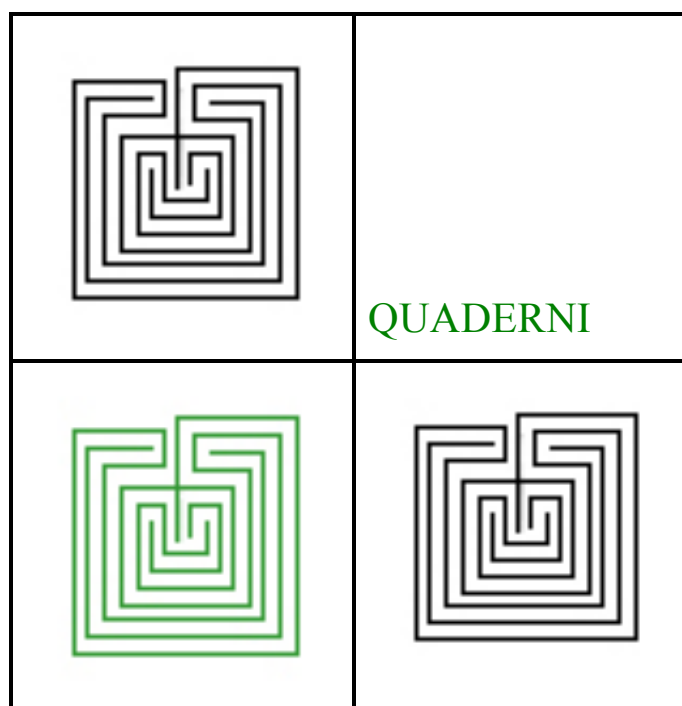


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# CONTACT ZONES

CULTURAL, LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY  
CONNECTIONS IN ENGLISH

edited by Maria Micaela Coppola,  
Francesca Di Blasio, Sabrina Francesconi



LABIRINTI 179

Università degli Studi di Trento  
Dipartimento di Lettere e Filosofia

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GRETA PERLETTI

FASHIONABLE SENSIBILITIES, FEMALE PATHOLOGY  
AND THE CONSUMPTION OF NOVELS: JANE AUSTEN'S WOMEN  
READERS IN THE CONTACT ZONE

As is well known, Louise Pratt's theorization of the «contact zone» was stimulated by the desire to investigate the complex factors that are at work when different languages and/or cultures come together. While building on the concept of «contact languages» in linguistics,<sup>1</sup> Pratt is interested in highlighting the problematic nature of the contact zone. In contrast to the idea of ideally coherent, harmonised, or «imagined» communities,<sup>2</sup> contact zones are characterised by imbalance, and can be identified as «social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other».<sup>3</sup>

By foregrounding conflict rather than cooperation, Pratt's contact zone is not so distant from Mikhail Bakhtin's «zone of contact», in which the «official line»<sup>4</sup> of authoritative discourse comes to grapple with internally persuasive discourse, engendering «a struggle against various kinds and degrees of authority».<sup>5</sup> Whereas the theatre of this Bakhtinian conflict is the individual person (or the novel's character) fighting against

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<sup>1</sup> Pratt focuses on contact languages, which are «improvised languages that develop among speakers of different native languages who need to communicate with each other consistently». M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> In the MLA speech where she first coined the concept of the «contact zone» (published as M. L. Pratt, *Arts of the Contact Zone*, «Profession», 91 [1991], pp. 33-40), Pratt addresses in particular Benedict Anderson's work on the relations between capitalism, printing and the (self-)fashioning of national communities. See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London 1983.

<sup>3</sup> M.L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> M.M Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1981, p. 345.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

external and internal discourses, Pratt brings the struggle over authority to the level of inter-cultural relations: the contact zone emerges «especially in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination»<sup>6</sup>. While the question of imbalanced relational power inherent in Pratt's «contact zone» has promoted its widespread application within post-colonial theory, this concept can be useful also to illuminate the clashes and conflicts to be found in a given culture when authoritative and non-normative discourses come together and contend with one another, in a process which can entail subjugation as well as creative resistance.

From this perspective, this paper uses the figure of the woman reader in the 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as the site for the emergence of a contact zone that brings together different types of discourse, endowed with different degrees of authority: the physiological-moral discourse that lies at the core of what G.J. Barker-Benfield has defined «the culture of sensibility»<sup>7</sup>, the medical discourse that focuses on the definition of and control over female nervous ailments, and the literary discourse to be found in some novels by Jane Austen.

### 1. *Cultures of Sensibility*

Concluding his *Essay on the Disorders of the People of Fashion* (1772), the famous Swiss physician Samuel Auguste Tissot laments the contemporary perversion of the 'natural' desire for health:

Can the inestimable benefit of health be so perfectly unknown in all orders of society, as to be scarcely desired, or what is worse, that langour [*sic*] should be as attractive as frost to the inhabitants of the Alps, or blackness to the Negro? This thoughtless excess is scarce

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<sup>6</sup> M. L. Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1992.



credible; for sure none but a malicious satyr [sic] can say that *it is not fashionable to be well*. What fashion is it but a fashion which renders it impossible to be happy, and to discharge our duty properly?<sup>8</sup>

While criticising the disdain demonstrated by people belonging to the highest ranks of society (the addressees of his essay) towards well-being, Tissot's words betray some disturbing fascination with the propensity to languor to which this class of people seems especially prone. If on the one hand inactivity and languor are clearly presented in the text as a source of pathology, on the other hand the exotic and quasi-sublime imagery that Tissot deploys – Alpine ice and dark, remote peoples and lands – actually undermines the possibility to conceive of languor in purely negative terms. Indeed, Tissot seems intrigued by the peculiar constitution belonging to «the people of fashion», and displays an ambivalent feeling towards their lifestyle, which is directly related to the ailments they suffer from. This ambivalence can be traced back to the more generally widespread 18th-century fascination with the 'fashionable' diseases<sup>9</sup> that are connected to the disorders of the nerves, the most common class of diseases affecting Tissot's wealthy patients.

After Thomas Willis's influential *Cerebri Anatome* (1664) established the importance of the brain as the 'soul organ' and maintained that the nerves provide the connection between the brain and the body, medical practitioners increasingly moved away from models based on the humours and devoted their efforts to understanding how the nerves operate in the body. In the 18th century, as the nervous system is revealed as promoting

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<sup>8</sup> S.A.D. Tissot, *An Essay on the Disorders of the People of Fashion*, Engl. transl. by F. Bacon Lee, Richardson, Urquhart, Bladon and Roson, London 1772, p. 162, italics in the text.

<sup>9</sup> See C. Lawlor, *Fashionable Melancholy*, in A. Ingram, S. Sim, C. Lawlor, R. Terry, J. Baker, L. Wetherall-Dickson (eds.), *Melancholy Experience in Literature of the Long Eighteenth Century*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke 2011, pp. 25-53.

a two-way dialogue between the body and the mind, the inside and the outside, sensibility (that is, the quality of the nerves' reaction to various stimuli) is intended as a way to measure the intensity of the individual's nervous response. George Cheyne's influential *The English Malady* (1733) compares the brain to «a finely fram'd and well-tun'd Organ-Case where all the nerves terminate»;<sup>10</sup> mobile and flexible nerves, if more delicate and impressionable, allow for the clearest sound.

The popularity of 18th-century sensibility largely depends on the concept's ability to be adapted outside medical discourse:<sup>11</sup> if not the expression of the soul, sensibility certainly foregrounds the special connection existing between the body and the mind. As Alan Richardson puts it, organic sensibility «implies a mind shaped by and realised in bodily organs, though not entirely defined by them»;<sup>12</sup> moreover, the nerves' function as the interface where the external world comes into contact with the inner conformation of the organism easily promotes the shift from medical to moral discourse, by combining (and sometimes blending together) organic sensibility and moral sympathy.

In some medical texts, the patient's moral quality appears to depend almost directly from the condition of the nerves. For Cheyne as well as for Tissot, the sensibility of the people of

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<sup>10</sup> G. Cheyne, *The English Malady: or, A Treatise of Nervous Diseases of all Kinds, as Spleen, Vapours, Lowness of Spirits, Hypochondriacal, and Hysterical Distempers*, Strahan and Leake, London 1733, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> H.M. Lloyd, *The Discourse of Sensibility: The Knowing Body in the Enlightenment*, Springer, Dordrecht 2013; W. Wild, *Medicine-by-Post: The Changing Voice of Illness in Eighteenth-Century British Consultation Letters and Literature*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2006; P. Melville Logan, *Nerves and Narratives*, University of California Press, Stanford 1997; J. Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1988; P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-83*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989; M. Simonazzi, *Il male inglese. La malinconia nella tradizione filosofica e medica dell'Inghilterra moderna*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2004.

<sup>12</sup> A. Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001, p. 71.

fashion, though predisposing their organism to a number of illnesses, is clearly superior to the obtuse if healthy body of peasants and savages, impervious not just to disease but also to sympathy and humane feelings. For Cheyne, the delicate possess elastic nerves that grant them perfect receptivity but also undermine their health, turning them into «fine Lancets or Razors, that coarse Usage will ruffle or spoil».<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Tissot seems convinced that, while the people of fashion often fall «victims of their most laudable feelings»,<sup>14</sup> the vigorous health enjoyed by the peasant grants him complete immunity to sympathy, to the point that «the loss of persons to him the most dear, scarce touches him»<sup>15</sup>.

As many commentators have pointed out,<sup>16</sup> sensibility is a disease inextricably connected to civilisation: the title of Cheyne's famous treatise implies that heightened sensibility is an exquisitely 'English' ailment, affecting the individual as well as the national body. Like delicate nerves, the proliferation of new goods, lifestyles and stimuli appears as a phenomenon that is both desirable and fatal, simultaneously refining and weakening the members of the higher social classes. Books, and especially novels, are part and parcel of this blooming consumerist society, founded on the sudden availability of luxury products. Like other commodities circulating in 18th-century England, also novels generate addiction, providing consumers with a momentary satisfaction as well as a prolonged extenuation.

It is within this cultural context that this article intends to place the woman reader so as to illuminate the contact zone that,

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<sup>13</sup> G. Cheyne, *The Natural Method of Cureing the Diseases of the Body and the Disorders of the Mind, Depending on the Body*, Strahan and Knapton, London 1742, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> S. Tissot, *People of Fashion*, p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> See in particular G. Barker-Benfield and P. Langford. See also A. Violi, *Il teatro dei nervi: Fantasmie del moderno da Mesmer a Charcot*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2005.

in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, this figure creates between the culture of sensibility and the representation of novels, the chief target of medical attack but also the space where the female voice of the novelist accepts or rejects medical representations. While the stigmatisation of the woman reader has been read mainly from feminist standpoints,<sup>17</sup> the culture of sensibility proves an apt lens through which to investigate the complex nexus of pathology and refinement that accompanies the representations of reading as a female practice in medical and novelistic discourse. This article contends that, in contrast to physicians, who tend to emphasise the pathological effects of reading novels, Jane Austen's narrative seems more willing to explore the potentialities inherent in the refinement offered by the habit of reading novels.

2. «*Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear*»: *The Female Organism and the Dangers of Reading*

As James Kennaway has recently argued, in Georgian culture the nerve paradigm allows for the reconfiguration of the ancient humour-oriented *morbi eruditorum* ('diseases of the learned') into a new range of disorders, shaped by both middle-class ideology and proto-Romantic epistemology.<sup>18</sup> As a result, the practice of reading undergoes a significant shift: while in the past prolonged study was believed to have pernicious effects on the body chiefly because it favoured a sedentary lifestyle (which in turn caused digestive ailments, melancholy etc.), in the 18th century the target of medical discourse becomes reading in itself.

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<sup>17</sup> J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999; K. Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Clarendon, Oxford 1993.

<sup>18</sup> J. Kennaway, *Two Kinds of «Literary Poison»: Diseases of the Learned and Overstimulating Novels in Georgian Britain*, «Literature and Medicine», 34 (Fall 2016), 2, pp. 252-277.

If reading becomes accepted as a social disorder, affecting the higher as well as the middle classes (and soon threatening to spread to the lower ranks<sup>19</sup>), in the 18<sup>th</sup> and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the pathological action of books is even more recognizably imagined as a disease of gender, posing a considerable threat to the exquisitely delicate female organism. As Jacqueline Pearson notes, although in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century reading is considered an essential requirement of women's education and morality, «[c]ontemporary comment (...) is less concerned about women or girls who do not read than with those who read the wrong books, in the wrong ways and the wrong places».<sup>20</sup> At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Katie Halsey writes, «[r]eading is figured as both virtuous and potentially dangerous, educative but also seductive».<sup>21</sup> Like sensibility in civilised society, also books can be morally edifying or harmful, evidence of refinement or agents of destruction.

The physiology of the female organism plays no marginal role in the spreading of this concern: if, on the one hand, women are 'naturally' drawn to books by their refined sensibility, books in turn endanger the organism by corrupting the 'natural' conformation of women's body and mind. This perversion occurs, firstly, by fruitlessly extenuating the nervous frame. As in Alexander Pope's poem *An Epistle to a Lady* (1743), the female organism is imagined as weak and mutable, a «[m]atter too soft a lasting mark to bear»<sup>22</sup>, not apt to study and concentration. In Bernard Mandeville's medical treatise (1711), the delicacy of women's frame, while accounting for the

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<sup>19</sup> See P. Bratlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1998.

<sup>20</sup> J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers, 1786-1945*, Anthem Press, London 2012, p. 30.

<sup>22</sup> A. Pope, *An Epistle to A Lady*, in D. Fairer and C. Gerrard (eds.), *Eighteenth-Century Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester 2015, p. 160 (line 3).

intensity of feelings, appears incompatible with the firmness of both bodily fibres and mental effort:

This delicacy as well as imbecillity (*sic*) of the Spirits in Women is Conspicuous in all their actions, those of the Brain not excepted: They are unfit for both abstruse and elaborate thoughts, all Studies of Depth, Coherence and Solidity, that fatigue the Spirits and require a Steadiness and Assiduity of Thinking [...].<sup>23</sup>

Serious study, however, is not the main target of medical discourse. Although doctors deplore the weakening effect of prolonged application and concentration on the female body and mind,<sup>24</sup> most medical texts insist on the pathological effects caused by the perusal of novels, which function as symbols of the stimuli of modern life, whose appeal the female organism seems incapable to resist. No wonder women's indulging in novels is imagined as akin to seduction: as Thomas Beddoes puts it in *Hygëia* (1802), novels «increase indolence, the imaginary world indisposing those, who inhabit it in thought, to go abroad into the real»,<sup>25</sup> thus reinforcing the stereotype of the 'Reading Miss' chasing imaginary worlds and imaginary partners, and easily corrupted by mischievous villains. In such context, novels can be recognised as a «species of literary poison»,<sup>26</sup> the physician Thomas Trotter contends, because they «first engender ardent passions, and then leave the mind without power to resist or subdue them».<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the physician John

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<sup>23</sup> B. Mandeville, *A Treatise of the Hypochondriack and Histerick Disease in Three Dialogues*, J. Tonson, London 1711, p. 246.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Beddoes, for example, blames parents for encouraging their daughters' passion for music, which is «highly enervating» because it requires from them «intense study». See T. Beddoes, *Essay on the Causes, Early Signs, and Prevention of Pulmonary Consumption: for the Use of Parents and Preceptors*, Biggs and Cottle, Bristol 1799, p. 121.

<sup>25</sup> T. Beddoes, *Essay on the Individuals, Composing our Affluent and Easy Classes*, in *Hygëia: Essays Medical and Moral*, Thoemmes Continuum, Bristol 2004, 3 voll., vol. 1, pp. 1-84, p. 77.

<sup>26</sup> T. Trotter, *A View of the Nervous Temperament*, Longman, Hurst, Reese, Orme, and Brown, London 1812, p. 93.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 94.

Reid compares circulating libraries to «a chest of liqueur, where there is nothing to nourish or strengthen, and everything to stimulate and inflame»,<sup>28</sup> the same metaphor that the Victorian pseudonymous ‘Aunt Anastasia’ uses in *Tinsley’s Magazine* to censor the literary tastes of her young niece, «half-drunk» of «the coarsest and most injurious kind of intoxicating literary liqueur».<sup>29</sup>

As is clear from the comments above, the over-stimulation of female sensibility is imagined as the disruption of the processes of assimilation and digestion, transforming women into voracious beings, dominated by unruly appetites and evoking the spectre of hysteria (in the variant of chlorosis<sup>30</sup>). If this testifies, on the one hand, to the «perceived necessity to police imagination and introspection at a time when internalised discipline and self-control were becoming paramount virtues»,<sup>31</sup> on the other hand the emphasis on the woman reader’s insatiability appears monstrous because it implies the perversion of women’s ‘natural’ female sensibility and, most importantly, of its crucial social role.

The physician John Armstrong’s argument about women’s physiology in his medical treatise of 1818 appears still in line with Tissot’s description of the special sensibility of the people of fashion. According to Armstrong, there is a two-way relation between women’s refinement and pathological weakness: while being predisposed by their nerves to acutely feel for suffering people, when women nurse their sick relatives and friends they

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<sup>28</sup> T. Reid, *Essays on Hypochondriasis and Other Nervous Affections* (1823), quoted in J. Kennaway, *Two Kinds of Literary Poisons*, p. 263.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers*, p. 123.

<sup>30</sup> One of the most important symptoms of chlorosis or green sickness, a disease known from antiquity and frequently associated to love-sickness and sexual frustration, is the disturbance of appetite. See I.S. Loudon, *Chlorosis, Anaemia, and Anorexia Nervosa*, «British Medical Journal», 281 (20 December 1980), pp. 1669-1675 and H. King, *The Disease of Virgins: Green Sickness, Chlorosis and the Problems of Puberty*, Routledge, London and New York 2004.

<sup>31</sup> J. Kennaway, *Two Kinds of Literary Poisons*, p. 254.

easily fall victims of the extenuation brought about by «corporeal fatigue»<sup>32</sup> as well as «solicitude of mind».<sup>33</sup> It is this physiologically-grounded, admirable and self-sacrificing sympathy – which lies at the core of women’s virtuous behaviour and moral worth as «flowers of society»<sup>34</sup> – that the selfish, voracious woman reader utterly rejects.

Medical texts harshly condemn the transgression of the physiological and moral order of female sensibility: as we read in a comment of the English translator of Tissot’s *Essay on Diseases Incident to Literary and Sedentary Persons* (1769), a 10-year-old girl who sits to read novels «will be an hysterick girl at twenty, and not a good nurse as she should be».<sup>35</sup> The physician and social reformer Benjamin Rush makes another important point when he claims that novels create a corrupted form of sympathy, which renders young women paradoxically impenetrable to humane feelings:

The abortive sympathy which is excited by the recital of imaginary distress, blunts the heart to that which is real; and, hence, we sometimes see instances of young ladies, who weep away a whole forenoon over the criminal sorrows of a fictitious Charlotte or Werter [*sic*], turning with disdain at three o’ clock from the sight of a beggar [...].<sup>36</sup>

As sophisticate receptivity is transformed into impermeability, the flower of society becomes a barbaric being,

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<sup>32</sup> J. Armstrong, *Practical Illustrations of the Scarlet Fever, Measles, Pulmonary Consumption, and Chronic Diseases*, Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, London 1818, p. 223.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> For a discussion of women’s representation as flowers and ornaments of society, see L. Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Century*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead 1989, p. 34.

<sup>35</sup> S. Tissot, *An Essay on Diseases Incident to Literary and Sedentary Persons*, Engl. transl. by J. Kirkpatrick, Nourse, London 1769, p. 137 (footnote by the translator).

<sup>36</sup> B. Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical*, Thomas & Samuel Bradford, Philadelphia 1798, p. 81.



her sophisticate sympathy turned into apathetic self-indulgence. This is what Charlotte Lennox's Arabella learns at the end of her story, when female Quixotism emerges less as an amusing target of satire than as the unnatural overturning of the order that grants social harmony: «these Books soften the Heart to Love, and harden it to Murder»<sup>37</sup>. More than in the delusive fantasies to which they give life, the lethal character of overstimulating novels is to be found in the perversion of sensibility that they engender in the female organism.

### 3. «Great Novel-Readers & not ashamed of being so»: Jane Austen and the Woman Reader

Austen's acute awareness of the cultural discourse of her time has been in recent years the subject of considerable scholarly attention, offering new critical tools to analyse her fiction. In addition to demonstrating her alertness to the topics discussed in scientific and medical discourse,<sup>38</sup> scholars have revealed the extent of her knowledge of the representations of women readers.<sup>39</sup> The Austens, it is well-known, were a family

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<sup>37</sup> C. Lennox, *The Female Quixote*, Oxford World's Classics, Oxford 2008, p. 380.

<sup>38</sup> For a selection of these works on Austen and science, see B. Lau (ed.), *Jane Austen and the Sciences of the Mind*, Routledge, London 2017; N.M. Phillips, *Distraction: Problems of Attention in Eighteenth-Century Literature*, John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 2016, pp. 175-211; M. Brown, *Emma's Depression*, «Studies in Romanticism», 53 (Spring 2014), 1, pp. 3-29; M.W. Dull, *Little Irritations in Mansfield Park*, in V. Tinkler-Villani and C.C. Barfoot (eds.), *Restoring the Mystery of the Rainbow: Literature's Refraction of Science*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2011, pp. 249-274; A. Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, pp. 93-113; S. Gross, *Flights into Illness: Some Characters in Jane Austen*, in M. Mulvey Roberts and R. Porter (eds.), *Literature and Medicine during the Eighteenth Century*, Routledge, London 1993, pp. 188-199; J. Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992.

<sup>39</sup> Beside J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain* and K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and her Readers*, see also A. Richardson, *Reading Practices*, in J.

of «great Novel Readers & and not ashamed of being so»,<sup>40</sup> as Jane writes to Cassandra in 1798. It is therefore hardly surprising that, when representing women who read novels, Austen's narrative tends to resist the power of medical discourse, rejecting the stigmatisation of novels in terms of pathology and emphasising instead their connection to taste and civilisation. Austen appears conscious, as Pearson puts it, that «reading both symbolises and opposes power»,<sup>41</sup> and she exploits the ambivalences of sensibility to go against received notions of novels as pathological. In her works, the woman reader arguably emerges in a contact zone between the medical discourse on female physiology and the female voice, which struggles against authoritative discourse. While Katie Halsey warns against the temptation of overstating Austen's rebellion against Augustan orthodox tradition – her extensive knowledge of conduct books, for example, being apparent in the sophisticated inter-textual dialogues her fiction engages with them<sup>42</sup> – Austen's re-assessment of the novel-reading woman involves a radical reaction against the effects a novel is supposed to have, in medical discourse, on the body and mind of a woman.

In Austen's narrative, the books that have the power to dangerously impair sensibility are rarely novels. *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Mansfield Park* (1814), for example, show some female characters who, like Mary Bennet and Fanny Price, display the kind of social apathy and hardened sensibility that

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Todd (ed.), *Jane Austen in Context*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005, pp. 397-405; E. Knights, «*The Library, of Course, Afforded Everything*»: *Jane Austen's Representation of Women Readers*, «English: Journal of the English Association», 50 (March 2001), 196, pp. 19-38; L. Erikson, *The Economy of Novel-Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Libraries*, «SEL: Studies in English Literature», 30 (1990), pp. 573-590.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in E. Knights, «*The Library, of Course, Afforded Everything*», p. 23.

<sup>41</sup> J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> See K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers*, pp. 37-56.

Rush attributed to the perusal of novels. And yet, neither of them is fond of novels; rather, they're both avid readers of the serious works of Augustan prose. On the one hand, Mary's perfect knowledge of tracts and moral extracts makes her not only unfit for social life (much to Elizabeth's «agonies»<sup>43</sup> at Netherfield Ball), but also completely unable to sympathise with her sister Lydia's fate.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, in the last chapter of *Mansfield Park* Fanny, whom Halsey aptly terms the «perfect conduct-girl heroine»,<sup>45</sup> enjoys her happy ending by becoming unsympathetic to the tragic suffering that has left the 'stage' of Mansfield Park, in Q. D. Leavis's powerful image, «as strewn with corpses of ruined lives as the stage at the end of *Hamlet* with dead bodies».<sup>46</sup> After imbibing the precepts of conduct books, Fanny knows nothing of the sociable, self-sacrificing sensibility doctors admired and condemned in civilised women. Rather, the narrator establishes that perceiving other people's misery (or, more disturbingly, knowing that one 'ought to' perceive it) and being happy are by no means incompatible states: «My Fanny (...) must have been happy in spite of every thing. She must have been a happy creature in spite of all that she felt or *thought she felt*, for the distress of those around her».<sup>47</sup> While the repetition of the adjective «happy», together with the concessive connector «in spite of», has the effect of ironically foregrounding the inappropriateness

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<sup>43</sup> J. Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, Norton & Company, New York and London 2001, p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> When Lydia elopes with Wickham, Mary seems exempted from the distress that dominates Longbourne, and can only parrot the language of moralists: «we may draw from [the event] this useful lesson; that loss of virtue in a female is irretrievable [...]». Ivi, p. 187.

<sup>45</sup> K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Q.D. Leavis, *Introduction*, in J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Macdonald, London 1957, pp. vii-xviii, p. xvii. For a reading of Fanny Price as self-centred rather than sociable see B. Battaglia, *La zitella illetterata: parodia e ironia nei romanzi di Jane Austen*, Liguori, Napoli 2009, pp. 111-185.

<sup>47</sup> J. Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Penguin Classics, London 2003, p. 428, italics added.

of Fanny's joy, the text leaves it for readers to decide whether such self-centred happiness is the ultimate outcome of the journey that transforms Fanny into a heroine whose virtue is rewarded or, on the other hand, a monstrous subversion of sensibility's social role.

At the other extreme of deficient sensibility, also the excessive delicacy of feelings cannot be attributed to the overstimulation caused by novels, but is often the result of the character's indulging in poetry. Marianne Dashwood is the obvious example: the heroine of the significantly titled *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Marianne is introduced to readers through Elinor's «concern» over «the excess of her sister's sensibility»<sup>48</sup>. However, her nervous condition becomes truly pathological only after Marianne and Willoughby spend days wallowing in the words of Romantic poets like William Cowper, James Thomson and Walter Scott. After her lover abandons her, Marianne's initially tragi-comic adherence to the literary role of the sentimental heroine suffering from heartbreak<sup>49</sup> becomes serious when it combines with her lack of nervous firmness,<sup>50</sup> bringing her on the verge of «self-destruction».<sup>51</sup> In a similar vein, in *Persuasion* (1818) Anne Elliott suggests to the bereaved Captain Benwick that he should not read so much poetry, arguing instead for the beneficial action of «a larger allowance of prose».<sup>52</sup> Significantly, Austen in this novel has an intelligent woman build her argument against poetry by evoking the

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<sup>48</sup> J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, Penguin Classics, London 2003, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> «Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting with Willoughby». J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> Looking back, Marianne fully recognises the pathological action of sensibility and the real danger it posed to her frame: «I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them almost led me to the grave». J. Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p. 322.

<sup>51</sup> Ivi, p. 322.

<sup>52</sup> J. Austen, *Persuasion*, Penguin, London 2012, p. 100.

refinement and extenuating stimulation which qualified sensibility:

she thought it was the misfortune of poetry, to be seldom safely enjoyed by those who enjoyed it completely; and that the strong feelings which alone could estimate it truly, were the very feelings which ought to taste it but sparingly.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, Austen's mature fiction criticises the shortcomings, inconsistencies and delusions of men readers rather than women, applying to characters like Captain Benwick or Sir Edward Denham in *Sanditon* (1871) the stereotypes of excessive sensibility and sentimental identification with the books they love.<sup>54</sup> Like women obsessed with novels in medical discourse, these readers are impaired by their nervous system, transformed into passive vessels unable to transcend their biology.

Austen's most memorable sentimental novel-reading heroine is, of course, Catherine Morland, the protagonist of *Northanger Abbey* (1817), a parody of Gothic texts which, at the same time, famously contains an extensive defence of novels.<sup>55</sup> Catherine turns Quixotic because, wishing to become a heroine, she commits to reading «all such works as heroines must read».<sup>56</sup> When she is invited to Northanger Abbey, residence of the Tilneys, the books she has read produce delusive fantasies, and account for the transfiguration of the sounds of the wind, the objects found in the house and the mansion's master into the staple features of Gothic *genre*. At the end of the book, when acknowledging her mystification, Catherine's language appears

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<sup>53</sup> Ivi, p. 99.

<sup>54</sup> This aspect is discussed in K. Halsey, *Jane Austen and Her Readers*, pp. 25-26 and J. Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain*, pp. 145-148. See also E. Knights, «*The Library, of Course, Afforded Everything*», p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> «it is only a novel! [...] only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language», J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, Wordsworth Classics, London 2000, p. 23.

<sup>56</sup> J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 4.

to echo the medical discourse against novels and their seductive action: a «self-created delusion», her «craving to be frightened» is conceived of as an «infatuation», a «mischief» caused by «the influence of that sort of reading which she had [in Bath] indulged».<sup>57</sup> And yet, *Northanger Abbey* is far from offering a straightforward moral condemnation of novels. Indeed, although Catherine's sensibility, enhanced by the stimuli she has absorbed in reading, does produce some morbid physiological reactions – tremors, palpitations, agitation of feelings, sleeplessness and all the creeping effects vividly described by a writing style that mocks Gothic writing<sup>58</sup> – the novel also arguably offers an exploration of the potentialities that novels can offer to female sensibility.

*Northanger Abbey* is a text that unsettles common assumptions about novel-reading in a number of ways. Firstly, with the choice of a heroine that simultaneously evokes and demystifies the stereotypes of the sentimental 'Reading Miss': endowed with a sound constitution, manners not particularly refined and a mind that the narrator jokingly presents as unremarkable,<sup>59</sup> Catherine is an unconventional heroine, confronted with a number of comically un-heroic situations (from listening to John Thorpe's endless ramblings to, more seriously, being shamefully expelled from the Abbey and sent home alone). Moreover, Catherine's youthful obsessions and errors are represented by the narrator of this text with irony and sympathy, two narrative modes that incessantly complicate the

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<sup>57</sup> All quotes in J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 145.

<sup>58</sup> The case in point is Chapter 21, which describes Catherine's agitation and «horror» during the first night she spends at the Abbey. J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, pp. 117-124.

<sup>59</sup> Catherine's attitude is often naive, foregrounding her lack of experience and knowledge – aspects that, the narrator amusingly claims, play an important role in Henry Tilney's interest in her: «Catherine [...] did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man», *ivi*, p. 80. See also the unflattering description of Catherine (by her mother) as «a sad little scatter-brained creature», *ivi*, p. 172.

possibility of a simplistic moral condemnation of the woman reader.

Also the corruption of female sensibility by novels is called into question by Austen's text. Far from impairing female sociability, in *Northanger Abbey* reading novels is presented as a socially cohesive practice, which supports friendships and is authorised and appreciated by Henry Tilney, one of the most ideal among the many male mentors that can be found in Austen's fiction. Moreover, despite predisposing Catherine's mind to mingle reality and imagination, reading novels never seems to pose any serious threat to the young woman, as she neither runs the risk of being seduced by a villain nor has her sensibility destroyed in morbid isolation from the world.

On the contrary, it may be argued that knowledge of Gothic texts actually provides Catherine with a reliable frame from which to perceive a reality dominated by an intensely oppressive power. Placed in the context of the 18th-century medical debate on sensibility, Catherine's final remark that, by transforming General Tilney into «a Montoni»,<sup>60</sup> she has «scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty»<sup>61</sup> implies that reading novels has refined her sensibility, allowing her to intuitively understand profound relational structures and power dynamics, and to articulate them by availing herself of the narrative tropes of Gothic writing. While Beth Lau's fine reading of *Northanger Abbey* interprets Catherine's growth as the development of her Theory of Mind capabilities, I would argue that her improved «mindreading» skills are the result of the refined sensibility she has acquired by reading (Gothic) novels.<sup>62</sup>

Throughout the novel, Catherine's inability to see through the veil of surface politeness is described by emphasising the

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<sup>60</sup> J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 136.

<sup>61</sup> Ivi, p. 181.

<sup>62</sup> B. Lau, *Catherine's Education in Mindreading in Northanger Abbey*, in B. Lau (ed.), *Jane Austen and the Sciences of the Mind*, pp. 37-57.

young woman's lack of confidence in her intuitions. When she gets to spend a whole day at the Tilneys' Bath residence of Milsom Street, for example, she unconsciously understands that Henry and Eleanor's constrained behaviour is due to the presence of their father, but she bases the discounting of her intuition on external appearance alone:

It could not be General Tilney's fault. That he was perfectly agreeable and good-natured, and altogether a very charming man, did not admit of a doubt, for he was tall and handsome, and Henry's father. *He [sic]* could not be accountable for his children's want of spirits, or for her want of enjoyment in their company.<sup>63</sup>

Like many other heroines of Austen's novels, Catherine is deceived by the surface: her mistake lies in the assumption that the General's good manners (his «agreeable», «charming» 'look') match his morality (his 'being' «good-natured»). Similarly, when Isabella Thorpe puzzles Catherine by openly talking about money and her disappointing marriage prospect, the protagonist «wishes Isabella [talked] more like her usual self»,<sup>64</sup> failing to recognise that the Isabella she is viewing now has never been more like her 'real' self, deprived of the filters of indirectness, conventional behaviour and polite lies.

In contrast to these difficulties in reconciling her intuitions with the surface level of appearances, the knowledge Catherine derives from her readings emerges as a form of refined sensibility, which works by producing effective insights that are the result of the cooperation between the real and the imaginary, the body and the mind, the rational and the irrational. Empowered by this knowledge, Catherine learns to no longer mistrust her 'embodied' intuitions:

Catherine attempted no longer to hide from herself the nature of the feelings which, in spite of all his attentions, he had previously excited; and what had been terror and dislike before, was now absolute

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<sup>63</sup> Ivi, p. 92.

<sup>64</sup> Ivi, p. 106.



aversion. Yes, aversion! His cruelty to such a charming woman made him odious to her. She had often read of such characters [...].<sup>65</sup>

In the above quote, Catherine's eager consumption of novels leads her to superimpose to reality a Gothic scenario which is hardly misleading: indeed, by recognising the evil character of General Tilney she is able to perceive that Northanger Abbey 'is' a place of imprisonment, and that she simply needs to replace the title 'Mrs' with that of 'Miss' Tilney to find the damsel in distress. If her intuitions derive, as Richardson convincingly argues in his reading of Austen's *Persuasion*,<sup>66</sup> from the interaction of conscious and unconscious processes that are part of organic sensibility as a form of 'embodied mind', moreover, it means that Catherine can experience that healthy succession of attention and distraction, voluntary and involuntary mental life that grants other Austenian heroines cognitive flexibility. As Natalie M. Phillips has recently shown,<sup>67</sup> this flexibility is a prerequisite of those female characters who successfully overcome the confusion of manners and morals that is so widespread in the world of 'the people of fashion'.

Viewed in this way, the woman reader enables us to appreciate the extent to which knowledge is produced and exchanged in a contact zone between normative discourse and the female voice that grapples with the limitations of such discourse. Within the textual world of *Northanger Abbey* as well as in Austen's fiction, the most «injured body»<sup>68</sup> is less that of the woman reader than that of the (woman) author, suffering from the negative connotations attributed to novels in authoritative discourse. By exploiting the dense ambivalences generated by the culture of sensibility, the novel-reading woman emerges in Austen's fiction as a trope that foregrounds the

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<sup>65</sup> Ivi, p. 132.

<sup>66</sup> A. Richardson, *British Romanticism and the Science of the Mind*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>67</sup> N.M. Phillips, *Distraction*, pp. 174-211.

<sup>68</sup> J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 21.

dialogue with and resistance against authoritative discourse, ultimately establishing the educational rather than pathological function of novels, and showing how these texts can enhance (rather than pervert) the exquisite quality of female sensibility. If, as Patricia Michealson argues, Austen's novels were possibly designed to be read aloud so as to performatively teach young women how to speak well and improve their conversation skills,<sup>69</sup> the cultural interest in female sensibility adds a further layer to Austen's desire to 'instruct' her female readers. As «the anxieties of common life» are inevitably bound «to soon succeed to the alarms of romance»,<sup>70</sup> Austen's texts, in other words, ensure their women readers that they will be equipped with the best weapons against real-life villains and horrors.

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<sup>69</sup> P. Michealson, *Speaking Volumes: Women, Reading and Speech in the Age of Austen*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2002, pp. 180-215.

<sup>70</sup> J. Austen, *Northanger Abbey*, p. 146.