing” (103).

This model may be the most prevalent element of *The Italian’s* ability to imagine a woman’s sexuality, but it is not the only one. Another device used is that of the veil, a symbol that appears throughout *The Italian* and almost all Gothic novels. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the veil, and not only the figure beneath the veil, becomes a locus of sexuality, because it

conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as a metonym

of the thing covered, and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions by which sexual desire is enhanced and specified. ("Character" 256)

This is, as Poovey argues, precisely the way modesty works: revealing the woman's sexuality while simultaneously controlling and concealing it. Sedgwick adds that the veil, as a symbol of virginity, has its own erotic savor, and men in Gothic novels fall in love as much with the woman's veil as with the woman herself. This, one could argue, is the case for Vivaldi, who first sees Ellena primly veiled, and is completely entranced by the image and his curiosity to see beneath it. This is also part of what gives Schedoni mystery and power, as he has "thrown a veil" over his past to conceal his crimes. And the sexual power of the veil even works on other women. Just as Vivaldi was attracted to Ellena by the sound of her voice and the mystery of her veiled face, so too is Ellena inexplicably drawn to the nun, Olivia, whose voice "seemed to speak a loftier sentiment of devotion than the others" and whose "face was concealed by a black veil, whose transparency, however, permitted the fairness of her complexion to appear" (Radcliffe 101).

It is this inexplicable attraction to Olivia, later revealed to be Ellena's mother, that constitutes the final space left open for female sexuality in the novel. To return again to the problem that Lisa L. Moore points to: in order to present and not present the heroine's desire ability to feel desire for the hero, a common strategy was the "direct the heroine's 'passion,' 'devotion,' and 'adoration' toward another woman" (694). This resistance to "heteronormative desires," Haggerty adds, allows women writers room to articulate female desire in subtle, often silent, but importantly transgressive ways. Ellena's

displacement of desire onto Olivia, is apparent throughout the first meetings. After seeing Olivia in her veil, and hearing her sing, Ellena is so fascinated by her that she asks all the other nuns about her, despite their animosity. When she sees Olivia again, the description is highly charged: "fixing on her the same enquiring eye, her [Olivia's] countenance brightened into a smile so full of compassion and intelligence, that Ellena, forgetting the decorum of the place, left her seat to approach her" (Radcliffe 104). Ellena is compelled to approach Olivia without even realizing what she is doing, an action very similar to Vivaldi's upon first seeing Ellena. Furthermore, when Olivia leaves again with noticing or acknowledging Ellena, she "could scarcely restrain her tears; she returned in deep dejection to her room. The regard of this nun was not only delightful, but seemed necessary to her heart" (104). Even when Olivia does befriend her, Ellena is horrified at the thought that the nun might only come because she is ordered, and is in raptures at the tiniest attention. These scenes are the closest Ellena comes to expressing any kind of desire or sexual attraction. Ellena's relationship with Olivia, like the figure of Schedoni, creates a space for imagining female desire that goes beyond the restrictive boundaries that propriety has placed on women.

Transferring the passion of the novel onto women is also the primary way that Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* constructs female sexuality. One of the first indications of this⁷ is the complete insufficiency of the heroes of the novel. The men of *Sense and Sensibility* are entirely ineffectual, and inappropriately paired up with the two heroines, Elinor and Marianne. This is as true for Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon as it is for Willoughby. As Haggerty argues, by

creating such inadequate heroes, Austen reworks the relations between male and female in order to “suggest both the strength of female bonds and the insufficiency of happy endings” (19). Furthermore, the plot of *Sense and Sensibility* seems to actively avoid its own ending, which will bring the unappealing “narrative closure of marriage” (Haggerty 13).

Rather than focusing even the imagined possibility of desire on the men of the novel, the true sexual charge and emotional force emerges from the spaces between and around the two sisters. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states in “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl,” the “passion and perturbation of their love for each other is, at the very least, the backbone of this powerful novel” (392). Haggerty adds that the passion Elinor and Marianne have for each other is possible, but also difficult to see, precisely *because* they are sisters: sexual love disappears within the structures of familial love, allowing female-female desire to “flourish unchallenged” (75). Even the title, while theoretically signaling the competition between “sense” and “sensibility,” is actually an indication of the relationship between the sisters, as Elinor’s “sense” and concentration of the social, and Marianne’s “sensibility” and concentration on the private, must combine in order to create a balanced relationship with the world and each other. However, Sedgwick attributes this combination of “sense” and “sensibility” to Elinor’s need to constantly cover up Marianne’s social inattention rather than to a balance between the two, such as in the following passages:

Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling

lies when politeness required it, always fell. (Austen 89)

and

No one made any objection but Marianne, who, with her usual inattention to the forms of general civility, exclaimed, “Your ladyship will have the goodness to excuse me – you know I detest cards. I shall go to the piano-forte; I have not touched it since it was tuned.” [...]

“Marianne can never keep long from that instrument you know, ma’am,” said Elinor, endeavouring to smooth away the offence... (103)

This impulse as well as Elinor’s care in hiding her unhappiness from Marianne are, to Sedgwick, indicative of Elinor’s codependency on Marianne. The passion of the novel is one-sided in Sedgwick’s view: “if love is vectored toward an object and Elinor’s here flies toward Marianne, Marianne’s in turn toward Willoughby” (“Jane Austen” 392). Haggerty, on the other hand, claims that Marianne’s passion is only displaced onto Willoughby because of her perception that Elinor is “worse than cold-hearted! Ashamed to be otherwise” (Austen 18).

The passage that both Sedgwick and Haggerty cite at length, as powerful evidence of the love between Elinor and Marianne is the “particularly devastating bedroom scene” (Sedgwick 391) in which Marianne writes to Willoughby for the last time. In the soft, wan light of the early morning, Marianne sits at a window seat “half-dressed,” “writing as fast as a continual flow of tears would permit her” (Austen 127). Elinor watches in “silent anxiety” and then speaks with the “most considerate gentleness” (127). The

tenderness with which Elinor regards Marianne is evident throughout the novel, but it is especially potent here. However, as Sedgwick points out, the naming of Willoughby displaces the passion of the scene (or at least Marianne's passion) away from this moment of "same-sex tenderness, secrecy, longing, and frustration" (Sedgwick "Jane Austen" 392). But, even if we can agree that Marianne's desire is directed at the object of Willoughby throughout much of the novel, it is easy to distinguish has that desire has appropriately moved to Elinor after her illness. It is Elinor who sits patiently by Marianne's bedside and cares for her tenderly during her brush with "madness" and "death," leading her back from the edge. And it is to Elinor that Marianne's thoughts and perceptions go when she recovers. Marianne's apology and self-assessment to Elinor is highly important as a sign of her change:

Had I died, -- in what peculiar misery should I have left you, my nurse, my friend, my sister!—You, who had seen all the fretful selfishness of my latter days; who had known all the murmurings of my heart! [...] You above all, above my mother, had been wronged by me. I, and only I, knew your heart and its sorrows; yet, to what did it influence me?—not to any compassion that could benefit you or myself.—Your example was before me: but to wait avail?—Was I more considerate of you and your comfort? Did I imitate your forbearance, or lessen your restraints...? [...] I shall now live solely for my family. You, my mother, and Margaret, must

henceforth be all the world to me...
(244-45)

This passage, as do other parts of the novel, also point to the importance of a community of women or "feminotopia": what Felicity Nussbaum discusses in "Feminotopias: The Seraglio, the Homoerotic, and the Pleasures of 'Deformity'" as a place for women to thrive without the presence of men, and to find autonomy and pleasure in the company of other women (135-37). But, while this community of women is vital to the conception of the Dashwood family (Elinor, Marianne, Margaret, and their mother living together autonomously and contently in Barton Cottage), the more significant element of Marianne's speech is her return to Elinor as the only safe place for affection and passion.

Some have argued that the ending of the novel – in which Elinor marries the ineffectual Edward, Marianne is practically forced into the arms of Colonel Brandon by her entire family, and the community of women that the Dashwood family constitutes is broken up – endangers, perhaps even destroys, the space of desire and passion that the two sisters have created for themselves. However, Edward and Brandon are little importance to the emotional happiness of the Elinor and Marianne, except as marriage to these two men will still allow the sisters to be always together. The bond between Elinor and Marianne is the only relationship that has a satisfying conclusion, and it is obvious that their marriages will in no way hinder this relationship. In this way, the space that encompasses Elinor and Marianne within the novel does not lose its sexual charge, and Austen allows for the possibility of two women finding true passion and compatibility even as they submit to social roles required of them.

These three novels, *Evelina*, *The*

Italian, and *Sense and Sensibility*, demonstrate how thoroughly women writers could construct female sexuality and make space for passion without ever stepping outside the bounds of their own sense of propriety, or the social expectations laid upon them. Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and Jane Austen were able to avoid the censure of critics, and indeed gained immense support from men and women alike. Yet, the sexual imaginations created in the silence and subtext of these works effectively challenges, if they do not outright defy, the restrictive and heterosexual norms that limited female desire to merely a mirror of the man's desire.

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