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A Romantic Austen: The Discordant Feminist Discourse of Adapting Sense and Sensibility

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A ROMANTIC AUSTEN:
THE DISCORDANT FEMINIST DISCOURSE
OF ADAPTING *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*

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Abstract:

This undergraduate thesis explores the intertextual and critical conversations around Jane Austen's Sense and Sensibility, and the 1995 screen adaptation of the same name, with a focus on how each text understands the interplay between feminine romance and feminine agency. A non-essentialist theory of adaptation is applied to construct an interpretive model that esteems Emma Thompson's version of the story and considers its consequence to different communities of Austen readership, which is measured by the distinctly feminist themes detectable in the sexuality of Sense and Sensibility fanfiction. This investigation uncovers the importance of expanding the interpretive power and possibilities of a narrative within a grand mission of maintaining a story's dynamic meaningfulness and nurturing the diverse intellects of readers.

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Introduction — The Malleable Austen

Despite what common pigeonholing might suggest, Jane Austen's novels have not always been associated with strictly female audiences nor what could be conventionally considered female-focused themes and situations. In fact, the nature of Austen's shifting audiences is best presented by Claudia Johnson, one of the leading scholars in Austen criticism, who clarifies that the first *Janeites*—or intense Austen enthusiasts—were primarily World War I veterans who bonded with *Pride and Prejudice* or *Mansfield Park* so they might escape into "a world before history blew up" (217). In actuality, it would not be until after WWII that scholarship began paying closer attention to the marriage plots within Austen's novels and, in turn, gave particular attention to how her stories explore a woman's navigation of her social reality. Granted, at first, this would mostly produce conservative readings that lifted from her female characters prescriptive manuals for how women should behave in a male-dominated world. Nevertheless, once the emerging feminist scholarship of the 1970s mingled with Austen, their innovative interpretative lenses would form a contemporary evaluation of her works as resisting the patriarchal social structures that permeated the early-nineteenth-century culture in which she published them (Demory 122). Jane Austen became a valued authority on womanhood.

For the last fifty years, critics have continued to demonstrate this malleability of Austen, reinterpreting her texts across changing cultural contexts and thereby generating different understandings of how her five novels comment on men, women, and the societies that marry them together. That said, the malleable Austen did not confine herself to literature for long, and soon her stories were borrowed by media industries to create television and film adaptations, such as Rodney Bennet's BBC miniseries of *Sense and Sensibility* in 1981 or even Giles

Forster's 1987 made-for-television film of *Northanger Abbey*. As such, adaptations caught the attention of a non-academic public; a new audience for Austen's stories would form that consisted of women who indulged in Victorian civility and picturesque romances. And the academics took notice.

This more pop-culture-oriented audience of Austen, with their passion fueled by a decade's worth of admired visual adaptations, exploded throughout the mid-nineties and developed into a quasi-obsession by the late 2000s. Such was the beginning of a stark dichotomy between two major Austen subcultures who still populate battlegrounds of interpretation to this day. The modern Janeites began sorting themselves into one of two groups, each of whose polarizing behaviors are amusingly outlined by Mary Ann O'Farrell: Austen fans either align themselves with the distinguished scholars and society members who partake in formal balls and conferences or the mass-market devotees who hoard Austen memorabilia and sleep on pillow cases imprinted with the face of Colin Firth—the dreamy Mr. Darcy of the 1995 *Pride and Prejudice* (481-482). Though incredibly different in their dispositions, these subgroups also formed contrasting beliefs about how to approach and value Austen's stories. The first group, often coded as more high-culture, tends to favor Austen's literary authority; they admire the emotional reserve of her female characters, whose strategic navigation of Victorian social systems is perceived as complementing their own self-proclaimed interest in "cultural sophistication" (Troost & Greenfield 5). A prime example of this is the Jane Austen Society of North America [JASNA], a literary organization boasting 5000 members who identify with this sophisticated approach to appreciating Austen, especially those who contribute to both the print and online publications of *Persuasions*, the society's academic journal on all things Jane Austen (*Jane Austen Society of North America*). The second subsection, more associated with general

popular culture, might better complement the pre-existing assumption that modern members of Austen fandom engage with her texts—and importantly, their adaptations—through a primary interest in feminine, heterosexual romance and melodrama.

The scholarly Janeites and the popular fans are each after a version of Austen's stories which are considerably different from one another, often to the point of incompatibility. Thus, we are left with a pertinent interpretive problem borne from Austen's intense malleability. A handful of scholars, including O'Farrell, have studied "the ability to tolerate others' private Austen," or as observed more commonly, the complete lack of this ability (481). Robert Irvine offers an acute summary of this tension between the two groups. Simply put, Austen fans outside of the academy are characterized by a pleasure-seeking style of reading that, within the frameworks of critical analyses, is typically scrutinized for being inferior to the academy's own ideas about Austen's rhetorical merit (148-149). This perspective may be unsurprising to those who have been paying attention to the 'Jane Mania' criticism over the last couple decades, much of which questions the relationship between popular Austen fans, romance conventions, and consumer culture. Recently, however, the digital age has equipped these fans with online spaces for better organizing and legitimizing their own conventions of interpreting Austen's texts. As a result, even some scholarly voices, like Nicole Peters, have started crafting a defense of this romantic readership:

> Ultimately, contemporary popular Austen readers are doing something much more complicated than is often recognized within the institutional setting: they use her novels to build and reinforce a strong community and to create a hybrid way of reading and interacting with a text, while simultaneously drawing attention to the arbitrary nature of the many boundaries they occupy and confront. (75)

Peters not only highlights one of the strongest reasons why popular Austen fans are subjects of academic skepticism but also why their interpretations of her texts matter. These fans create new understandings of Austen's novels which confront the scholarly status quo. The suggestion is that popular fans, with their collections of Austen merchandise and preoccupation with cinematic adaptations, somehow threaten the academy's pre-established conventions of evaluating these novels. In line with this methodology, critics like Peters have encouraged a shift in how to retrospectively analyze both earlier adaptations of Austen's novels as well as the popular audience discourses that emerged from them. It is a lens that assesses points of contention among Austen's readership with the goal of reevaluating whether these confronting, seemingly heretical, interpretations from popular audiences are truly without intellectual merit.

Throughout this paper, I explore one of the many intersections of adaptation and audience discourse which serve as interpretive battlegrounds in the history of Jane Austen's critical reception: the 1995 film adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* and the divisive conversation it sparked about the story's capacity for feminist themes. The film in question, adapted for the screen by English actress and screenwriter Emma Thompson, disrupted the preconceived notions of how *Sense and Sensibility* conveys its opinions on feminism's relationship with romance, a confrontation which would continue to influence even more unorthodox approaches to the text more than twenty years later. In Section 1, I apply destabilizing methodologies of approaching text, textual criticism, and textual adaptation to understand how and why the novel's leading interpretations—generated from the two aforementioned Austen subgroups—appear so at odds with one another. I then transition into a subsequent validation of Thompson's rendering of the story, one which recognizes its role in creating new insights into the novel's feminist discourse. In Section 2, the paper shifts focus to the role of the film in defining popular Austen readership,

observed through the phenomenon of *Sense and Sensibility* fanfiction, which further establishes the ability of adaptation to complicate and enrich the relationship between Austen and feminism.

I. Feminism and Flawed Fidelity

For those unfamiliar with Austen's first published novel, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) is set in southwest England, right at the tail end of the eighteenth century. After the death of their father, which passes nearly all of their inheritance to their stingy half-brother, sisters Elinor and Marianne Dashwood must rectify their poor economic situation through the contemporary marriage structures of their time—they must marry into wealth. Elinor, whose perspective is often focalized within the text's omniscient narration, is commonly understood as the novel's *sense*, given her reliance on emotional restraint as she navigates the highs and lows of securing a future with the awkward yet kind Edward Ferrars. Conversely, Marriane's raging *sensibility* leads her into treacherous romantic territory until circumstances align just right for the coldly compassionate Colonel Brandon to finally catch her heart. The narrative closes on two happy couples, the sisters seemingly secured emotionally and financially, living just a short walk apart.

When Emma Thompson released her film in 1995, she mostly adhered to the novel's plot as laid out above, yet many scholars soon claimed that the sentimentality and romance of the screenplay had tweaked the heterosexual relationships in ways which undermined what they perceived as some foundational feminist ideology at work in Austen's original.[1] Even during filming, the movie's production team received a call from the JASNA, who argued that Hugh Grant was far too handsome to play an accurate Edward Ferrars, or so Thompson recounts in her

[1] I'd like to clarify that, though film is undeniably a collaborative medium by nature, with dominant credit traditionally given to the director (Ang Lee, in this case), my purposes here lead me to refer to the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* as an invention of Emma Thompson, whose work on the screenplay serves as the primary location of adaptive choices. This decision is in line with many scholars of the film, including the cited authors.

diary about making the film (244). That said, the best way to approach this critical reception to the film, while simultaneously unpacking the scholarly norms of reading Austen's as feminist, is to fast-forward to three years after its theatrical release. In 1998, Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield published *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, a collection of essays from various critics that discussed six film and television adaptations of Austen's novels which crossed audience's screens throughout 1995 and 1996. Given its status as one of the first pieces of scholarly engagement with the Austen film boom of the 1990s, the enclosed critiques and praises of these adaptations—including Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility*—established a lasting influence on how other scholars would continue to approach Austen adaptation. This impact is measurable simply by looking at how often the essays from this volume are referenced in scholarship, even in articles which concern themselves with more recent adaptations.

One of the key trends among the *Jane Austen in Hollywood* [*JAH*] essays is their evaluation of Thompson's film as poorly integrating Austen's feminist ideas into her rendering of the romantic dynamics between Elinor/Edward and Marianne/Brandon. Specifically, the arguments from Rebecca Dickson, Kristen Flieger Samuelian, and Deborah Kaplan together craft a picture of the film that upholds many of the '70s, feminist sentiments which helped define the scholarly group of Austen readership. Thompson's Elinor—both in the screenplay and Thompson's own on-screen portrayal—ultimately loses her feminist vitality due to the moments where she breaks from her strategic emotional repression; Marianne's extra affection for Brandon becomes exemplary of the post-feminist compliance with heterosexual marriage conventions; and, of course, Hugh Grant and Alan Rickman's versions of Edward and Brandon respectively leaves them far too romantically appealing. These kinds of responses are not ignorant of the moments when the film does dabble in feminist discourse, but Samuelian

summarizes the persistent scholarly complaints with Thompson: “Because the explicitness of her [patriarchal] critique works in concert with her courtship plot, it engenders a complacency that Austen resists” (150). For many contemporary scholars of the ‘90s, Austen’s feminism is predicated on a resistance to the societal structures of marriage, and the palpable romance of adaptations like Thompson’s *Sense and Sensibility* are incompatible with this style of feminism. In other words, much of the scholarly readership assumes an interpretation of *Sense and Sensibility* that reads Austen as opposed to traditional marital systems, including the sentimental conventions which typically surround them, and therefore concludes that an interpretation Thompson’s romantic pleasure is antithetical to their conception of Austen as a feminist writer.

In a more modern lens of understanding adaptation, however, this method of analyzing the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* has a flawed foundation. The scholarly reception in *JAH* operates under the belief that their interpretations of the novel reveal some essential piece of Austen’s themes which should have been preserved by the adaptation, because adaptive fidelity is inherently good. They claim a clear and specific feminist intent exists in the text, and therefore Thompson’s film loses intellectual value by not adhering to that feminism. This approach to adaptation may have fit well with the scholarly subgroup of readership that subscribed to Jane Austen’s authorial authority, but it also falls into what Kamilla Elliot critiques as a kind of “essentialism” which presumes adaptation’s responsibility to mimic some observable essence of the source text. Elliot describes the limitations of such a methodology, and challenges critics of adaptation to instead study an adaptive work “as its own other as well as its own self” in order to understand their rhetorical importance more deeply (23). Within this framework, critics like Dickson, Samuelian, and Kaplan risk overlooking a new perspective on how Austen can be read as a feminist. A similar dismantling of adaptation essentialism is executed by Christa Albrecht-

Crane and Dennis Cutchins's poststructuralist argument that the essence of a source text is in fact "neither knowable, nor directly representable," and this uncertainty should actually encourage critics to pivot their attention to the intertextuality of adaptation, which is "artistically productive and affirmative of difference" (17-20). In actuality, the *JAH* trends represent a distaste for difference that upholds the traditional interpretive conventions of scholarly Janeites. They do not treat Thompson's adaptation as its own unique reading of *Sense and Sensibility* that is equivalent to and distinct from their own essentialist conceptions of the novel's feminism. Of course, this is not to suggest that their arguments are completely baseless or lack nuance, but I do believe they offer reductive analysis typical of the '90s Austen discourse, the kind of analysis which might yield interesting insights into the malleability of Austen's feminism if we continue to deconstruct the mechanisms behind it. Only then can Nicole Peters's vision of adaptive resistance be fulfilled through a legitimized picture of Thompson's own feminist Austen.

As a further disclaimer, I acknowledge that it would be unfair to suggest that the *JAH* scholars have any ill intention in striking down Thompson and her film; I'm suggesting neither that nor the prevalence of some rampant hermeneutic arrogance among scholarly readership in and around the JASNA. Rather, what is important to note is that this subgroup shares a similar guiding belief for how adaptation should be considered, that being the essentialist lens. A useful exploration of these kinds of guiding principles of interpretation can be found in Stanley Fish's book *Is There a Text in This Class?*, where he outlines one way readers participate in constructing a story as they consume a text. Fish posits that all readers approach any text with their own individual and pre-established sets of interpretive strategies, strategies which lead them to notice specific and distinct elements of the text's construction as well as understand those elements differently than others may. Ultimately, then, Fish argues that there is not really a

single, true version of a text but rather merely one unique rendering of a story in each reader's own mind (342-343). It is easy to see the connection between Fish's theory of reading and Elliot/Cutchins's rejection of essentialism, as Fish too seems to undermine whether a sole essence of a text even exists at all. In this sense, the arguments within *JAH* articles are to be understood as grounded in each author's individual interpretive strategies; it can be assumed that one of these strategies must give great rhetorical weight to Austen's satire of marriage systems as servicing her feminist themes, and thus these critics have established a version of *Sense and Sensibility* in their minds where romantic conventions are frowned upon.

Though these strategies are individualized, that does not mean interpreters cannot agree or, at the very least, have enough similarities between their own renderings of texts that said interpretations are compatible with one another. Fish calls these groups of like-minded readers *interpretive communities* (482). It is reasonable to assume that the collective sense of a proto-feminist Austen can be explained as the individual scholars of the mid-nineties functioning as one of these interpretive communities. Given that they approach the original and adapted *Sense and Sensibility* with similar interpretive principles, it is unsurprising how they manage to have pictures of the novel's feminism which can co-exist together, thereby reaffirming their own understandings while also making them more confident in discrediting any contradictory interpretations. It then follows that Thompson's adaptation should not be considered an objective misrepresentation of the novel's arguments against marital romance; it is more accurate to say that her conception of the novel which produced the adaptation simply lies outside of the realm of the plausible readings that make up the scholarly subgroup of readership. The next logical step, therefore, is to consider what different interpretive strategies could have guided Thompson's experience of *Sense and Sensibility* to produce a union between feminism and

romance, which seemingly struck a chord with another distinct interpretive community of popular fans who agreed with this new approach.

It would be difficult for anyone to claim a completely correct picture of Emma Thompson's principles as a reader; some principles might even be consciously unknown to Thompson herself. That said, it is worth inferring towards her general values as an interpreter and artist for the sake of constructing a clearer conception of the story she translated to the screen. During a 2017 visit to her alma mater, Newham College of the University of Cambridge, Thompson spoke about her primary lens for navigating media which combines her encounters with feminist theories during her college years as well as her interest in comedy throughout her career. She even recounted an anecdote about how her failed comedy series caught the attention of a *Sense and Sensibility* producer—presumably Lindsay Doran—who consequently offered her the screenwriter role ("Emma Thompson"). These ideas of humor and female experience are related to another statement made by Thompson during an interview with the Chicago Tribune just one month after the film's release, where she praises Austen's as a "great ironist and a great satirist," specifically in how the writer treats her vast cast of characters (Fort Worth). In fact, Thompson's central focus on feminism and comedy likely explains why she is drawn to Austen's irony, which many critics have concluded to be an essential rhetorical construction for deploying her feminist messaging and doing so in an engaging way. As Nora Nachumi—another *JAH* critic—puts it, the text of *Sense and Sensibility* in particular is filled with ironic narration which "exposes the social structures" that create struggles for women (131). Surprisingly, it seems at first glance that the romantic moves of the film and Thompson's own appreciation of Austen's feminist satire are at odds with one another. After all, this has been the argument outlined by the film's most dominant critics. So how did Thompson utilize similar guiding principles that

recognized this irony while still envisioning the story's capacity for heightened romance? The dilemma suggests an interpretation of the novel that considers the feminist weight of Austen's satirical voice yet allows the romance of Elinor and Marriane's marriages to actually become part of the text's feminism. Such a reading would help characterize the interpretive frameworks of not just Thompson, but also the popular fans that her film spawned.

Allow me to propose one such reading of *Sense and Sensibility* which borrows from the scholarly readership's conception of Austen's irony yet conversely gives stronger interpretive influence to how the character interactions accompanied by the ironic voice differ from the character interactions where this ironic voice is notably absent. The majority of Austen's more mocking tones are reserved for passing judgment on the marriages between the minor characters of the novel, which indeed produces a similar kind of resistance to eighteenth-century systems of marriage as is interpreted commonly by scholars as feminist argument. Many of these resistances are built upon moments of wit that highlight how traditional relationships proved dissatisfying for women. For example, in observing how Lady Middleton's plainly domestic lifestyle has truncated her capacity for unique personal interests or pleasures, the narrative voice surmises, "she had nothing to say one day that she had not said the day before" (42). This same voice satirizes many of the other marriages which surround Elinor and Marianne, as if to give them a picture of how their female identity may be squandered by patriarchal marital strictures: John and Fanny Dashwood have little in common, save for their avarice born from the financial pressures of England's high society, and Mrs. Palmer lives in denial of her husband's acute disdain for her, which originates in his naive decision to marry for beauty alone. Marriage under these poor contexts often forces women to compromise their morality, happiness, or their sense of individuality, and Austen employs scathing ironic criticism through the narrative voice to pull

back the curtain on this reality. In doing so, *Sense and Sensibility* manages to push against the pre-established definitions of womanhood in a way that models standard feminist values.

It might seem as though I am only further strengthening the "antiromance argument" of the novel as understood by the scholarly interpretive community (Kaplan 405). In fact, many of these essays follow the structure I've just outlined before extending their application of Austen's feminism to create arguments for the unsuitability of Brandon and Edward as romantic partners. They assume that, since Austen uses the narrative voice to allude to the men's inadequacies—for instance, Samuelian's belief that their stiffness translates to some kind of "passionlessness" (155)—then their unions to the Dashwood sisters must be another link in the chain of disappointments for the female marriage experience. Any romantic aspect of these relationships is thus undermined by this feminist appeal, allowing Austen's critique of subjugating marriages to also exist as a critique of the romantic lures and tropes which pervade them.

However, as Fish has helped suggest, this understanding must be predicated on giving more interpretive attention to the men's faults, leaving less space to consider the moments in which Austen affirms their marriages to Elinor and Marianne with a sincere voice. In fact, it is common for the ironic voice to be temporarily suspended when constructing images of Brandon and Edward; a leitmotif which upholds this effect is the novel's repeated references to the good hearts of these men within those genuine appeals. Contrary to the *JAH* scholars, this pattern implies that, at least to some degree, these men demonstrate their worthiness as romantic partners, a worthiness that particularly stands out against the established satirical backdrop of other undesirable marital dynamics. More importantly, as the marriage plot takes center stage in the final pages of the novel, consider the way the narrator—which has displayed its potential for ironic critique—instead reflects on Elinor and Edward's engagement without wit:

> They were brought together by mutual affection, with the warmest approbation of their real friends; their intimate knowledge of each other seemed to make their happiness certain—and they only wanted something to live upon. (261)

One might even argue that a rare endorsement of romance is detectable here, or at the very least an approval of this particular relationship. The way Austen's prose positions Elinor and Edward as having identical feelings, as finding happiness in their similar treatment of one another, helps demonstrate a foundation of equality within their relationship. It is distinctly opposite to the kind of union the narration's feminist razor has been tearing apart throughout the other sections of the text. Soon after this moment, the same language ties a bow around the romantic dynamic between Marianne and Brandon as well (266). These ending marriages do not only evoke happy emotions from the young women themselves, but the narrative voice can be read as legitimizing this romance-induced joy. It is as though sincerity is used to clarify the feminist lens with a footnote that demonstrates how love in marriage can contribute positively to a woman's circumstances, so long as her desires for equity and personal fulfillment are delivered upon.

Within this interpretation, the feminist irony which captivates many *Sense and Sensibility* readers, including Thompson, can indeed coexist with heterosexual romance in certain situations. It is a unique understanding of the novel's feminism which both satisfies Thompson's recognition of Austen's amusing satire while still rationalizing how Thompson can emphasize romance in her film without straying from a feminist argument. Furthermore, it is reasonable to suggest that some version of this interpretation of the novel directed Thompson's adaptive choices in her screenplay, but to further solidify this connection, some attention can be dedicated to analyzing how this different feminism manifests within the film itself. After all, the thematic

takeaways from this film greatly influenced how the popular subculture of Austen would understand the novel in the following decades, so the adaptation's themes bear fleshing out.

Austen's irony as translated to the screen is most closely represented by the film's overall sense of humor, which should not come as a surprise given Thompson's established identity as a comedic artist. Just as the satirical tone of the novel critiques the flaws of the minor-character marriages, so too does the film employ amusing critique to interrogate the quality of their relationships, with a specific interest in how the social systems around them might have contributed to these moral and personal falterings. In short, the audience is encouraged to laugh at the characters who can be reasonably criticized. Arguably, this first kind of laugh is at the expense of Fanny Dashwood, whose complicated dismantling of John's promises to his late father of supporting his half-sisters suggests the amusing extent of her selfishness. This biting comedy tells the audience who they should not identify with. The same can be said of the Palmers, who also become the butt-end of several jokes in Thompson's screenplay, typically when Mr. Palmer puts his wife down, making the audience very aware of the imperfect marital archetype the two represent—complete opposites who do not even seem to enjoy one another's company. By employing comedy in this way, Thompson adheres to the interpretive model constructed above, allowing her to highlight behaviors within heterosexual relationships which appear unfavorable for both the women of the era and the women in the audience. As Thompson sees it, the overall interplay of "love and money" within the film helps communicate the anti-feminist politic of the setting that typically leads both men and women to end up in flawed marriages (255). She not only suggests that women like Fanny or Mrs. Palmer deserve some ridicule, but more importantly she implies that it is unfair socioeconomic pressures which formed these women's flaws, similar to how modern societal expectations continue to alter the behaviors

of today's women. Thus, Thompson's adaptation of irony helps establish a harmful yet relatable social norm which often disrupts a positive experience of womanhood, a norm that can then be overturned by the more satisfactory love exemplified by the story's primary couples.

Admittedly, the more reservedly described 'mutual affection' between the Dashwoods and their husbands receives a more dramatic evolution on screen, but the guiding interpretation of Austen's romantic sincerity still manifests within the film. The emphasis remains on satisfying the female agent through the increased quality of her male counterpart with whom she is permitted to be intensely attracted to, even if those standards have been slightly updated to meet the demands of a '90s crowd. For instance, Demory provides insight into the growing popularity of the "female gaze" across the turn of the century (142). Where the male gaze had more commonly put women's attractiveness on voyeuristic display for male audiences, this emerging reversal aimed to validate the female perspective of the world, such as destigmatizing their expression of physical attraction. The 'behind the scenes' bonus feature on the film's DVD shows Thompson being well aware of this female gaze in how she plays into male attractiveness within feminine romance fantasies. She describes Colonel Brandon as "the man of all our dreams" and the devilishly handsome Willoughby as "sex [arriving]" into the scene (Special Treats). Though some feminist critics, like Samuelian and Dickson feel that Austen's stories are no place for exploring the female gaze, going so far as to suggest it is solely included for commercial appeal, another way to read this adaptive choice is as a modification of Austen's sincere romance. Mutual affection is given an added element of mutual attraction, with the normalization of feminine interests through a male-dominated medium serving as an evolved version of the novel's feminism. After all, why shouldn't a well-rounded romantic satisfaction of Elinor and Marianne include some sense of physical attraction to the men they marry? Thompson

manages to raise this question herself by utilizing her own interpretive strategies to understand the primary marriages within *Sense and Sensibility* in a way distinct from that of the scholarly interpretive community.

To do Thompson justice, however, it feels necessary to add that creating handsome leading men is not the only satisfaction of the female gaze that the film feels is important to a neo-feminist rendering of the novel. Take for instance, the narrative space devoted to setting up a strong bond between Edward and Margaret, the youngest Dashwood sister. In Thompson's adaptation, Margaret becomes a tomboy-ish girl with a passion for geography who voices many explicit complaints about the role of women in 18th century society. When Edward first comes to Norland, Margaret retreats under a reading table in the library, and he intentionally makes incorrect observations about a nearby atlas to draw her out from hiding. This begins a friendship between the two, and Elinor is shown smiling through the window as her sister and her object of romantic interest engage in mock sword fighting. The suggestion is a seemingly uncontroversial one: women deserve the quality of men who are able to get along with their family. Austen herself alludes to this positive aspect of romantic pairings with the "strong family affection" and "constant communication" between the Dashwood sisters and their family even after they are married (269). Though Thompson's imagining of the Edward/Margaret relationship is not present in the source text, it is an elaboration which heightens similar elements of romantic sincerity in the novel and can be interpreted as another way the screenwriter preserves romance in spite of the ironic framework. In this way, the 1995 film actually develops upon Austen's proto-feminist concepts by permitting a kind of romance catered to the demands of women within their heterosexual relationships, not the demands of men.

Thus far, we have investigated the likely interpretive principles which directed both Thompson and her critics to arrive at different feminist understandings of *Sense and Sensibility*, even estimating an interpretation of the novel which acts as a bridge between some elements of Thompson's artistic approach and some observable qualities within the film itself. The interpretive community which encapsulates the scholarly readership of Austen has established itself as having a strong influence on what sorts of interpretations of novels like *Sense and Sensibility* are acceptable. That said, the positive reception of the 1995 film among popular audiences would help unite a secondary subculture behind the specific interpretive values which the film encapsulated, including its marrying of feminism and romance. The reality of this effect can be detected in how popular fans of *Sense and Sensibility* engaged intertextually with the film and the novel in their own adaptations. In the following section, I resituate this exploration of conflicting feminist discourse in one of the primary spaces that popular fans of Austen operate within, that being online forums dedicated to fanfiction. I consider the intertextuality between these fan-created works and Thompson's film and how it contributed to the modern relationship between Jane Austen and feminist values within this popular interpretive community.

II. Fanfiction and Feminism: A Flustered Fantasy

The recent history of the Jane Mania that swelled in the years following the release of the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility* is far too vast and complex to be fully presented here. A small tip of this iceberg is continuously referenced in much of the already cited scholarship, that being the particular rhetorical importance of Joe Wright's 2005 version of *Pride and Prejudice,* possibly the most recognizable and beloved Austen adaptation among fans who view her stories through the lenses of pleasure and pop culture. However, for our purposes here, I turn to Sarah Glosson

to provide some context on how digital spaces of fan-created works became one of the main powerhouses of Austen engagement and reimaginings.

In section three of her book *Performing Jane: A Cultural History of Jane Austen Fandom*, Glosson describes how Austen's screen adaptations became important touchstones for the community of popular fans, and as the digital age brought about new ways for this fandom to mingle with one another, they managed to establish their own traditions of interpretation which were intricately linked to these adaptations (125-141). An example of this is 'wet-shirt Darcy' a sort of inside joke among *Pride and Prejudice* fans based off of their sexual attraction to Colin Firth's portrayal of the character in the 1995 BBC Mini-series, in which his muscular physique is revealed to Elizabeth—and the audience—after his white shirt is soaked by water (Demory 139). Like any media that is invited into the fanfiction spaces like Archive of Our Own [AO3] or Fanfiction.net, *Sense and Sensibility* received extensions and re-presentations of scenes from both the novel and film, and given this intertextual foundation, it seems fair to refer to these fanfictions as themselves adaptations—and therefore interpretations—of the original text. Like Thompson's film, they offer insight into the conceptions of the story held by their anonymous authors and are representative of the interpretive beliefs of those within their interpretive community of popular readership.

In general, these fanfiction spaces have not been seriously considered by the academy until recently. This is likely due to how their lack of respect for Austen's narrative authority, as well as their predilection for "representations of romance" (Glosson 157), directly conflict with the established values among the scholarly readership of her novels. Given the aforementioned relationship between Austen and female romance, it is perhaps relevant to note that, though many of these authors use anonymous usernames, Glosson clarifies that both the writers and

readers of fanfiction tend to be young women. That said, the numbers from these digital spaces alone act as strong measures of engagement which legitimize their influence on the *Sense and Sensibility* discourse. At the time of writing, AO3 alone hosts around 3,800 stories tagged as inspired by one of Austen's six novels (*Archive of Our Own*).[2] The most popular piece of fanfiction under the *Sense and Sensibility* tag, *At Last* by user DC_Fitzpatrick, runs over 300,000 words and has been viewed almost 65,000 times. For the purposes of this paper, I have selected a handful of less lengthy fanfictions—or *fics*—in order to gain better insight into any feminist themes these adaptations express and how those might be connected to Thompson's film. These fics were all completed within the last six years: *Sense and Fascination* by user DC_Fitzpatrick, *There is Nothing Lost* by Mysticalpapaya, and *Evermore* by Thepocketsizedauthor.

Establishing a general intertextual connection between the 1995 film adaptation and these fanfictions is rather simple; one need only consider the matching iconography. In some instances, the film-specific renderings of certain mise-en-scène elements, such as costumes or props, make appearances in the fanfiction texts. For instance, *Sense and Fascination* repurposes the striking images unique to Thompson's interpretation, most notably Margaret's ornamental treehouse and Brandon's red army jacket that serves as his wedding attire (DC_Fitzpatrick). That said, an even clearer insight into the minds of these fan authors is accessible thanks to AO3's unique chapter notes feature, which allows writers a way to comment on their own unfolding work between chapters. This is a place for numerous confessions about the inspiring capacity of the 1995 film. Both *Sense and Fascination* and *There is Nothing Lost* actually note this connection before either of their texts even begin, each paying particular homage to Alan Rickman's performance as Colonel Brandon, which makes sense given that these stories explore

[2] The breakdown by specific novel is as follows: *Pride and Prejudice*, 2667 stories; *Persuasion*, 466; *Emma*, 409; *Sense and Sensibility*, 332; *Mansfield Park*, 255; *Northanger Abbey*, 218.

the romance between him and Marianne. In fact, the actors' portrayal of each character plays a critical role in how these authors fundamentally envision said characters; Fitzpatrick writes, "I see Colonel Brandon as Alan Rickman, Marianne as Kate [Winslet], and so on" (Fitzpatrick). Glosson's claim that "the visual, embodied nature of [Austen] adaptations inspire and infuse fan writing" does indeed hold up for *Sense and Sensibility* (148). These texts, like any adaptive work, are exploring new understandings of Austen's novel by their very nature as adaptations, and yet these connections to the film make it clear how Thompson's own interpretation of the story has influenced theirs. Additionally, it is not a far leap to assume that this individual influence extends to the greater interpretive community of popular *Sense and Sensibility* readership/fandom, as it is either believed by the authors that their audience is aware of the film as an intertext, or at the very least, they make efforts to ensure everyone is on the same page.

If the more practical elements like character and visuals of the fanfiction have direct ties to Thompson's film, then it would be expected that the thematic moves of these fan works also have some sort of relation to the film's themes. Perhaps one of the most interesting ideas to tackle—or at the very least, the most difficult to ignore—is how the selected fics adapt Austen and Thompson's sincere romance with a more sexualized spin. To anyone familiar with the conventions of fanfiction, this should not be too surprising, as the medium has come to be known for its sexually explicit scenes which are enjoyed by readers who lovingly label it *smut*. That said, not all communities are so open-minded. The Republic of Pemberley, an Austen club similar to the JASNA, prohibits any sexual content from their own collection of curated, fan-created works (Glosson 154-155). The generic conventions of the Austen's canon, which is particularly meaningful to a scholarly readership, can be seen limiting what ideas are compatible with Austen's texts. Admittedly, this is a bold direction for the story of *Sense and Sensibility*, but

there is much value in the advice of Robert Stam, who broaches these strong disparities between adaptations and their source texts as a way of tapping into some contemporary "social unconscious" (247). In the case of these selected fanfictions, we are able to see modern feminist values emerging from not simply the sheer arrival of sex into the story but pointedly from the kind of sex that the adapted Marianne experiences. More specifically, the sexual patterns in these narratives that explore the post-novel happenings of Marianne and Brandon's relationship, can be summarized by two primary qualities: a female figure who discovers her sexual liberation and a male figure who is invested in the woman's sexual satisfaction.

In Mysticalpapaya's *There is Nothing Lost,* the marriage bed notably becomes a space for Marianne to discard her negative assumptions about sex and instead discover an unexpected happiness. Take, for instance, this moment of focalized narration:

> A shiver ran through Marianne at the sensation [Brandon] had just given her; her head came off the mattress to look at him wide-eyed. Was this. . .what being with a man should feel like? Every indication she had ever been given suggested the act was a chore, something that must be done. Never had she expected [him] to create these sensations inside her. (Mysticalpapaya)

Clearly present here is Papaya's conception of nineteenth-century heterosexual intercourse as repressing the sexuality of women by positioning the male as the only participant for whom it is expected to experience pleasure in sex. It is not the social norm for women to enjoy the same satisfaction. However, the text suggests a divergence from this patriarchal structure, to the point where Marianne is surprised by her own audible expressions of pleasure, for they are "not ladylike in the slightest" (Mysticalpapaya). Marianne knows she is breaking social conventions of civility by this degree of enjoyment, but she is able to do so in a space of comfort. A similar

sentiment is captured within Thepocketsizedauthor's *Evermore,* where Marianne follows up her first sexual experience with a fervent inquiry as to when she and Brandon might lie together again, an unconventional feminine enthusiasm for sex which is affirmed by the Colonel (Thepocketsized). These fanfics, and likely the parts of the popular readership which they brush up against, therefore understand Marianne's marriage as a subversive space where she can indulge in her sexuality in a way that is liberating as opposed to shameful.

The other key quality of these scenes is how Brandon's unique disposition continues to disrupt the traditional pitfalls of heterosexual experiences, further establishing him as a worthy romantic partner for Marianne. Pocketsized frames this element rather explicitly: "Perhaps unlike other men of his standing, the pleasure of his wife was something he felt a need to provide" (Thepocketsized). In this adaptation, Brandon himself seems to be aware of the little attention paid to feminine sexual pleasure, and he has strong convictions to go against this grain. Papaya too develops upon this masculine awareness through Brandon's interior monologue which describes his intense desire for Marianne "to be as comfortable as possible with every step" of their sexual exploration (Mysticalpapaya). Moments like these seem to be tailored to the female gaze in a similar way to Thompson's depiction of romance. The characterization of the couple's sex aims to both acknowledge and subvert the traditional sexual problems for women—not just avoiding displeasurable, chore-like sex, but importantly creating situations where her goals of feminine satisfaction and consent are readily shared and respected by the man. The specialness of Brandon as a romantic partner, which is outlined in the romance-permitting interpretation of the novel and executed in Thompson's film, is thereby granted another layer in these fanfictions.

Keeping in line with Stam's interest in the social unconscious, it does not require a large logical leap to detect how the fanfiction's resistance to 18th century subjugations of women are

still relevant to how some experience sex and sexuality in the modern world, which might be understood as further informing how fan writers deploy Austen's story in a way that generates this kind of feminine fantasy. The fanfiction makes it clear that, when the interpretive power is placed in the hands of a perhaps less respected interpretive community, like the popular Austen fandom, they are still able to create new and meaningful understandings from texts like *Sense and Sensibility*. It is a unique understanding that addresses relevant yet original questions about how sex functions within the kind of romantic *and* feminist relationships desired by women of both the novel's contemporary culture as well as the culture of the fanfiction itself.

And it is fair to argue that Emma Thompson helped give these fan writers this power. Of course, the 1995 film does not include sexual content; the only moment of physical affection the film offers is when Edward kisses Elinor's hand tenderly during Marianne and Brandon's wedding, as the lip kiss that Thompson and Hugh filmed was cut from the movie's final version. Instead, I believe that the intertextuality between film and fanfic suggests that Thompson's aforementioned blending of romantic and feminist themes introduced different interpretive possibilities for *Sense and Sensibility* that had not been possible due to the guiding principles of the scholarly interpretive community around the text. Her unique rendering of the story thrived in the film medium, and joined the conversation alongside other similar adaptations which helped spread a fresh set of interpretive strategies for approaching Austen's novels that, though difficult for some to accept, instead carved out a new interpretive community of popular readership. The film's version of feminism made it more reasonable for female audiences to apply the story of *Sense and Sensibility* as a means of exploring the intersections between maintaining a strong female identity while still indulging in romantic fantasies that are perfectly,

including sexual ones. It produced a powerful community of readers with similar interpretations of the story, and importantly, assured the reasonableness of those new interpretations.

What is vital about *Sense and Sensibility* fanfiction then, is how its themes of sexuality through a female gaze signify the popular community's desire to iterate upon these romantic interpretations that Thompson made both plausible and pleasurable. It is just as Peters concludes towards the end of her essay: "Austen fanfictions break down the barriers between readers and texts not only through developing community but also by challenging hermeneutics and the process of reading" (87). The sexual explorations within the fanfiction ultimately pioneer ways of reading the novel which exist outside the interpretive barriers of the scholarly authority, and in doing so, allow already established beliefs about the feminist Austen to evolve within this new territory. Thompson's film then is not responsible for destroying what made Austen's feminist arguments so impactful; it is only guilty of being an intellectual tool that made the questions *Sense and Sensibility* already asks about feminine and masculine dynamics more complex.

Conclusion: For More Malleability

This outcome of complexity is the rhetorical backbone of the relationship between audience, adaptation, and interpretation—whether some scholars approve or not. Though this is far from a place to unpack the intricacies of feminism as an ideology, the general assumption that feminist principles have been, and continue to be, in flux is as safe a statement as it is significant. Like feminism, so too has Austen persisted as a contentious point along the spectrum of valued literature, and her vastly different breeds of readerships is a testament to this fact. As a result, it is easy for one to fall back on their own interpretations of her novels, thus preserving the clarity and simplicity as to how a text such as *Sense and Sensibility* might establish its relationship to

relevant cultural themes like feminist ideology. However, as displayed by the evolution of Thompson's interpretative resistance into a bustling community of like-minded readers and writers, the act of maintaining an open mind to multiple avenues of understanding—even for seemingly sacred classics like Austen—increases a reader's chance of expanding their access to this complex nexus of various understandings.

I use the term nexus here specifically to evoke a final touchstone of adaptation studies, that being Annette Svensson's framework of the *text universe*, a term referring to the intricate and ever-expanding web of understanding that an interpreter has for any given story (47). *Sense and Sensibility*, its innovative adaptations, and its discordant responses, display not just the inevitability but also the rhetorical value of expanding one's text universe. Both the scholarly and popular communities of Austen create distinct yet intelligent interpretations of her novels, thereby contributing to the growth of the feminist lens that inhabits the *Sense and Sensibility* text universe for those who interact with said novels—and for that reason alone, they are incredibly valuable. Equally important is how Thompson's 1995 film demonstrates the key function that adaptation can play in diversifying the perspectives possible within the nexus. It is demonstrative of a necessary system that supports our intellectual maturing as readers of novels and watchers of film. All that is required of the audience is to temporarily set aside their own guiding interpretive strategies and give themselves over to another reimagining of Austen's malleable first text.

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Appendix

Presentation given at the SPU Honors Research Symposium 2024 on May 18th, 2024.

Title of Panel: "Creative Process & Processive Creativity"

Thank you, Cameron, for sharing your phenomenal tunes with us! And thank you again to everyone for staying tuned in while we continue to explore the exciting complexities of peoples' creative processes. If you will allow me to pivot back to the realm of literature, I'd like to introduce you to a little underground writer named Jane Austen.

Though it might not be her most iconic work, *Sense and Sensibility* is Austen's first published novel, written at the tail end of the 18th century and then published in 1811. The story follows two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. After their father's death, which passes all of their inheritance to their stingy half-brother, the two must reinstate their financial security through marriage. Elinor is commonly understood as the novel's *sense*; she relies on her emotional restraint to navigate the difficulties of securing a future with the awkward-yet-kind Edward Ferrars. On the other hand, Marianne's destructive *sensibility* rages on, until she manages to settle down with the coldly compassionate Colonel Brandon. And so, the narrative closes on two happy couples; the sisters are emotionally and financially secure, and they are living just a short walk from one another. If we fast forward two hundred years or so, another artistic achievement would be produced. On June 24th, 2018, Archive of Our Own user Mysticalpapaya would post the first chapter of what would become a sixty-thousand-word text entitled "There is Nothing Lost," a piece of fanfiction that imagines the post-marriage romance between Marianne and Brandon; and yes, our friend Papaya takes the opportunity to describe every detail—including the spicy ones.

This abrupt juxtaposition might raise a perfectly natural response—um, how the heck did we get here?—and that's a question that I will offer one potential answer to. Specifically, my Honors Project investigates this peculiar act of adaptation by exploring the interpretive conflict around *Sense and Sensibility* and its most popular reimagining, that being the 1995 film from screenwriter Emma Thompson. I pay particular attention to the controversial interplay between romance and feminism which has relentlessly fueled the discourse around this adaptation for almost thirty years.

But before we can analyze these texts, I should get us on the same page as to how to think about the reading process altogether. There is much to learn when we contextualize the *Sense and Sensibility* discourse through the lens of Stanley Fish's concept of the *interpretive community*. Simply put, Fish believes that the process of reading narrative begins with each individual reader's guiding principles of interpretation, which they will consciously or unconsciously follow while they construct their own understanding of a story. For example, I may have a background in studying ecology, and therefore I might give more attention to a novel's natural descriptions when I construct what that story means. On this basis, Fish argues that there really is no *true text*; there is only the version of the story in my head that is the result of my deployed interpretive strategies.

Despite this idiosyncratic process, a collection of readers may share similar enough guiding principles so that they end up with versions of the story that are compatible with one another. In that moment, they form an *interpretive community*. There are two such readerships of Jane Austen which map onto this *interpretive community* model in easily observable ways, and ways that are relevant to our investigation into the *Sense and Sensibility* discourse. At the risk of sounding reductive, they can be best summarized as:

1. The high-culture-adjacent academic critics who are known to put Austen's writerly authority first.
2. The pop-culture-adjacent readers, more closely associated with fandom, with their passion for Austen's touching romances. (This includes our friend Papaya)

Now there is a complicated history between these two communities, but what's important to note is their inability to agree on a single version of Austen's stories; often it is the scholarly group who places themself intellectually above the popular one. Regardless, those previously mentioned ideas from Stanley Fish tell us that there is likely some vital difference in guiding principles that has produced such a discordant discourse between these two readerships.

Which brings us to this book—*Jane Austen in Hollywood*—a collection of essays from various critics that discussed six film and television adaptations of Austen's novels which premiered for audiences throughout 1995 and 1996. Inside are many reactions to Thompon's *Sense and Sensibility*, but one of the key trends is a general dissatisfaction with the sentimental framing that the movie creates around the story's romantic pairings. For the *JAH* critics, this romance interrupts the feminist themes originally in the novel. Thompon's Elinor—whom she actually portrays on-screen—supposedly loses her feminist vitality due to how she breaks from her strategic emotional repression. And Marianne—played by Kate Winslet—has an inflated affection for Brandon which displays a post-feminist compliance with heterosexual marriage conventions. And Hugh Grant and Alan Rickman's embodiments of Edward and Brandon respectively are all-around far too romantically appealing. These critiques from the *JAH* scholars embody the scholarly subsection of Austen interpreters; they present a version of *Sense and Sensibility* in which Austen's feminist arguments are built upon an opposition to marital systems and conventions—and as such, Thompson's romantic pleasure simply does not belong.

Now, one of the main interpretive principles from these academics is probably already clear: they subscribe to a kind of feminist theory which views heterosexual romance as a threat to feminist values or agendas, like maintaining a complete female agency. That said, there is a second principle that we can infer from these *JAH* writers; they seem to think that Austen's artistic intention should have been preserved in Thompson's film. It is an endorsement of adaptation as a fidelity-focused endeavor. Sure, this was common in adaptation studies of the twentieth century, but recent scholars like Kamilla Elliot have begun to critique this approach as a kind of *textual essentialism*, a fixation on whether the adaptive text 'remained true' to the source text. Elliot, and others like her, argue that this belief severely limits the rhetorical potential of adaptation as a creative process that can make new meanings. Another voice, that of Denis Cutchins, reminds us that this essential, authorial truth is completely unknowable in actuality, a claim that goes hand-in-hand Stanley Fish's individualized, constructive reading process. In this sense, despite what the scholarly interpretive community may believe, it's possible that there is no single, Austenian intent for an adaptation to encapsulate after all.

So, if all that we are left with are interpretive strategies, then it would be worth asking what are Thompson's own guiding principles as a reader and artist. Of course, this is something difficult to know for sure, but making some inferences will bring us closer to discerning what version of *Sense and Sensibility* she translated to the screen, a version which influenced many popular fans. In a handful of interviews, Thompson emphasizes her identity as a feminist, one which she cultivated while reading feminist writers as a college student. Additionally, she highlights her role as a distinctly female comic in much of the art she creates, a belief she connects to her perception of Austen as "a great ironist and a great satirist." Surprisingly, these ideas of humor and feminine experience do not initially take us off course from how the *JAH*

critics understand Austen's writing style; they too love *Sense and Sensibility*'s ironic narrative voice, which is often deployed as a tool for dismantling the contemporary social structures that create struggles for women. Though Thompson seems to be using similar guiding principles as the scholars, it is important to remember that one major change: Thompson saw within the novel the story's capacity for sentimental romantic heights. This point of contention, along with her implied guiding principles, suggests that Thompson developed an interpretation of the novel which recognized the feminist weight of Austen's satirical voice while still allowing the romance within Elinor and Marianne's marriages to become a part of the story's feminism.

Allow me to propose one such reading of the source text, one that is simpler than you might expect. The cleanest way to uphold Austen's irony *and* provide space for indulgent romance is to pay attention to which character interactions are accompanied by the ironic voice as opposed to the ones where said voice is notably absent. In fact, the ironic voice mainly frames moments where traditional marriage systems have resulted in some kind of dissatisfaction for the female agent. A favorite example of mine concerns side-character Lady Middleton, who is positioned as a victim of her monotonous domestic lifestyle that has rendered her with "nothing to say one day that she had not said the day before." But still, this ironic voice is typically suspended during instances that emphasize the quality—often the *unique* quality—of Edward and Brandon as romantic companions for the Dashwood sisters. As the marriage plot takes center stage at the end of the novel, Austen earnestly reflects on the ending unions as founded on a "mutual affection" and "intimate knowledge" which make happiness a certain outcome for Elinor and Marianne. It is delivered with an alternative, more sincere voice that almost clarifies that, though *Sense and Sensibility* can sometimes wield an anti-marital razor, the story does

admit that love within marriage structures can still contribute positively to a woman's life, provided that her desires for equity and personal fulfillment are delivered upon.

This is an interpretation that, in theory, lines up with how Thompson could have perceived the novel, but to further strengthen its plausibility, we must consider how this new feminist hermeneutic manifests within the movie itself. It should come as no surprise that the novel's irony shows up on screen as the film's overall sense of humor, and that humor serves a similar function of critiquing the flaws within the marriages between the narrative's minor characters. We are given chances to make fun of couples like Mr. & Mrs. Palmer or John & Fanny, and in doing so, we recognize how the unfair socioeconomic pressure has created marital behaviors that are amusingly disappointing, for instance Fanny's melodramatic levels of greed. Moments of humor like this complement our Thompson-inspired interpretive model by establishing a negative social norm that the film can then undercut through the more preferable romance between the story's main couples.

Admittedly, the 'mutual affection' between the Dashwoods and their husbands receive a more dramatic evolution on screen. That said—in line with our interpretive model—an emphasis remains on the goal of constructing marriages in which a high-quality male counterpart satisfies the female agent. The film perhaps updates these standards for a '90s crowd, often by playing to a female gaze which foregrounds the sex appeal of Brandon and Edward, something that Thompson even admits was intentional—and can you blame her? Though seemingly hollow, I think what is actually happening here is a development upon Austen's 'mutual affection' that mattered to the feminine experience; Thompson has expanded it to include a 'mutual attraction' as well, catering to the female gaze while attempting to normalize it. That said, these feminine appeals do push past physical attraction to include other characteristics of romantic relationships

that are typically considered important to women. For instance, the ‘95 film fleshes out a strong bond between Edward and Margaret, the youngest Dashwood sister, much to Elinor’s delight. The resulting suggestion is seemingly an uncontroversial one: women not only deserve but are more satisfied by a man who can get along with their family. Yes, this element is not in the novel, it is an act of Thompson’s imagination, but it can be understood as an elaboration of the similar tone of romantic sincerity in Austen’s text. Thus, in spite of the ironic framework, sentimentality is preserved and ultimately becomes part of the movie’s own feminist ideas. Thompson develops upon Austen’s proto-feminist concepts by permitting a kind of heterosexual romance catered to the demands of women, not the demands of men.

When we consider Thompson’s interpretive approach and the choices in her screenplay, we can detect a version of *Sense and Sensibility* that departs from the conventional interpretation held dear by scholars like the *JAH* critics, and this new version is achieved by marrying together the story’s feminist irony with its attention to female romantic satisfaction. What becomes more interesting, though, is the ripple effect of Thompson’s film; the positive reception among popular audiences would in some ways unite a secondary subculture behind her version of the story. Though interpretive influence may be hard to measure, we can detect the real-world effects in the way the pop-culture oriented readership engaged intertextually with the story, linking together the novel, the film, and their own adaptations: the wild-west of internet fanfiction.

In her book *Performing Jane: A Cultural History of the Jane Austen Fandom,* Sarah Glosson describes how Austen’s screen adaptations became important touchstones for this community of popular fans. And, as the digital age introduced new ways for this fandom to mingle with one another, they managed to more properly establish their own traditions of interpretation, many of which were derived from these adaptations. Currently, Archive of Our

Own—which is a major fanfiction hub—hosts around 3,800 stories tagged as inspired by one of Austen's six novels. The most popular within the *Sense and Sensibility* tag is a 300,000-word text entitled *At Last* by user DC_Fitzpatrick; it has been viewed almost 65,000 times. For my purposes, I looked at three less lengthy fics from the last six years to hopefully gain insight into what feminist themes these adaptations express and how they might be connected to Thompson's film. All three of them, including the aforementioned work by MysticalPapaya, focus on Marianne and Brandon's blossoming relationship after the events of the novel.

Establishing a basic intertextual connection between the 1995 film and these fan-works initially has two clear approaches. The first is the film-specific iconography that also appears in the fanfiction, including mise-en-scene elements like Brandon's bright-red army jacket and Margaret's ornate treehouse, both of which are sole inventions of Emma Thompson. In addition to this, we are given explicit access to the minds of these authors through Ao3's 'chapter notes feature,' a place often used to make direct references to the 1995 film. For example, one user clarifies for the reader, "I see Colonel Brandon as Alan Rickman, Marianne as Kate, and so on." These texts, like any adaptive works, explore new understandings of Austen's novel by their very nature as adaptations, and yet it is clear that Thompson's own interpretation has influenced theirs. And if the more practical elements are connected, then surely the themes are too.

And, perhaps one of the most interesting themes to tackle—or at the very least, the most difficult to ignore—is how the selected fics adapt the story's sincere romance with a more sexualized spin; for those familiar with fanfiction conventions, this should not be surprising. Though it may seem startling at first, a closer look reveals modern feminist values emerging not necessarily from the simple arrival of sex into the story but pointedly from the *kind* of sex that fanfiction-Marianne experiences.

Now, I will spare you the line-by-line specifics—though I can provide the links afterwards to anyone who would like to do some further reading. That said, the overall sexual patterns within these texts establish two primarily expectations of feminine desire. One: Marianne becomes a female figure who discovers a kind of sexual liberation. Two: Brandon is a unique male figure who is invested in and supportive of a woman's sexual satisfaction. In order to achieve these goals, the fanfiction characters often have to break social conventions which are not only associated with Austen's time period but also remain palpable in certain social contexts today. For instance, Marianne describes her own enthusiasm for sexual exploration as unladylike, and in doing so, she alludes to the norms of civility for women which persist both in and outside the bedroom. What's important is how this shame is distinctly assuaged by Brandon, who for his own part expresses an investment in Marianne's comfort and pleasure while acknowledging that his behavior is uncommon among his contemporaries. As a whole, these works craft a picture of romantic sex in marriage which is tailored to the female gaze in a way similar to Thompson's own depiction of Marianne and Brandon. The specialness of Brandon as a romantic partner, which is emphasized by the romance-permitting interpretation of the novel and executed in Thompson's film, is thereby granted another layer of meaning in these fanfictions.

With this intertextual relationship in mind, *Sense and Sensibility* fanfiction becomes an example of an important potential of the interpretive process: when the dominant interpretive power is given over to a perhaps 'less-respected' community like the popular Austen readership, those individuals manage to create new and meaningful understandings. They may have a strange surface, but it is that exact uniqueness which makes them interesting and important. In our case here, these fan writers raise original questions as to how sex functions within the kind of romantic relationships that are appealing to women of both eighteenth-century and modern

cultures. Obviously, Thompson's film never reaches this level of sexual explicitness. That said, the intense intertextuality between the fan-adaptations and her own make likely that her aforementioned blending of romantic and feminist themes introduced to a new subset of readers this different set of interpretive possibilities for *Sense and Sensibility*, and those possibilities were previously thought impossible due to how the guiding principles of the scholarly interpretive community had gate-kept the text. Thompson's distinct rendering of the story thrived in the film medium, and it joined the conversation alongside other similar adaptations which offered a fresh set of interpretive strategies for approaching the stories of Jane Austen. And though some of these ideas may be difficult for certain readers to accept, those fresh strategies helped better define and carve out space for a new interpretive community. In this sense, Thompson's film played a role in uniting this powerful community towards certain interpretations and helped assure the reasonableness of those new ideas. Her screenplay is thereby not actually responsible for destroying what made Austen's feminist arguments impactful; it is only guilty of becoming an intellectual tool that made more complex the questions that *Sense and Sensibility* already asks about the feminine experience.

This outcome of complexity is the rhetorical backbone of the relationship between audience, adaptation, and interpretation. And *Sense and Sensibility* placed within this framework helps demonstrate that investigating the 'whats' and 'whys' of artistic complexities can expose new and important understandings, understandings about our social realities and our own experiences within them. Whether we look inward at our own interpretive habits or look outward at the interpretive habits of others, we are asking questions about the creative process, and as a result we are able to engage with humanity's creative instincts in ways that make meaning and build communities. And who could forget the cherry on top: it is also just plain fun.