Neurodiversity in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma:* Jane Austen's Heroines and Their Cognitive Difference

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Alexandra Sausa

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Abstract

There is a dearth of criticism that analyzes Jane Austen's characters through the lens of neurodivergence — that is, an umbrella term for neurological difference, or behavior and cognitive processing that differs from what is "typical". Although Austen has male characters that have been read as neurodivergent, this thesis will focus on two of Austen's neurodivergent heroines: Marianne Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse. To support neurodivergent interpretations of these heroines, I supplement close readings of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* with social science and psychological literature. Marianne exhibits numerous characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and Emma exhibits many traits of narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Through their supportive relationships with loved ones and their social development, Marianne and Emma acquire the skills to navigate the neurotypical society of late eighteenth-century England. Just as Austen's novels act as pedagogical programs for women entering eighteenth-century English society, they specifically provide guidance for neurodivergent women like Marianne and Emma, as characters like Elinor Dashwood and Mr. Knightley model supportive relationships between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals.

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Introduction

One of the most distinct aspects of Jane Austen's heroines' is their vibrant dispositions: from the imaginative, oblivious Marianne to the confident, self-centered Emma. And yet, despite their unusual minds, these women are rarely read through the lens of neurodiversity, the idea of "perceived variations seen in cognitive, affectual, and sensory functioning differing from the majority of the general population or 'predominant neurotype', more usually known as the 'neurotypical' population" (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 1). I argue we can better understand Austen's heroines by reading them through this psychological lens; the reader gains insight into the unique minds of Marianne and Emma when we interpret the former as having autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), and the latter as having narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). When we acknowledge their cognitive differences, we better understand one of Austen's purposes in writing these coming-of-age stories. Scholars like Claudia Johnson argue that Austen's novels can be read as teaching young women to survive the demands of long eighteenth-century patriarchy, "Whereas conduct books teach young women the social codes they must adopt if they are to live acceptably as wives and daughters, fully integrated into their communities, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) makes those codes and the communities that dictate them the subject of its interrogation, and what is at stake finally is not propriety, but survival" (50). Just as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma* (1815) teach women how to survive the social sphere, how to make the best of less-than-ideal situations, so too do they teach neurodivergent people like Marianne and Emma to better adapt to and navigate social rules. By recognizing the neurodiversity of Austen's heroines, we can better understand Marianne and Emma, their unique strengths, challenges, and character development, as well as the neurodivergent pedagogy of Austen's fiction.

By reading Austen's heroines as neurodivergent, the reader can better understand their cognition and growth. Without the lens of neurodiversity, we only have partial insights into the inner lives of Austen's heroines. For example, many scholars read the heroines of *Sense and Sensibility* as embodying or symbolizing each of these traits. Marianne represents sensibility, where Elinor represents sense.[1] In all of these readings that focus on sensibility and sense, scholars read Marianne as allegory, not as a character who feels and thinks about the world in a unique way. For example, some approaches read Marianne's emotionality as mere sensibility, her emotional outbursts as self-centered and inconsiderate of others. But if we read Marianne as autistic, we can factor in the emotional dysregulation, meltdowns, and clinical depression that often accompany this way of being. Our understanding of Marianne's character becomes far more complex, nuanced, and, perhaps more importantly, empathetic. If we ignore Marianne's cognitive difference, if we write her behavior off as *just* sensibility, we fail to understand how emotions overpower and debilitate her in ways neurotypical people may not experience. Without the lens of neurodiversity, the reader may develop misconceptions about Marianne and limited insight into her character. The same holds true for Emma. Critics charge Emma with being self-important, arrogant, and narcissistic. And yet, for all the discussion about Emma's narcissism, no one has attributed her behavior to *an intrinsic cognitive wiring*, to narcissistic personality disorder. This is what my thesis sets out to do. Without understanding Emma's NPD, we cannot appreciate the cognitive difference that lies underneath the heroine's strengths, including her confidence and her moments of savvy social management, or her challenges, especially her

[1] For examples of these types of readings, with varied opinions of the novel's criticism of Marianne, see Marilyn Butler's *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* and Alistair Duckworth's *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels.*

distorted, self-aggrandizing perception. I push back against reading Marianne and Emma as *deliberately* self-centered or inconsiderate towards others. Rather, their cognitive processing—the way they feel and read the behavior of others—is at odds with navigating neurotypical social structures. Marianne and Emma must *work* to adapt and perform neurotypical behavior—it does not come naturally.

This is the project of Austen's fiction: to help neurodivergent characters adapt to a neurotypical world. Similarly, scholars like Katheryn Sutherland outline how Austen's fiction acts as social pedagogy, "how characters must learn to be skillful readers of those around them…Her heroines in particular discover in the course of the novel that individual happiness cannot exist separately from our responsibilities to others." I expand on the idea of Austen's fiction as pedagogy by reading her work through the lens of neurodiversity; for the *neurodivergent* heroines, the issues of observing and 'reading' others becomes all the more important, all the more central to their growth and survival. Just as Austen's novels act as conduct books, Austen's neurodivergent pedagogy drives the progression of both *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma,* the development of both heroines, and their adaptation to the neurotypical social world. Austen's treatment of her cognitively-different heroines demonstrates her keen understanding of what we now call neurodiversity. She recognized that while behavior can be changed, cognition is innate. Over the course of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma,* this is precisely what her neurodivergent heroines learn.

Austen and Human Cognition

Austen teaches Marianne and Emma how to best conduct themselves in a neurotypical culture and also teaches them about their intrinsic cognitive wirings—wirings that persist from

the beginning to the end of their respective novels. For instance, in *Emma*, the heroine recognizes her "errors of imagination" (302). The phrase "errors of imagination" is one that Mr. Knightley coins, and his phrase surprisingly mirrors the contemporary psychological concept of narcissistic confabulation, a fabrication or distortion of reality, experiences, and memory (APA Dictionary of Psychology) —in other words, a fabrication of events that preserves the narcissist's positive self-image. By the end of the novel, Emma has an epiphany about how her "errors of imagination," her unique cognition, contribute to a distorted view of the social world, "She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on!" (350) But even after she understands her cognitive tendencies, Emma is still narcissistic and proud. At the end of the novel, Emma reads a letter from Frank Churchill and fixates on any references to herself, "As soon as she came to her own name, it was irresistible; every line relating to herself was interesting, and almost every line agreeable; and when this charm ceased, the subject could still maintain itself" (376). In other words, the subject which Emma finds "interesting," "agreeable," and charming is herself; although she has reformed much of her behavior, she is still a narcissist.In both of her novels, Austen's neurodivergent heroines learn about their unique minds and develop adaptive behaviors but they are *still* neurodivergent; they are *still* autistic and narcissistic—the same way autism and many personality disorders are lifelong ways of being.

Austen had a profound interest in human cognition, paying careful attention to the minutiae of social interactions and the thought processes of her characters. In *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Austen's narrator remarks on the relationship between the mind and fiction in the famous

defense of the novel genre: “It is only a novel... or, in short, 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” (60). The narrator voices the ambition of Austen’s fiction: to display “the greatest powers of the mind” and “the most thorough knowledge of human nature.” What’s more, Austen shows particular interest in the “happiest delineation of [human nature’s] varieties.” From Catherine Morland to Marianne Dashwood to Elizabeth Bennett to Emma Woodhouse, Austen traverses a diversity of worldviews, temperaments, and cognitive ways of being through her heroines. She delights in their cognitive difference. The variety of human nature is the “*happiest* delineation” (emphasis added). The phrase “happiest” suggests that Austen *embraces* physical and cognitive differences, and takes pleasure in writing and reading these in fiction. Indeed, we can read Austen’s eighteenth-century description of the “happiest delineation of [humanity’s] varieties” as synonymous with what we today call neurodiversity. By linking novel writing and reading to exploring neurodiversity, Austen offers a wealth of opportunities for analyzing her texts through the lens of psychology and disability studies.

Many scholars have read Austen’s work from cognitive angles. Lisa Zunshine argues Austen’s novels contain multiple “embedded states of mind” and deep intersubjectivity, which Butte defines as “the web of partially interpenetrating consciousnesses that exists wherever perceiving subjects, that is, human beings, collect. [T]he process begins when a self perceives the gestures, either of body or word, of another consciousness, and it continues when the self can perceive in those gestures an awareness of her or his own gestures” (qtd in Zunshine 1). In other

words, the psychological structuring of Austen's novels reveals her interest in how people perceive each other's behavior and motives. Perhaps this is why Austen takes particular interest in heroines who must learn to assess the interiority of others accurately. Zunshine also argues that Austen's novels reflect Theory of Mind, a concept used "interchangeably with mind-reading to refer to our ability to explain observable behavior in terms of underlying thoughts, feelings, desires, and intentions" (276). What Zunshine calls "deep intersubjectivity" can also be understood as layers upon layers of mind reading, the repeated attribution of mental and emotional states to others. Moreover, Austen's free indirect discourse *enacts* these layers of mind reading; characters attempt to mindread others, and the narrator investigates the motivations and behaviors of her heroines. While Austen and her narrator perform "mind reading" on her characters, we will see that many of Austen's heroines struggle with this ability, and instead have *mindblindness.* The American Psychological Association asserts "a person with mindblindness cannot 'read the minds of others' —that is, understand their behavior in terms of BELIEF-DESIRE REASONING" (VandenBos 654). Intensely focused on mind reading and mind blindness, Austen's novels engage with these themes even on a stylistic level.

Austen's use of free indirect discourse is closely linked to her novels' interest in cognition and social pedagogy. Free indirect discourse (FID) is a style of third-person narration in which the language of the narrator and characters overlap and blur together. It is difficult to discern what language belongs to the narrator, and what belongs to Austen's heroines. Alternatively, FID can be viewed as a style in which a character takes over the narration. In both instances, the reader must decide if, and what, the narrator and her characters agree on. For instance, Daniel Gunn argues that as *Emma* progresses, the discourse of the narrator becomes

more difficult to discern from the heroine. Because of the heroine's moral development, the narrator increasingly agrees with her perspective. Similarly, Maria Folsom asserts that in *Sense and Sensibility* the narrator sympathizes with *both* Marianne and Elinor and shares some of the heroines' frustration as they comment on the social world.

In this way, Austen's free indirect discourse accomplishes two things. First, FID creates intimacy between the heroine and the reader and lets the reader see her innermost thoughts. However, the narrator still mediates the discourse of the novel, and provides commentary on the heroine's thought processes as well as the larger social sphere. Austen's use of FID demonstrates the author's acute observation of the social world and its regulations, and how these impact her heroines. By placing the reader nearly in the mind of the heroine, Austen's use of free indirect discourse is an appropriate move for novels so invested in their heroines' unique ways of thinking and educating them on how others think. As Miller argues about Austen's free indirect discourse, "Narration comes as near to a character's psychic and linguistic reality as it can get without collapsing into it, and the character does as much of the work of narration as she may without acquiring its authority" (59). Miller draws attention to how free indirect discourse delegates the *authority* of the novel primarily with the narrator. She can speak to social norms the mindblind heroine may not understand. I would argue that the heroine possesses some authority over the novel—Emma's voice, after all, is quite pervasive in her self-named novel—but FID allows the narrator as pedagogue to intervene and comment on the neurodivergent heroine's thought process and behavior. By testing the boundaries between narrator and character discourse, FID forces the reader to actively judge social reality.

Austen's free indirect discourse allows the reader to see how her heroines *mind read others* and to mind read the heroine herself. This is particularly true for *Emma,* a novel in which the heroine's voice dominates much of the narration. Daniel Gunn links free indirect discourse with the heroine's learning, "as many of Austen's readers have concluded, Emma is designed to provide a kind of moral instruction, as Emma makes mistakes and then recognizes them, it is necessary both that Emma's subjectivity be given expression and that it be contained by a more comprehensive and authoritative subjectivity". He also underscores the inherent pedagogy of Austen's novels— pointing to Emma's "moral instruction"—something which I take a step further by factoring in neurodiversity and mind reading. Free indirect discourse also helps the reader mind read Austen's characters with greater insight; the reader has direct access to the beliefs and reasoning that motivates the novel's key heroines. Rachel Oberman intuits the mind reading implicit to free indirect style, although she uses different language, "The reader is subtly trained to develop the trait that Emma lacks, the ability to see beyond one's own mental confines…the reader of Emma is forced to ponder the accuracy of a given character's perspective but is also trained to value the act of imaginative entry into another's consciousness" (15). By focalizing the narrative through Emma's thoughts, Austen helps the reader practice mind reading. Oberman's idea of *valuing* "the act of imaginative entry into another's consciousness" also gestures to readers empathizing with characters unlike themselves, but appreciating and gleaning something from their unique perspectives. Such an evaluation of Austen's free indirect discourse speaks to, what I argue, is the central pedagogy of her novel. Austen teaches her neurodivergent heroines to adapt to a neurotypical world, and she helps readers' practice their own powers of mindreading of and empathy for those who have cognitive

differences. By providing access to the interiority of her neurodivergent heroines, Austen's free indirect discourse cultivates empathy and understanding in her readers.

Indeed, the neurotypical reader may *need* more access to the cognition of these characters to understand what otherwise appears to be strange behavior. Indeed, while some readers criticize Emma, Austen has at least supplied the tools (i.e. free indirect discourse) to understand her thought processes and what she values. In contrast, in *Sense and Sensibility*, most of the free indirect style focuses on Elinor's cognition. As for Marianne, readers can only interpret her character based on her behavior and speech. Perhaps this is why Marianne has been so misinterpreted, or rather under-interpreted. Many people attribute Marianne's actions to sensibility and do not explore her psychological difference perhaps because of her less noticeable free indirect discourse. With minimal free indirect discourse, and therefore, minimal access to Marianne's language, the reader relies on the following to gain access to her interiority: Marainne's reported speech and behavior, the novel's narrator, and the novel's chief focalizer Elinor. If the reader relies on only one or two of these components, she may read Marianne as overly emotional instead of neurodivergent.[2]

Austen and Disability

Where the neurotypical reader may have some difficulty relating to a neurodivergent character, Austen had personal experience with disability, which influenced the content of her novels. Jane Austen's brother, George Austen, was undoubtedly disabled. As is often the case

[2] It is worth noting that Elinor and the narrator, as seemingly neurotypical reporters of events, may not themselves understand the full extent of Marianne's innate difference.

with disabled people in history, little documentation and plenty of uncertainty remains about George; George Tucker writes, “George will always be an enigma…No mention is made of George in J.E. Austen-Leigh’s Memoir, but his grandson has stated that George ‘grew up weak in intellect’” (115). Letters from the period provide us with what little documentation we have of George, as well as insight into his physical and intellectual disabilities. In a 1772 letter to his wife, Tysoe Saul Hancock described George as “my godson who must be provided for without the least hopes of his being able to assist himself.” In other words, George was not intellectually or socially capable of taking care of himself, and he lived with his family, dependent on their care. In a 1778 letter, Philadelphia Walter compares the handicapped son of her brother (Jameson Hastings) to George Austen: “We all fear very much his faculties are hurt; many people say he has the appearance of a weak head: that his eyes are particular is very certain: our fears are of his being like poor George Austen. He has every symptom of good health, but cannot yet use his feet in the least, not yet talk, tho’ he makes a great noise continually” (qtd. in Tucker 116). Comparing Hastings’s son to George, the “weak head” and “particular” eyes of both boys recalls traits associated with a developmental disability. Given the syntax, the characteristics of an infant not yet walking and making “a great noise continually” may not apply to George Austen, but in any case, these evoke the sensory differences that may appear in infants with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Of course, George Austen’s diagnosis of any contemporary disability remains speculative; to borrow the language of Tucker, he will remain an “enigma” in this way. But what is clear is George Austen was marked as physically and cognitively different by his eighteenth-century peers, and he had some type of disability that made him dependent on his family’s care.

Austen herself experienced disability toward the end of her life. Scouring Austen's letters. Zachary Cope determines that Austen likely had Addison's disease, also referred to as adrenal insufficiency.[3] From her letters, the reader gets a sense of the pervasiveness of her illness, such as one written to her brother on April 6th, 1817, "I have been really too unwell the last fortnight to write anything that was not absolutely necessary, I have been suffering from a bilious attack attended with a good deal of fever…I was so ill on Friday and thought myself so likely to be worse that I could not but press for Cassandra's return with Frank" (qtd. in Cope 182). In her final months, Austen's illness impeded her ability to write and rendered her unable to finish her novel-in-progress, *Sanditon*. Her quality of life evidently suffered— "bilous attacks" and "a good deal of fever" sound painful and debilitating—and in this instance, her discomfort is so great that she must call upon her sister's care. Austen's illness likely influenced just how pervasive the themes of health, illness, and disability are in her final novels. In *Persuasion,* Mary Musgrove is a hypochondriac and Mrs. Smith is disabled, and *Sanditon* revolves around illness. The latter novel is set in a seaside resort—a place where eighteenth-century people to improve their health—and is populated with characters like hypochondriacs, invalids, and doctors[4].

Perhaps for this reason, several scholars have read Austen's fiction through the lens of nineteenth-century invalidism. Maria Frawley situates invalidism within the scope of the material conditions of nineteenth-century England; while invalidism existed before this historical period,

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[3] For more of Cope's analysis and grounds for diagnosis, see his article "Jane Austen's Last Illness".

[4] For a reading on bodily diversity and illness in three of Austen's novels, see Kathleen James-Cavan's "Jane Austen and Bodily Diversity in *Emma, Persuasion*, and *Sanditon*: Laughter through Gritted Teeth"

its unique social climate allowed for hundreds of men and women from a variety of professions to adopt this identity.[5] And indeed, the material conditions around invalidism come to the fore in Austen's novels, from Mr. Woodhouse's anxiety about the unhealthiness of urban spaces to settings like Bath and Sanditon and their emphasis on improving health. In "Jane Austen and Me: Tales from the Couch," Diane Driedger points out the tendency of literary critics to be dismissive of Austen's sick characters, especially the hypochondriacs, and to not acknowledge their lived experiences with chronic illnesses. A dimension of these characters' experiences—their illness and disability—has not been thoroughly explored in existing scholarship. Driedger also argues that Austen's own opinion of invalids may have changed over her lifetime and across her literature. Austen once referred to sickness as "a dangerous Indulgence at my time of life" (Austen-Leigh 221), which for Drieger begs the question, "It seems again that she sees sickness as an indulgence, perhaps like her previous characters. Was she thinking that it was a matter of choosing to be well? Because she had appeared to satirize the symptoms and lifestyles of invalids in her novels, could it be that she didn't want to be one?" (55) What Drieger's scholarship demonstrates is the importance of compassion when analyzing sick and disabled characters. Through the lens of disability studies, readers can cultivate greater empathy for handicapped characters, for those with physical and mental differences, not unlike Austen herself. The same holds true for Austen's neurodivergent characters, many of whom qualify as disabled.

[5] For more information on invalidism in the culture and literature of nineteenth-century England, see Frawley's monograph *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain.*

The emergence of disability studies in the 1990s responds to the medicalization and stigmatization of disability in both academia and larger culture. Disability studies holds that the social category of disability is on par with other social constructions, such as race, class, and gender. In other words, disability is one facet of experience that must be considered in any robust social analysis. Moreover, disability studies distinguishes between the ideas of impairment and disability. While impairment is a physical fact—for example, conditions like blindness, developmental delay, an amputated limb, among others—disability is a *social construction.* Disability is the social meaning people derive from impairment. As Simi Linton asserts in *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, "Disability studies takes for its subject matter not simply the variations that exist in human behavior, appearance, functioning, sensory acuity, and cognitive processing, but, more crucially, the meaning we make of those variations" (2). The field implicitly asks: what meanings and narratives does neurotypical culture link to disabled individuals? How can those who are cognitively and physically othered survive a world that is not made for them? These are precisely the questions that Austen asks by relating the stories of her autistic and narcissistic heroines. Moreover, readers can ask questions about how Austen makes meaning out of disability: what meaning does Austen attribute to variations in human cognition, and how should readers interpret her characters? How does the context of long-eighteenth century England influence her discourse, specifically the language of mental difference she has access to?

Disability studies has primarily focused on physical disability and thus historically paid less attention to mental differences. Benjamin Fraiser emphasizes the invisibility of cognitive difference in the field,

> "Cognitive disabilities, when juxtaposed with the increased theoretical, social, and cultural visibility of physical disabilities, have tended to remain disproportionately unseen. That is, those disabilities that might be classified as intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities have not enjoyed as much critical attention by humanities scholars" (29)

Fraiser also contends that while scholars have begun to correct an able-bodied gaze, there remains a need to correct a "cognitively abled" gaze (30). The same holds true for Austen studies. I emphasize neurodiversity as an important tool for literary scholars, especially when studying Austen and her keen interest in human variety. All too often, those who are disabled and/or neurodivergent are treated as diseased and inferior, and they are labeled as defective and burdensome. Where some medical literature and cultural biases stigmatize mental differences, the idea of neurodiversity embraces these groups of people. Thomas Armstrong emphasizes the sense of "affirmation" neurodiversity embodies: "just as we use the terms "cultural diversity" and "biodiversity" to refer to the rich variety of social heritage or biological life, we need a term that conveys a sense of richness of the different kind of brains" (viii). To appreciate the complexity of Austen's neurodivergent characters, neurodiversity must be applied to the study of her novels, as well as eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, literature where examples of physical and mental disability proliferate.

Literary scholars of the long eighteenth-century have explored manifestations of disability—a concept understood in different terms than we understand it today, including the language of "deformity", "defect", and "monstrosity" (Gabbard 80). Like the larger field of disability studies, long eighteenth-century scholars in this field see the category of disability as a

social construction, and one on par with class, gender, and race. Some particularly productive eighteenth-century literary scholarship has investigated the intersection between these social categories. In *'Defects': Engendering the Modern Body* (2000), Helen Deutsch and Felicity Nussbaum interrogate the intersections between gender and disability, arguing that those labeled physically or mentally "defective" had been hitherto ignored by early modern scholars. In *Novel Bodies: Disability and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (2019), Jason Farr claims that in many discourses, disability becomes analogous to queer sexuality and gender. Farr primarily uses examples of physical disability in literature to argue that eighteenth-century discourse on sexuality relied on discourse about disability. Disability studies and eighteenth-century studies have recognized and analyzed the experiences of the physically othered—but a thorough exploration of the cognitively othered remains to be seen. My thesis contributes to the neurodiverse turn in these fields.

Although there is significant Austen scholarship on disability and cognition, few have read her novels through the lens of neurodiversity. Dekel reads Mr. Darcy as an autistic man and explores how gender norms factor into his development. But what about Austen's heroines: could we read the sometimes oblivious, overly emotional Marianne as autistic? Could we read Emma as a heroine with Narcissistic Personality Disorder? I argue that the lens of neurodiversity can increase our understanding of these women. Though many have commented on their unusual temperaments, few have considered their challenges—and strengths—as originating in a profound cognitive difference. This thesis focuses on two of Austen's heroines, Marianne Dashwood and Emma Woodhouse, and reads them as neurodivergent characters. In my first chapter, I propose reading Marianne as autistic to better understand her character and behavior.

Her inability to "read" the thoughts and feelings of others, disregard for and misunderstanding of social propriety, special interests, and emotional dysregulation are just a few traits that mirror autistic experience. Emma, on the other hand, can be understood as someone who has Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). In my second chapter, I demonstrate how she meets almost all the criteria for the disorder as dictated in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (only five are required for a medical diagnosis): a grandiose sense of self-importance, fantasies of unlimited power and superiority, a belief she should associate with other high status people, a sense of entitlement and a need for excessive admiration, to name a few. Emma also has "a paradoxical combination of grandiosity and vulnerability" and "a propensity to suffer from feelings of intense shame", a phenomenon increasingly documented in psychological literature (Ritter et al. 429).[6]

In many ways, Marianne and Emma resemble each other in their character growth. Austen emphasizes the "blindness" of Marianne and Emma—the eighteenth-century equivalent of what we can read today as mindblindness. Each heroine grows as she understands her unique blindness, be it autistic mind blindness or narcissistic confabulation. Only after Marianne and Emma recognize their lack of awareness can they cultivate more empathy and more accurately assess the behavior of others. By the end of both novels, they come to a better understanding of their own minds and the social world. Marianne reflects on her relationship with Willoughby—and the depression and nearly fatal outcome that followed—and reassures her sister, "my feelings shall be governed...shall be regulated, it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by

[6] For more information on feelings of shame in individuals with NPD, please see Ritter et al.'s article "Shame in Patients with Narcissistic Personality Disorder".

constant employment" (Austen 351). Similarly, after Mr. Knightley reprimands Emma's unkindness towards Miss Bates, the narcissistic heroine has an epiphany about herself, "She had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious. But it should be so no more. In the warmth of true contrition, she would call upon [Miss Bates] the very next morning" (327). These revelations are two key examples of how the heroines come to terms with their unproductive behaviors and ways of thinking, as they set a course of action to remedy their past behavior. In these moments of newfound self-awareness, Marianne and Emma learn about their own unique cognitions—in Marianne's case, her emotional dysregulation and in Emma's, a lack of consideration of others—knowledge which will help them adapt to their neurotypical social circles.

Marianne and Emma's narratives also differ because of socioeconomic status; more is at stake for Marianne because of her lower place in the social hierarchy. Marianne's story revolves around her survival as an autistic woman on the cusp of gentility. She *must* find a husband to attain economic security. But her neurodivergent traits—including emotional dysregulation, obliviousness about proper social conduct, and difficulty reading the behavior of others—trouble the matchmaking process and occasionally put her reputation and safety at risk. Emma, on the other hand, is an aristocratic heiress, the mistress of both Hartfield and, arguably, Highbury. Her nonconformity to neurotypical, feminine gender norms does not threaten her social position or livelihood. In this way, *what is at stake* for both heroines differs. Where Emma must cultivate more empathy to become a kinder social "ruler" and mistress of Hartfield, Marianne must adapt to neurotypical norms or risk a fall in social status. To recall Claudia Johnson's argument about *Sense and Sensibility*, "what is at stake finally is not propriety, but survival" (50). Emma's story

does not revolve around surviving eighteenth-century society; her neurodivergent quirks have little bearing on her status because she is a wealthy heiress. However, Emma does learn how her patterns of thinking and behavior can impact others. Aside from cultivating empathy, self-awareness, and awareness of others, the main pedagogical threads differ for each heroine's development. Where the ideas of self-governance and emotional regulation come to the fore in Marianne's growth, Emma's character development centers around managing her narcissistic "blindness," or her self-centered outlook of the world.

Characters like Marianne and Emma are worthy of respect and understanding, just as real neurodivergent individuals deserve the same compassion. Our understanding of neurodivergent communities, especially those with autism and personality disorders, is often short-sighted, if not inaccurate. Our knowledge of neurodiversity will only grow with more research and hopefully, dehumanizing stereotypes will correspondingly diminish. For instance, autistic people are all too often labeled as "emotionally stunted" or "unempathetic." Conversely, as an autistic woman myself, I have been stereotyped as "sensitive" and "overly emotional". Both sets of stereotypes are reductive and do not understand autism as a spectrum across individuals.[7] In many ways, neurotypical outsiders lack empathy—they do not understand this way of being in the world, how people like me experience empathy, sensory stimulation, and human connection. Through this approach to fictional neurodiversity, I hope readers can better cultivate empathy for neurodivergent people and practice reading characters with unfamiliar minds.

[7] Moreover, an individual autistic person can experience a spectrum of emotions, as opposed to a stereotypical binary between "unemotional" vs. "overly emotional" . For instance, many autistic people have moments of emotional flatness *and* hypersensitivity.

Chapter 1: Neurodivergence and Social Growth in *Sense and Sensibility*:

Reading Marianne Dashwood as Autistic

According to the narrator of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne Dashwood, "was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract,by her conduct, her most favourite maxims" (379). At the end of the novel, the narrator gestures to something "extraordinary"[8] about Marianne's development and cognition; over the course of the novel, she had to overcome significant inner conflicts, including "the falsehood of her opinions" and change her "conduct" to adapt to the social world. Marianne's transformation in *Sense and Sensibility,* from emotional and rule-defying to more rational and self-governed, has been a topic of significant scholarly discussion. Many critics understand her development as moving from sensibility to sense and read the novel itself as a struggle between the two[9]. According to this narrative, Marianne begins the novel as the epitome of sensibility, indulging in imagination and fantasy, and spurning social protocol that conflicts with her feelings. When this excessive sensibility culminates in an illness that almost takes her life, she reforms her behavior and heeds Elinor's guidance, aligning herself with sense[10]. However, there is a growing body of scholarship that rejects the sense and sensibility binary and other scholarship that departs from sensibility-centered readings. Participating in this line of inquiry, I

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[8] Many critics would read the word "extraordinary" as satirical but as we will see, such a reading does not recognize just how "extraordinary" Marianne's neurodivergent adaptation to the social world truly is, and how much work it required.

[9] Susan Morgan, for instance, describes the novel as "the triumph of politeness over sincerity" (188).

[10] For an example of reading the novel in terms of this intellectual-emotional dichotomy, see Ruth ApRoberts's "*Sense and Sensibility,* or Growing Up Dichotomous"

propose we must diagnose Marianne as having Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to fully understand her behavior and interiority, as well as the pedagogy Austen has in mind for her neurodivergent heroine.

Many scholars see Austen's understanding of human nature as too nuanced for the binary proposed by the title—which provides fertile ground for my own approach, which addresses the nuance and variation of mental difference. As Marcia Folsom puts it, "Austen readers have agreed for a long time that seeing *Sense and Sensibility* as a didactic novel that prescribes to young women readers Elinor's 'sense' and warns against Marianne's 'sensibility' does not do justice to its complexity" (29). In a similar vein, Claire Tomalin argues Elinor and Marianne act out a "debate" that mirrors 1790s discourse on the topic of openness (155). She asserts, "Austen starts as though she is favouring one set of answers, and grows less certain as the book progresses. For me, this ambivalence makes *Sense and Sensibility* one of her two most deeply absorbing books…Fiction can accommodate ambivalence as polemic cannot" (155). The idea of Austen "[growing] less certain" of answers related to "sense" suggests, to my mind, that Austen began to sympathize more with her neurodivergent heroine who embodies "sensibility". Moreover, Tomalin suggests the reader does not choose sense or sensibility, nor Elinor over Marianne; rather, we must grapple with the "ambivalence" of their different ways of being in the world. Similarly, Donald Stone argues that instead of cultivating sense at the expense of sensibility, "the book asks us to choose sense and sensibility — each finely tempered by contact with the other — not sense or sensibility" (39-40). In light of these nuanced readings, perhaps Sense and Sensibility is more of a red herring, or one of the humorous generalizations that Austen's satiric narrators so often make. Others like Shaun Maurer investigate Marianne's

growth through the lens of developmental psychology, arguing her challenges are age appropriate for adolescence. My reading of Marianne as an autistic woman expands on these nuanced and psychological readings of *Sense and Sensibility* by exploring Austen's treatment of mental differences. Austen's novel is not about one allegory over another—sense *or* sensibility—but rather grapples with a nuanced, cognitive way of being: autism. Just as the novel negotiates sense and sensibility, and adolescence and adulthood, so too does it address the spectrums of neurodivergence and neurotypicality, disability and normalcy.

While a majority of scholars have read Marianne as an embodiment of eighteenth-century sensibility, there is a dearth of criticism that investigates Marianne's disposition from the lens of neurodivergence and disability studies. I propose that Marianne exhibits a significant number of traits that characterize Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Her struggles with managing her emotions and her behavior are indicative of the experiences of an autistic person. Moreover, she is someone we might call "neurotypical-passing"; after all, prior scholarship has primarily attributed her behavior to sensibility, making her cognitive difference invisible. My autistic reading of Marianne does not seek to *supplant* sensibility-focused readings. Rather, I propose that a neurodivergent reading of Marianne *supplement* pre-existing scholarship. By reading Marianne's emotional experiences as those of an autistic woman, we gain more insight into her psychology and character development over the course of the novel. Understanding Marianne as an autistic offers fresh insights into her character, social interactions, and social growth; throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne learns how to better navigate social rules and survive the neurotypical social norms of late eighteenth-century England. In many ways, Austen takes on the role of proto-psychologist in her works. An acute observer of people and a discerning

'reader' of the social world, Austen incorporates a vast spectrum of cognition in her works, including the characterization of Marianne.

My analysis of Marianne's psychology and development is three-fold. First, I identify Marianne's autistic attributes and struggles. Second, I look to the period after she recovers from her illness, a crucial turning point in the novel that brings about self-reflection and changes in her behavior. Finally, I look to the end of the novel, and investigate how the novel frames Marianne's autism, social growth and integration.

Autism and the Relative Invisibility of Autistic Women

Before analyzing Marianne's autistic traits, we must consider the relative invisibility of autistic adults and women today. Consequently, autistic people at the intersection of these identities— autistic adult women—are especially underrepresented. Medical and psychological literature and the understanding of autism among the general populace are all dominated by the male experience—which can vastly differ from how autism presents itself in women and girls. Unlike autistic men, autistic women are more likely to mimic social standards, and their fixations may revolve around more socially acceptable topics (Regan). Marianne's special interests in music and literature, for example, would have been highly appropriate for a young woman in eighteenth-century England. Moreover, the "camouflage" hypothesis, the idea that "females with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) may display superficial social skills which may mask their ASD symptomology impacting on the identification of the disorder", gestures to one reason why women with autism are under-represented and under-diagnosed (Allely 14). In Marianne's case, she masks by performing behaviors related to "sensibility", which would have been an accepted mode of behavior, if one that Austen critiques and evaluates in *Sense and Sensibility*. Thus, when

we examine literary characters who have traits associated with autism, we confront the relative invisibility and lack of documentation of the high functioning, female adult autistic experience. The dearth of female autistic studies in literature reflects the lack of representation autistic women grapple with in real life.[11] That is to say, the invisibility of autistic people today may make it difficult to discern—indeed, "read" —characters as neurodivergent. Other scholars have begun investigating fictional depictions of autistic women.[12] However, representations of autism in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature have yet to be explored. My approach applies the lens of neurodiversity to *see* Marianne in all her autistic complexity.

A standard definition of autism appears in the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), which outlines several key criteria for autism including: persistent deficits in social interaction and communication; restricted repetitive behaviors and interests; impairment in social or occupational functioning; and the fact that these differences are not better explained by intellectual disability (50-51). Whereas the DSM-V focuses more on "deficits" and impairment, the organization *Understood* offers a conception of autism that veers more toward a way of being in the world. The article "What Is Autism?" describes autism as "a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects how people communicate and interact with others and the world around them. It's lifelong — you don't grow out of it" (Morin). The author highlights a few prominent struggles autistic people might have, including understanding "unwritten" social rules, taking language literally, participating in conversation,

[11] For more information on the lack of representation of autistic women, see Rachel Morgan-Trimmer's "Autism in Women - Under-Diagnosed, Under-Served and Under-Represented".
[12] See the article "Characters with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Fiction: Where Are the Women and Girls?" by Priyanka Rebecca Tharian et al.

and controlling their own tone and volume—all of which are traits Marianne exhibits in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Marianne's Autistic Traits

Marianne exhibits many autistic behaviors over the course of the novel: to name a few, black and white thinking, special interests, naivety about proper social conduct, inability to perform social niceties, misreading social situations, and blatant honesty that often results in socially inappropriate comments. She is easily overwhelmed by her emotions and as a result, seeks the relief of isolation or has emotional outbursts and meltdowns. She experiences debilitating bouts of depression and her romantic attachments become special interests—both of which become key plot points in the novel, exposing Marianne's unique challenges and hastening her character growth. Central to Marianne's neurodivergence and characterization is her lack of cognitive empathy. Cognitive empathy can be defined as the ability to perceive the world from the point of view of others. While neurotypical people have this skill, many autistic people lack this ability, "which would allow them to understand the position of the other person" (Gelhaus et al.). In other words, a lack of cognitive empathy can result in a skewed perception of others.

Psychological literature clearly links autistics' difficulties with empathizing to their limited perception of others, or "mindblindness," which can also be applied to Marianne. In "Sex Differences in the Brain: Implications for Explaining Autism," Simon Baron-Cohen and his co-authors touch on the significance of mind blindness among autistics. Studies demonstrate that many autistics face "impairments in empathy," and autistics may have "empathy deficits, or degrees of mind blindness in that they are delayed in developing a "theory of mind" in childhood

and joint attention in infancy" (820). Literary scholars have identified this mind blindness in Marianne. Comparing the heroine of *Northanger Abbey* to Marianne, William Nelles asserts "Marianne shares Catherine's inability to understand other characters' minds and emotions" (13). Nelles later refers to these heroines as "mindblind," underscoring their inherent mental difference in the language of neurodivergence. In particular, *Sense and Sensibility* draws attention to the mindblindness of Marianne's psychology. Consider Elinor's reflection on Marianne's psychology in chapter nine of volume two: "She expected from other people the same opinions and feelings as her own, and she judged of their motives by the immediate effect of their actions on herself" (Austen 221). Because of her inability to emphasize, Marianne struggles to see other individuals, their intentions, and their desires from a point of view other than her own. Marianne's obliviousness has two significant consequences: she misinterprets people and social situations, and she makes social errors.

Marianne often misreads the dynamics of group interactions and exacerbates social tension. One of the most striking scenes occurs when Marianne completely misreads the dynamic between Elinor, Lucy, and Edward in the parlor. Elinor tries to mediate an uncomfortable situation, romantically attached to Edward while Lucy and Edward are secretly engaged. Marianne, however, so convinced of a mutual attachment between Elinor and Edward, remains oblivious of the tension between the other three. After Edward inquires about Marianne's wellbeing, Marianne urges him to think not of her, but her sister, "Elinor is well, you see, That must be enough for us both" (258). The narrator draws attention to how Marianne's comment discomforts the party, "This remark was not calculated to make Edward or Elinor more easy, nor to conciliate the good will of Lucy, who looked up at Marianne with no very benignant

expression" (258). It should be noted that Marianne cannot "calculate" an advantageous social move because of her limited cognitive empathy. Evidently, Marianne, unable to read the group dynamics, does not pick up on her peers' discomfort, nor Lucy's "no very benignant expression". Throughout this conversation, Marianne continues to be overly friendly to Edward and chastises him for being 'engaged' elsewhere, in a way that makes clear a partiality between the Dashwood sisters and Edward. Indeed, the snide Lucy is quick to remark, "'Perhaps, Miss Marianne,' cried Lucy, eager to take some revenge on her, 'you think young men never stand upon engagements, if they have no mind to keep them, little as well as great'" (259). The subtle jab at Willoughby's character and, more importantly, Marianne's judgment makes Elinor "very angry, but Marianne seemed entirely insensible of the sting" (259). Once again, Marianne cannot discern the nuances of the situation and remains oblivious to Lucy's hostility towards her. Consequently, Marianne carries on with her excessive amiability toward Edward, once again disrupting the group's tranquility, "The nature of her commendation, in the present case, however, happened to be particularly ill-suited to the feelings of two thirds of her auditors, and was so very unexhilarating to Edward, that he very soon got up to go away" (259). Marianne makes her listener so uncomfortable that he opts to leave the room, soon followed by Lucy. Mindblind to the interiority of others, Marianne fails to notice the tension between her peers.

Marianne's incorrect reading of the others persists even after Edward and Lucy depart. Annoyed by what seems like Lucy intruding on Elinor's time with Edward, Marianne asks her sister, "What can bring her here so often!...Could not she see that we wanted her gone! —- how teazing to Edward!" (259) Because of her limited cognitive empathy, Marianne cannot deduce or guess what (or who) kept Lucy in their company. Incredulous as ever, it is Marianne who could

not see that Lucy also wanted her gone. The irony only grows when Marianne thinks Lucy's actions were "teazing to Edward." Once again, it is Marianne herself who was unknowingly "teazing." Her praise of Edward has made him uncomfortable; she does not realize excessive compliments may upset a shy, reserved person. Moreover, her praise of Edward has revealed that the Dashwoods are close to him, which is something that annoys Lucy and no doubt makes Elinor and Edward painfully aware of their pseudo love triangle.

In addition to making inappropriate comments, Marianne makes no effort to engage in socially polite lies because of her autistic mind. After Lucy Steele gushes over how "sweet" Lady Middleton is, Marianne remains "silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion" so Elinor must take up "the whole task of telling lies" (149). Incapable of lying, Marianne fails to preserve the feelings of others even when the social situation requires it. Her autistic honesty and genuineness prevent her from performing falsehood. Because of autistic women's cognition, they usually do not value, much less understand these arbitrary social conventions. Victoria Honeybourne describes how autistic women interpret the social world, "A lot of what other people do feels unimportant to you. You have different beliefs and values. Everybody else seems to connect instinctively and so easily, whereas you always seem to inadvertently say the wrong thing" (54). Marianne does not *value* performing politeness, much less understand how or why to perform it—she will only see its unfortunate necessity by the novel. But for now, Mariannes' belief in showing *only* genuine feeling—an autistic tendency which overlaps with the eighteenth-century understanding of "sensibility" —conflicts with social propriety. As a result, she says or does "the wrong thing", such as praising Edward and making him uncomfortable or in this instance, not placating Lady

Middleton. Instead, the socially savvy and likely neurotypical Elinor must be socially polite for them both.

Marianne's disregard of social propriety also reflects a neurodivergent way of processing the world. Marianne goes on an excursion with Willoughby to Allenham, oblivious of the potentially severe social consequences. When visiting his future property, Marianne and Willoughby go unchaperoned. Stunned, Elinor confronts Marianne about this breach in proper conduct and Marianne returns "after a ten minutes' interval of earnest thought" and entreats her sister, "Perhaps, Elinor, it was rather ill-judged in me to go to Allenham; but Mr. Willoughby wanted particularly to shew me the place" (102). Marianne does not seem to fully register her social error and dwells no longer on her impropriety. Instead, she derails into exclamations over the "charming house" for almost half a page. Marianne almost learns from her social mistake by reflecting on it—her ten minutes of "earnest thought" —but instead of recognizing and amending her social error, she becomes absorbed in fantasies. As Marianne excitedly chatters on and on about the sitting rooms at Allenham, she is oblivious to her sister's disinterest in the subject, which Austen's narrator hints at with her dry humor: "Could Elinor have listened to her without interruption from the others, she would have described every room in the house with equal delight" (103). Marianne fails to gauge that Elinor is not engaged in the conversation. Moreover, her daydreams and easily excitable imagination can be understood as autistic fantasy, "a defense mechanism in which a person deals with emotional conflict and stressors by indulging in excessive daydreaming as a solution for problem solving" ("autistic fantasy"). Instead of recognizing just how "ill-judged" her unchaperoned trip was, Marianne avoids confronting her mistake by turning to pleasing daydreams.

In this way, autistic social obliviousness and imagination multiply Marianne's social errors: first with her conduct with Willoughby, and then in her conversation with Elinor. Marianne's coping mechanisms and behavior are counterproductive to her learning from social mistakes and better navigating social interactions. Marianne is unable to grasp her negligence, unable to acknowledge how an unchaperoned trip with a young man could damage her reputation. Marianne's autistic inability to read social situations and comprehend social rules puts her in an incredibly vulnerable position, especially in her encounters with Willoughby.

So far I have discussed how Marianne's impaired cognitive empathy and mindblindness results in misinterpretation and error in social situations. While Marianne cannot "feel" what others feel, she experiences moments of *intense* feeling which she struggles to manage. These intense feelings recall the experiences of other autistic women. Victoria Honeybourne points out that autistic women have difficulty "expressing their emotions" and "managing feelings" and "report being overwhelmed by negative feelings such as anxiety, nervousness or loneliness, which then has a long-lasting negative impact on their education and future lives" (58). Similarly, many people experience intense empathy. Romy Hume and Henry Burgess assert that empathy-deficit theories of autism remain problematic for a variety of reasons, and emphasize the intensity of affective empathy for many autistic people, "Affective empathy and motor empathy, however, have been demonstrated as intact or heightened in autistic people. Affective empathy refers to the capacity to be emotionally affected by others' feelings and may be summed up with, 'I feel what you feel'".[13] Stereotypes of autistic people lacking empathy erase how

[13] For more information on autism and affective empathy, see Hume and Burgess's article, "'I'm Human After All': Autism, Trauma, and Affective Empathy".

overwhelming emotion can be for autistic people, and impedes our ability to fully understand Marianne's emotional episodes. While many attribute Marianne's behaviors to mere sensibility, in actuality her emotional outbursts mirror autistic experience, a profoundly different way of processing feeling and the external world.

The novel draws attention to Marianne's autistic excess of feeling, and it becomes one of her defining traits. The very first chapter foreshadows and characterizes Marianne by her emotional intensity, "Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever; but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation" (44). In contrast to the level-headed, self-governing Elinor, Marianne's foil, Marianne is "eager in every thing" — a very apt phrase to describe the intensity of an autistic person's passions. Moreover, the narrator stresses how her feelings have "no moderation", implying that they are intense as well as difficult to manage. One can see how Marianne's focus on her passions and hobbies, such as literature and music, has no "moderation" —which matches the intensity of autistic special interests. The criteria for ASD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) describes special interests as "highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus" (54). Marianne's love for reading and music fit this criteria of "highly restricted, fixated interests", and could also be called "preoccupations" and "obsessions".

Marianne's special interests do not go unnoticed by her peers—evidently they realize her passions greatly inform how she perceives and navigates the world. About Marianne's love of reading, Edward exclaims, "I know her greatness of soul, there would not be music enough in London to content her. And books!—Thomson, Cowper, Scott—she would buy them all over

and over again: she would buy up every copy" (Austen 123). Marianne does not merely 'like' music and books; they spur "her greatness of soul" and of passion, a passion that cannot be satiated even by all the literature available in London. Marianne's special interests go beyond the arts. For many autistic women, romantic interests take on the intensity of special interests, source. As is the case for these autistic women, Marianne's romantic attachment to Willoughby becomes one of her special interests.

Marianne's feelings for Willoughby go beyond infatuation. She is obsessed and wholly preoccupied with him; she seeks to fill her every moment at Barton with Willoughby's company and conversation. When Marianne agrees to go to London with Elinor and Mrs. Jennings, it is only in the hopes she will see Willoughby—she has no desire to socialize with other peers. Her strong attachment to Willoughby, not unlike her other passions, makes her loss of him all the more devastating, all the more overwhelming and difficult to cope with.

After upsetting social interactions, intense emotions overwhelm and incapacitate Marianne. It should be noted that autistic people are often mistakenly understood as lacking emotion. In actuality, autistics can easily be debilitated by intense emotions. Her overwhelming emotions often result in meltdowns, which are amplified emotional responses often manifest themselves as "intense reactions to stress or outbursts that are colloquially referred to as 'meltdowns'" (Mazefsky et al.) When Marianne can avoid a meltdown, or at least conceal it, she often does so through emotional withdrawal and self-isolation.

In volume two of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne's reaction to Willoughby's cold indifference at the London ball demonstrates just how intense autistic emotional response can be: "Marianne, now looking dreadfully white, and unable to stand, sunk into her chair" (Austen

200). Marianne is so overwhelmed that her sister expects her to faint, Marianne's emotional response is so visceral that it physically incapacitates her. When the sisters arrive home, Marianne is in "a silent agony, too much oppressed even for tears" and almost immediately heads to bed "desirous of being alone" (201). The language of "oppressed" is key to understanding Marianne's emotional regulation or lack thereof. Her emotions govern and assail her, she is crippled by their intensity. Similarly, her agony is "silent"; Marianne does not seek to confide in others after moments of emotional distress. She emotionally withdraws, she is uncommunicative. To cope with her hurt, Marianne immediately seeks solitude and alone time to process these emotions. The Intense World Theory of Autism helps explain Marianne's withdrawal (Markram and Markram). Rather than framing autism as a deficit disorder, the researchers suggest the condition is hyperfunctional: autistic people feel overwhelmed and bombarded by too much stimuli, which causes them to withdraw, socially and emotionally, as a means of self-protection (Sifferlin). In this vein, when Marianne cannot emotionally withdraw and feels overwhelmed, she inevitably melts down in moments like this rejection by Willoughby.

Indeed, the narrator offers other glimpses of Marianne's psyche that can be read through the lens of the Intense World Theory of Autism. The narrator draws attention to Marianne's intense turns inward, "Marianne was spared from the troublesome feelings of contempt and resentment…by remaining unconscious of it all; for she was as well able to collect her thoughts within herself, and be as ignorant of what was passing around her, in Mr. Gray's shop, as in her own bed-room" (238-239). In this passage, the reader will notice just how much stimulation surrounds Marianne. She sits in Mr. Gray's shop, no doubt filled and surrounded by bustling people. Moreover, Marianne also avoids feelings of "contempt and resentment" that would arise

from observing the pretentiousness of the other customers, including her own half-sibling Mr. Dashwood, who scrutinizes every frivolous detail when picking out a toothpick case. In other words, Marianne seeks solitude in her own mind to block out all of the overwhelming stimuli, and the unpleasant emotions they stir inside her. While Marianne avoids "troublesome feelings" in this moment, her inward turn as a coping mechanism often fails—especially in situations relating to Elinor.

Marianne often feels overwhelmed by her intense empathy and love for Elinor, so much so that she has meltdowns. At a gathering at Mrs. Ferrars's home, Mrs. Ferrars and her daughter make deliberate efforts to slight Elinor, by downplaying the quality of the screens she painted. Marianne responds viscerally: "Marianne was vexed at it for her sister's sake, and turned her eyes toward Elinor to see how she bore these attacks, with an earnestness which gave Elinor far more pain than could arise from such common-place railway as Mrs. Jennings's" (71). These descriptions of Marianne as "vexed" and overly earnest convey just how upset she is by Mrs. Ferrars's "attacks" on Elinor. After another moment in which Mrs. Ferrars behaves unkindly toward Elinor, Marianne loses her composure and has an emotional meltdown after she tries to comfort her sister: "[Marianne] could say no more; her spirits were quite overcome, and hiding her face on Elinor's shoulder, she burst into tears" (252). Marianne's intense feelings, of love for her sister and hurt over Mrs. Ferrars's frigidness overwhelm her and lead to sporadic, uncontrollable emotional outburst. Conversely, some might argue that this moment demonstrates Marianne's emotional selfishness, not her empathy. Her burst taxes Elinor's own emotional resources as she suffers these insults. What these critics *do not understand* is that Marianne cannot control her emotional reaction. She is overwhelmed by an inundation of mortification,

humiliation, and anger on Elinor's behalf—and this tide of feeling inevitably breaks. Although Mrs. Ferrars's petty coldness likely would not evoke such a powerful response in a neurotypical person, Marianne is beyond hurt by such behavior.

It should be noted that prior to Marianne's illness, she does not register that her intense feelings debilitate her. Marianne's emotional episode after Willoughby's removal from the countryside brings about emotional outbursts that prevent Marianne from acclimating to the loss of her lover, her new social environment. Marianne's reaction to Willoughby's absence also reveals that she does not realize how harmful her intense emotional reactions can be: "without any desire of command over herself. The slightest mention of anything relative to Willoughby overpowered her in an instant" (114). The phrase "desire of command over herself" suggests that Marianne might be able to control her behavior but chooses not to—or perhaps, so mired in her depression, she cannot imagine, even fathom acting in a more controlled way. For either reading, it is evident Marianne does not understand how debilitating her intense emotional outbursts can be. "Overpowered" in an instant, Marianne has yet to learn the importance of emotional regulation.

Reformed Behavior: Marianne's Adaptation to the Social Sphere

Scholars often read Austen's novels as pedagogical programs that educate heroines and heroes. Stefanie Markovitz, for instance, rightly point outs that "falls" form part of this pedagogy: "Austen's understanding of falling relates intimately to her conceptions of both happiness and education, that is, of making people 'better'"(780). These falls can be metaphorical, such as a moment of mortification or humiliation, or literal, such as Marianne's fall in the rain in the first volume, which sets up her romance with Willoughby. I would argue

that Marianne's "falls" anticipate a neurodivergent challenge she must overcome. Her fall in the rain sets up a relationship with Willoughby that instructs her how to read others correctly. Later in the novel, Marianne's fall into illness, which stems from depression and a lack of self-care, will teach her the importance of emotional regulation.

Claudia Johnson underscores that Austen ultimately teaches her heroines to *survive* their social circumstances: "Whereas conduct books teach young women the social codes they must adopt if they are to live acceptably as wives and daughters, fully integrated into their communities, *Sense and Sensibility* makes those codes and the communities that dictate them the subject of its interrogation, and what is at stake finally is not propriety, but survival" (50). Johnson's argument echoes and bolsters my reading of Marianne's development. As an autistic woman, Marianne must adapt to eighteenth-century social codes to navigate a world that privileges men and neurotypicals.

I concur with other scholars that Marianne undergoes a social education and, I would argue, one grounded in her neurodivergent struggles. By the end of the novel, Marianne's social conduct dramatically transforms. She is eventually able to learn from social mishaps often caused by her mindblindness and emotionality, and proves able to perform social propriety and follow social rules. She becomes more conscientious of the needs and interiority of others, and she develops strategies to cope with her emotional volatility. Marianne's life-threatening illness brings about self-reflection that changes her behavior. Moreover, Marianne's loved ones and friends, particularly Elinor, serve as models for Marianne on how to perform advantageous social behavior, and how to curate self-awareness. Some people may question why Marianne was not able to conform to social norms earlier. Indeed, we must remember that Marianne is only

seventeen at the beginning of this novel—a tumultuous time for any teenager, but especially an autistic one. As a young autistic woman, Marianne is still learning how to "read" and navigate the social world at this stage in her life; in part because of her adolescence, and doubly so because of her neurodivergence.[14]

Marianne learns to mimic social politeness as the novel progresses. Marianne's improved social conduct is related to her improved cognitive empathy, her increased emotional attention to her loved ones. In volume three, Marianne realizes her ignorance of Elinor's suffering over Lucy and Edward's engagement and feels incredibly guilty. Although Marianne feels upset and despises Lucy and Edward, she agrees to be polite upon her sister's urging and modifies her behavior accordingly:

> She performed her promise of being discreet, to admiration. —She attended to all that Mrs. Jennings had to say upon the subject, with an unchanging complexion, dissented from her in nothing...She listened to her praise of Lucy with only moving from one chair to another, and when Mrs. Jennings talked of Edward's affection, it cost her only a spasm in her throat.—Such advances towards heroism in her sister, made Elinor feel equal to any thing herself (278).

Because of her love for Elinor, Marianne heeds her sister's advice and strives to behave civilly. The word "performed" demonstrates how Marianne truly 'acts out' this proper social conduct—it does not come naturally to her as it would for a neurotypical person. As an autistic person,

[14] As an autistic woman myself, I can attest to young adulthood being a challenging period of life, one in which I was still learning 'social rules' and norms by observing others.

Marianne learns how to play her social role, how to act the part of politeness. She masks her true feelings; she withholds both verbal comments and body language. By schooling her facial expressions and behavior, Marianne demonstrates she can govern her emotions instead of letting her emotions govern and overwhelm her. Marianne resolves herself to perform social lies and propriety, although this conflicts with her autistic tendency to be honest. Because of her love for her sister, Marianne learns how to navigate this social situation in a less disruptive, more productive way for both herself and Elinor. Austen focalizes this scene through Elinor and utilizes the older sister's free indirect discourse, as indicated by the use of em dashes and parallel, meandering sentence structures that mimic actual thoughts. Elinor feels "admiration" for Marianne's actions and describes her behavior as "heroism"—and appropriately so. Although many would read Marianne's "heroism" ironically, it is actually true because of her neurodiversity. Elinor understands just how difficult this social performance is for her sister. Marianne faces head on what are daunting social challenges for an autistic all because she deeply loves her sister. Understanding Marianne as cognitively different allows the reader to cultivate greater sympathy for Austen's heroine—just as Elinor does. A neurodiverse approach invites an interpretation of Austen's narrator as knowing and sincere, as someone who understands Marianne's unique disposition and celebrates the compassion between the novel's sisters.

Not only does Marianne's love for Elinor facilitate her social growth, but Elinor herself plays an active role in Marianne's social growth. Throughout the novel, Elinor models advantageous, savvy social behavior for her autistic sister, fully aware of Marianne's differences in perception and cognition. In a spirited conversation among the other Dashwoods and Edward Ferrars, Marianne accuses Elinor of trying to change her opinions. But Elinor does not agree,

"My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behavior…I am guilty, I confess, of having wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or to conform to their judgment in serious manners?" (120). Here Elinor attempts to teach Marianne about the realities of unspoken social rules. Elinor only encourages Marianne to *perform* social propriety, to be attentive to her peers—but Marianne does not have to "adopt their sentiments", she can still have her own opinions.

Moreover, it should be noted that Elinor admits she is "guilty" of her wishes, which can be read one of two ways (or perhaps both). On the one hand, Elinor may say this ironically—she merely wants Marianne to be a more attentive acquaintance. And yet, Elinor may also feel some guilt over the fact that she *must* teach Marianne social rules if she is to survive in their culture. Perhaps in another world, Marianne's autistic behaviors would not be an impediment to social interaction, but be met with an understanding of human cognitive difference—but this is not the world Marianne or Elinor live in. Hence Marianne must develop strategies to adapt.

Marianne learns to cope with her intense, internal emotions, especially regarding her memories of Willoughby. After Marianne falls ill, she reflects on her behavior and recognizes how a lack of emotional regulation fed her impropriety and illness: "I saw in my own behavior...nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others. I saw that my own feelings prepared my sufferings...Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged" (350). Instead of turning toward autistic fantasy as a coping mechanism, as she might have done earlier in the novel, Marianne addresses her problem. Indeed, the language of "failing indulged" gestures to Marianne's overindulgence in

her imagination which led her to neglect “duty” and behave in a way that clashed with social rules. She understands how her “own feelings”, her lack of emotional regulation exacerbated her “imprudence” and “sufferings”. Marianne recognizes her “want of kindness to others”, which is arguably synonymous with a lack of cognitive empathy, her inability to see things from the perspectives of others and courteously modify her behavior.

The newly self-aware Marianne also understands her intense experience of emotions will persist. When reflecting on her heartache over Willoughby, Marianne confides in Elinor, “His remembrance can be overcome by no change of circumstance or opinions” (351). The painful emotions evoked by Willoughby, the intensity of what Marianne feels, will still exist—arguably, Marianne’s self-acceptance of autistic emotionality points to a non-ableist reading of the text. Autistic people cannot change their mental wiring, their strong emotions or any other challenges and gifts that come with their neurodivergence. Autistics, not unlike neurotypicals, can only develop coping mechanisms that help them adapt to the rules of the world. After reflecting on Willoughby, Marianne explains how she plans to cope: “my feelings shall be governed...shall be regulated, it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment” (351). Instead of letting her emotions overwhelm her, Marianne will use rational thinking to make sense of her feelings, she will use emotional regulation (or in Austen’s language, the ‘government’ of feeling) to quell them. She will also pursue “constant employment” as a means to distract herself from unpleasant memories. The word “governed” in this passage is key to the pedagogical program of Austen’s text. Once “governed” and incapacitated by her intense emotional reactions, Marianne now governs and gains some control over her emotions, which will lessen her discomfort and

difficulties, be it over Willoughby or socially upsetting situations, as she navigates neurotypical society.

The Novel's Treatment of Neurodiversity

How does the novel treat Marianne's mental difference, and why is this significant? What matters in a neurodivergent coming-of-age story, and the development of its heroine? We can begin to answer these questions through a topic at the heart of Austen criticism: the marriage plot. I argue that Austen destabilizes the centrality of the marriage proposal in Marianne's narrative; instead, she foregrounds moments of Marianne's newfound self-awareness and love for her sister. What matters for this neurodivergent heroine is *not* romance, but social learning and sisterly support.

On the one hand, it should be emphasized that Marianne's peers objectify her to an alarming extent, particularly in relation to the marriage plot. Such objectification surfaces when the characters wish for Marianne to marry Colonel Bradon, "To see Marianne settled at the manor-house was equally the wish of Edward and Elinor. They each felt his sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the reward of all" (379). On the one hand, Marianne's peers transform her into an object, "the reward" for themselves and Colonel Brandon. Colonel Brandon's "sorrows" and ameliorating them is one of the central concerns felt by this social circle, and its significant presence in the end of the novel generally cannot be ignored. I would argue Marianne is objectified, for one thing, because she is a woman on the marriage market, and a woman who deviates from cognitive and social norms, no less.

And yet, I would also argue the other characters' relief over Marianne's societal integration, especially given her cognitive difference, lies at the heart of this passage. Indeed, one should return to the phrase "their obligations" and "by general consent". While Marianne's "consent" and willingness to marry can be questioned, the language of "their obligations" underscores how Marianne's peers feel great responsibility over her livelihood. Moreover, the sentence begins with "To see Marianne settled", underscoring Elinor and Edward's anxieties, especially Elinor's anxieties, about seeing her sister find social security and a place in the world — an anxiety not unlike that of neurotypical peers and parents of autistic individuals today, who want the best for their loved ones. Marrying Colonel Brandon, a man who actually loves Marianne is an opportunity that cannot be passed up in the minds of Marianne's friends, a way this autistic woman can find some measure of safety and acceptance. In this way, one can read Marianne as an object and "reward", but also see how her development and integration into the social sphere is the underlying "reward" for the other characters.

For all the characters' enthusiasm over Marianne's marriage, it is mentioned only in passing. The narrator describes not how Marianne and Colonel Brandon became engaged, but instead focuses on how a change of heart in Marianne did occur, "With such a confederacy against her…what could she do?" (379) Austen frames the union between Marianne and Colonel Brandon more as a social necessity for Marianne's sake, and a contract where her consent is dubious or reluctant. In any case, this excerpt is the closest the narrator comes to depicting how the couple became engaged. In some ways, the depiction of the marriage in *Sense and Sensibility* resembles Austen's other novels. Janis Stout convincingly argues that while Austen provides insight to the happiness of the couple *after* the proposal, she usually omits the proposal scene

itself, denying readers access to this intimate moment. Like Marianne's marriage, Stout characterizes Elinor's proposal scene by its "absence of direct depiction": "What might be expected to be the romantic climax of the book, Edward's proposal to Elinor, is not a "scene", properly speaking, at all. It is merely acknowledged to have occurred" (318). Outside of omitting and summarizing off-stage proposals, Marianne's marriage plot deviates from that of other Austen heroines. For one thing, romance does not dominate the discourse. In other Austen novels, the build up to or the aftermath of the proposal scene includes some confession of love from the hero. In fact, in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*—for many people, two of the more romantic Austen novels—the heroes describe their love in strikingly similar ways. Where Mr. Darcy tells Elizabeth, "A man who had felt less, might [have talked to you]" (330), Mr. Knightley confesses to Emma "If I loved you less, I might be able to talk about it more" (366). But in *Sense and Sensibility,* Colonel Brandon utters no such line (at least, in front of Marianne) and Marianne's first love, Willoughby, denies her any romantic reciprocity whatsoever. Moreover, there is hardly anything romantic about being a "reward" for someone else or having a "confederacy" of people pressuring Marianne into marriage. Why sideline the element of romance from Marianne's narrative?

In her article "Instrument of Growth: The Courtship and Marriage of Jane Austen's Novels", William Magge argues that Austen enlarges the courtship and marriage plot "for detailing the growth of successive heroines" (198). If courtship and marriage function as "[instruments] of growth" for Austen's heroines, Austen treats courtship differently in Marianne's story to better address her neurodivergent growth. Instead of a proposal scene or build up to it, Marianne must reconcile with her errors in romance, her misreading of the social

world, and her emotional dysregulation, much of which I addressed in the previous section, as it related to Marianne's promise that "[her] feelings shall be governed" (351). It should be noted this reconciliation of past behavior culminates in a conversation with Elinor—indeed, Marianne also reconciles with Elinor herself—in chapter ten of the last volume:

> "Had I died, —it would have been self-destruction…Had I died, —in what peculiar misery I should have left you, my nurse, my friend, my sister!...But you, —you above all, above my mother, had been wronged by me. I, and only I, knew your heart and its sorrows; yet, to what did it influence me? —not to any compassion that could benefit you or myself. —Your example was before me: but to what avail? —Was I more considerate of you and your comfort?...regretting only *that* heart which had deserted and wronged me, and leaving you, for whom I professed an unbounded affection, to be miserable for my sake" (350-351).

Instead of a proposal or romantic scene, Austen substitutes this with Marianne's self-reflection and her apology to her sister. In many ways, this scene could be read as an"anti-proposal". Marianne does not receive a romantic confession by the end of the novel; instead, she must work through why Willoughby's proposal never happened—she must grapple with her misreading of the social world. Moreover, this scene of sisterly intimacy replaces a moment of romantic love between hero and heroine. In either case, Marianne has *agency* in this moment of intimacy, which recalls how Austen treats her heroines and courtship plots (which also are composed of moments of intimacy). As Heidi Giles points out in her article "Resolving the Institution of Marriage in Eighteenth-Century Courtship Novels", "Jane Austen's portrayal of courtship differs from that of many courtship novels written throughout the eighteenth century: in Austen's

novels, instead of submitting to authority and convention, a young woman takes charge of her own marriage" (76). Although Marianne does not "take charge" of her marriage, she *does* take charge of evaluating her personal shortcomings. She *does* "resolve" her conflicted feelings and come to terms with the marriage proposal that did not happen. Marianne ameliorates a relationship arguably more important than marriage—her relationship with her sister. Marianne's reconciliation with Elinor not only replaces the heteromantic proposal scene, but cements the extent of her social growth. Marianne's conversation with Elinor displaces the proposal scene, its usual dominance at the end of Austen's marital plots, because Marianne's social learning *matters more* than romance. It is social learning and sisterly love that ensures Marianne's survival.

Marianne's evaluation of her past behavior focuses on how she has wronged her sister. Marianne criticizes the "peculiar misery" she would have inflicted on Elinor had she died, and regrets her lack of compassion toward her sister. Folsom foregrounds "the centrality of the love between the two sisters" in Marianne's discourse and argues that instead of "giving a narrative of Marianne's contrition, Austen gives Marianne ample space to declare her feelings, to remember and to review the past" (35). To expand this interpretation, I argue Austen gives her neurodivergent heroine a voice so she can work through her neurodivergent errors and formulate new ways of navigating the social world. It is Elinor's suffering that motivates Marianne to change her behavior, to begin learning how to regulate her emotions (and this skill of emotional regulation, I hope has become clear, is difficult and arduous to acquire for many autistic people). Moreover, as we have seen, the sisterly love between Elinor and Marianne pervades the entirety of the novel, "In scene after scene, what comes through in Elinor's attention is that she is looking out for Marianne, who is younger, more vital, but in her very vibrancy, needing protection"

(Folsom 33). Folsom's reading supports my own understanding of the love between Elinor and Marianne, a neurotypical and neurodivergent sister. As I have argued earlier, by teaching Marianne how to navigate the social world, Elinor not only acts as a loving sister, but a neurotypical mentor. Indeed, she is "the example before [Marianne]" on how to navigate the social world (351). Moreover, Folsom's description of Marianne's "vibrancy" recalls the narrator's celebration of human difference in *Northanger Abbey,* "the happiest delineation of [human nature's] varieties" (60). Yes, Marianne may need special "protection" from loved ones like Elinor, and the neurodivergent heroine needs the unique pedagogy *Sense and Sensibility* provides, but Marianne brings joyousness and vibrancy into her sister's life and the very experience of reading this novel.

Marianne's self-reflection and conversation with Elinor supplants a confession of marital love with a confession of sisterly love—the sisterly love that largely enabled her growth as an autistic woman. The final sentence of the novel cements the steadfastness of the Dashwoods' sisterly love,

> Between Barton and Delaford, there was constant communication which strong family affection would naturally dictate; —and among the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands (381).

The final image of the novel is one of sisterly love and felicity, one that celebrates "the merits and the happiness" of its neurotypical and neurodivergent heroine. It is not the women's marital

relationships that take precedence. Rather, the novel reiterates their sisterly bond—the main relationship that has facilitated Marianne's social growth. The culmination of the novel with the sisters' relationship is just one reminder how Marianne's family and peers love her, guide her, and safeguard her as much as possible. The image of harmony between the households of Barton and Delaford and "that constant communication which strong family affection would dictate" reminds us of the stakes of Marianne's development. Aided by her social support systems at Barton and Delaford, her adaptation to the neurotypical world is one of the central projects of the novel, and the one thing her loved ones wished to see.

My reading of the Dashwood sisters' closeness does not cast aside the importance of marriage; rather, it approaches its importance in a different way. Marianne's marriage largely facilitates her survival and her integration into a neurotypical world, "she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, a mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" (380). By the end of the novel, Marianne becomes thoroughly integrated into her social community—a "mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" no less. The phrase "submitting to new attachments" can be read in one of two ways. As a vulnerable, neurodivergent heroine, Marianne "submitting" to the patriarchal institution of marriage makes her secure in the social world (this is the social reality of eighteenth-century England, unfortunately). Additionally, the language of "submitting" can be interpreted as Marianne's own language, expressing her reluctance and the difficulty of performing these new social roles. Indeed the phrase of "submitting to new attachments" can be read as a part of the narrator's tendency to reflect the perspectives of both sisters—including the

ways its autistic heroine humorously indicts the arbitrariness of the social world[15]. While acknowledging the security offered by marriage, the ending of the novel *foregrounds* moments that highlight Marianne's newfound self-awareness and relationship to her sister: the key elements that enable her neurodivergent development. While Marianne's survival does require her to learn 'normative' social behavior and culminates with the patriarchal institution of marriage, Marianne does carve out a place for herself in the world—something she did not have at the beginning of the novel—a place alongside loved ones who safeguard her flourishing and wellbeing.

[15] For a particularly convincing analysis of narrative voice in *Sense and Sensibility,* see Folsom's "The Narrative Voice and the Sense of *Sense and Sensibility".*

Chapter 2: Neurodivergence in Jane Austen's *Emma:*

The Narcissistic Heroine, Her Social "Blindness" and "Blunders"

In Jane Austen's *Emma,* narcissistic characters proliferate in the village of Highbury: Frank Churchill, Mr. Elton, Mrs. Elton, Mr. Woodhouse, and of course, the novel's heroine. And yet, despite the abundant narcissism within the landed gentry and upper-middle class, there is a dearth of criticism that investigates the novel's characters, especially the heroine, through the lens of psychology and social science. Marian Blasi, one of several scholars interested in Emma's narcissism, includes *Emma* in her survey of narcissism in nineteenth-century literature. However, Blasi focuses on "a quality of narcissism" following the Freudian interpretation of the Narcissus myth and its relationship to nineteenth-century materialism, as opposed to a neuroscience-informed approach that analyzes neurodivergence in individual characters (4). As I continue to read Austen's work through the lens of psychology, I propose a reading of *Emma* that foregrounds the heroine's Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) and thus illuminates her perception of herself and others. Emma's narcissism often blinds her from reality, distorting how she evaluates social interactions and the desires and motivations of her peers. Her neurodivergence also causes her to make numerous social errors, or "blunders". Not unlike Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility,* Emma's neurodivergence contributes to her social "blindness" and "blunders"; by the end of the novel, Emma gains greater awareness of her own psychology and improves upon her shortcomings, including her manipulation of others, and difficulty empathizing and reading the social world. Indeed, becoming aware of one's mindblindness and adapting to the social sphere are central parts of Austen's pedagogy for her neurodivergent heroines.

The centrality of cognition in Austen's *Emma* cannot be understated. Claire Tomalin alludes to it in her description of the novel in which "the pleasures of a detective story are added to the study of human psychology" (248). Not only does Tomalin gesture to the centrality of psychology in the novel, but the idea of detective work is also bound up in the cognition of readers and characters alike. Readers uncover secrets like the affair between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax at the same time Emma does "detective work" to parse the social world, which improves as the novel progresses. Indeed, Emma's unique psychology comes to the fore of many critical readings. F.B. Pinion underscores the self-centeredness of the novel itself, "In Emma nearly everything is seen from the heroine's point of view, only occasionally from Mr Knightley's or the Westons'" (116). Pinion goes on to describe Emma as a misjudging imaginist with a different developmental trajectory than other heroines, contrasting her with Austen's Elizabeth Bennet, "The process of self-discovery is longer and more complicated with Emma; it gives greater opportunity for subjective or psychological treatment in dramatic scenes and reflection, with ironical punctuation in circumstance and comment" (117). The psychological treatment of scenes, and the elongated process of learning and self-awareness underscores just how central Emma's cognition is to the novel. Though Adela Pinch only briefly looks at *Emma*, she focuses on the heroine' perception of others: "Emma believes herself to be 'in the secret of everybody's feelings,' but she is ignorant and grievously mistaken about everybody's feelings, including her own" (142). What these readings reveal is an intense interest in Emma's mind. Indeed, scholarly insights mirror actual NPD traits, though they may use different language. For example, Pinch's analysis reflects how narcissistic traits like Emma's arrogance and belief in her own superiority color her perception of others and contribute to her mindblindness. Similarly, building on Pinion's analysis, one can see how the self-centered frame of the novel mirrors and

highlights the heroine's narcissism. Reading Emma (and *Emma)* through the lens of Narcissistic Personality Disorder reveals her as a character with mental difference.

Austen herself intuited she wrote a heroine that may be controversial, "I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like" (*Memoir of Jane Austen* 157). Remarking on Austen's witticism, Eugene Goodheart notes, "It is easier to say why the reader may dislike Emma than why her creator likes her. Emma is willful, manipulative, an arranger or rather a misarranger of other people's lives. Much of the time she fails to see things clearly and truly, and her self-knowledge is uncertain" (589). Goodheart's commentary on Emma's manipulation and "uncertain" self-knowledge can be read as part of her neurodivergence[16]. Conversely, Claudia Johnson provides a thorough analysis of Emma's critics—especially those critiques undergirded by misogyny and sexism—and argues that Emma's naysayers overlook the heroine's effective social governance and the female-empowerment within *Emma*.

I build on Johnson's work by suggesting it is not only Emma's gender and transgression of gender roles, but her neurodivergence and transgression of social rules that also unsettle Austen's readers. Moreover, in her chapter on *Emma* titled "Woman, Lovely Woman Reigns Alone", Johnson argues that the novel supports women's governance through Emma's "reign" over Hartfield and Highbury and that "female authority itself is the subject of Emma" (122) Expanding Johnson's work, I argue that what is at stake in this Austen novel is not just women's rulership, but the rulership of neurodivergent women—in particular, a narcissist "who possesses

[16] We should note that while Goodheart lists negative traits that can be associated with Emma's neurodivergence, he does not discuss the virtues of Emma's unique temperament. This chapter aims to correct this tendency and point out the positive facets of Emma's neurodivergence.

and enjoys power, without bothering to demur about it" (Johnson 125). While reading *Emma*, readers must not overlook the significance of the heroine's position as a neurodivergent woman, her inherent strengths and social learning throughout the novel, and how this makes her an apt, even admirable "social ruler".

Emma and Narcissistic Personality Disorder

The novel's very first sentence underscores Emma's narcissistic self-importance: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (Austen 55). The narrator appears to take on Emma's persona in the opening sentence. The language of "very little to distress or vex" seems particularly characteristic of Emma's language and voice throughout the text. The first page goes on to gesture to Emma's sense of self-importance, "The real evils indeed of Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself; these were the disadvantages which threatened to alloy to her many enjoyments" (55). Emma's disposition "to think a little too well of herself" reflects a central characteristic of Narcissistic Personality Disorder: a grandiose sense of self-importance. Her position of power, as a gentlewoman and the mistress of Hartfield, compounds with this neurodivergence in a way that "[threatens] alloy to her many enjoyments". In other words, class and neurodivergence intersect in ways that will cause Emma to make social errors—the very problem the novel delights in and seeks to amend. The beginning of the novel foreshadows Emma's perception of her centrality and sets up a reading of Emma as narcissistic and neurodivergent.

Just as the novel is focalized predominantly through Emma, Emma sees herself as all-important to the world of Highbury; she perceives its daily events as revolving around her. Emma's sense of grandiose self-importance resonates with American Psychology Association's (APA) definition of Narcissistic Personality Disorder: "A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts" (669). The first two volumes of the novel especially center around Emma's narcissistic behavior. For instance, Emma's supposably charitable relationship with Harriet is in many ways, a self-centered project; Emma finds selfish amusement in her matchmaking schemes, a reprieve from the boredom of her normal life, and enjoys Harriet's intense loyalty and admiration. However, true to Austen's neurodivergent pedagogy, Emma does develop empathy and love for her friend as the novel progresses. Moreover, Emma arguably demonstrates all nine of the APA's diagnostic criteria for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (five or more traits qualify as a diagnosis), which include: a grandiose sense of self-importance; fantasies of power and brilliance; a belief in being "special"; need for excessive admiration; a sense of entitlement; interpersonal exploitation; lacking empathy; envy of others; and displays of arrogance (American Psychological Association 669). My reading explores these traits as they manifest in Emma's relationships and dictate the plot of the novel. While the DSM did not exist in the nineteenth century—nor psychological diagnoses as we know them today—the idea of narcissism *did* exist. And evidently, this type of character amused Austen and served her literary purposes; not only does *Emma* abound with narcissistic characters, but they appear throughout Austen's novels, from Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* to Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot in *Persuasion.* Austen's experimentation with the narcissistic character confirms her keen

observation of durable human personality, and reading her novels alongside contemporary twenty-first century diagnostic categories reaffirms her nineteenth-century insights.

"Blunders" and "Blindness": Emma's Narcissistic Traits

Where Austen saw the social world with startling clarity, the same cannot be said for her most narcissistic heroine. The words "blind" (and "blindness") and "blunder" abound in *Emma*; variations of the word "blind" appear twenty-six times throughout the novel, and variations of "blunder" appear fifteen times. The novel can be read as a series of episodes that revolve around Emma's "blunders" and social growth. Austen uses the word "blunders" to gesture to errors in Emma's judgment and behavior of others. Moreover, these blunders arise from Emma's "blindness," a word that also proliferates in the novel and reminds the reader of Emma's misjudgments and narcissistic fabrication. In other words, "blindness" often stands in for Emma's mindblindness. The importance of this word surfaces in Claire Tomalin's reading of the novel, "Emma is blind to everything she does not want to see, and is enlightened only when her mistakes are shown up, and the good advice of her brotherlike lover is accepted" (249). Here, the word "blind" becomes equivalent to narcissistic fabrication, which is what Tomalin describes, though she may not know this psychological terminology: that is, Emma's narcissistic fabrication is avoiding "everything she does not want to see." Emma's distorted perspective recalls the mindblindness of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* and just how frequently the novel describes Marianne as "blind." Austen takes care to demonstrate this trait in her neurodivergent heroines and teach them self-awareness over the course of these novels. Just as Marianne's autism becomes most apparent in social situations, Emma's narcissistic traits come to the fore especially in her relationship with Harriet.

Throughout the novel, narcissistic confabulation is one of Emma's most pervasive narcissistic traits. Narcissistic confabulation can be defined as fabricating or distorting reality, experiences, and memory (APA Dictionary of Psychology). According to Sam Vaknin, narcissists invent "scenarios of how things might, could, or should have plausibly occurred" and reject information that "challenges their grandiose self-perception and the narrative they had constructed to explicate, excuse and legitimize their antisocial, self-centered and exploitative behaviors, choices and idiosyncrasies." In other words, narcissistic confabulation causes the narcissist to *misread the social world*—something critics argue that Emma already does. Eugene Goodheart points out that "Emma takes her cues for her behavior from observing external circumstances that she invariably misinterprets" (590). Though she does not employ the language of psychology or cognitive literary theory, what Claire Tomalin describes as Emma's inner voice is precisely narcissistic confabulation: "Emma's inner guide tells her...to misread Mr. Elton's attention to her, obvious as they are to other people…It tells her to flirt with Churchill as heartlessly as he flirts with her, and with no intention of accepting him when he proposes, as she confidently expects him to do" (248-249). I expand on scholarly interest in Emma's social misreading by attributing it to narcissistic confabulation, an intrinsic facet of Emma's cognition. Mr. Knightley notes Emma's tendencies of narcissistic confabulation, though in different language. After he reflects on the behavior of Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax, Mr. Knightley's free indirect discourse alludes to this narcissistic confabulation in Emma, which he terms "errors of imagination" (302). In other words, Mr Knightley's eighteenth-century phrasing of "errors of imagination" can be interpreted as the distortions of experience that "narcissistic confabulation" encompasses.

The reader first sees Emma's narcissistic confabulation in her narrative-making of Harriet's background. Early in the novel, Emma makes clear that Harriet's beauty sharply contrasts with her lower class: "Those soft blue eyes and all those natural graces should not be wasted on the inferior society of Highbury and its connections" (69). Emma sees beauty as incompatible with being lower class; beauty is "wasted" when appearing in this echelon of society. In other words, this passage gleans an important aspect of Emma's worldview: gentlemen and gentlewomen are people of beauty and grace, and lower class people cannot embody these attributes. To support her worldview, Emma invents a story behind Harriet's origins. In the eighth chapter, Mr. Knightley emphasizes Harriet's vulnerability and low socioeconomic status, but Emma maintains her view of Harriet's birthright: "Though in a legal sense she may be called Nobody, it will not hold in common sense…There can scarcely be a doubt that her father is a gentleman—and a gentleman of fortune" (98). Although Emma acknowledges Harriet's legal standing, she suppresses this reality with a more optimistic narrative: that Harriet is in fact a gentleman's daughter. Emma's persistent belief in Harriet's upper-class origins reveals just how unshakeable her worldview is: if Harriet is beautiful and kind, she must also be upper-class like Emma herself. In other words, Emma's mind distorts reality, Harriet's class origins, to support her elitist worldview. Emma's first impression of Harriet provides insight into her other narcissistic traits, including being drawn to "special" individuals. Emma first describes Harriet as someone "whom Emma knew very well by sight and had long felt an interest in, on account of her beauty" (68). In other words, it is Harriet's unique beauty—or at least, Emma's perception of her beauty as surprising and exceptional—that piques Emma's "interest". Emma's interest in Harriet recalls the following language from the DSM-V: a narcissist believes "that he or she is "special" and unique and can be only understood by, or

should associate with, other special or high-status people" (669). In other words, Emma identifies Harriet as exceptional and therefore, wants Harriet to be in her social circle.

As their relationship develops, one gets the sense that Harriet's submissive disposition meets Emma's narcissistic needs. In the second chapter of the novel, Emma remarks on how Harriet "[shews] so proper and becoming a deference…so artlessly impressed by the appearance of every thing in so superior a style to what she had been used to" (69). By showing a "deference" and being impressed by all that Emma's society offers, Harriet fulfills Emma's desire for excessive admiration[17]. A narcissist like Emma "may be surprised when the praise they expect and feel they deserve is not forthcoming" (American Psychiatric Association 669). Therefore, Harriet ensures Emma receives praise—praise which only proliferates as the novel progresses. After Emma laments her misguidance of Harriet, Harriet protests, "Nobody is equal to you! —I care for nobody as I do or you!" (247). Her heartfelt exclamation "made Emma feel that she had never loved Harriet so well, nor valued her affection so highly before." Emma's response does gesture to a moment of growth: she evidently admires Harriet's selflessness and kindness. But one can also see how Harriet's assertion that nobody is equal to [you]" would be so important to Emma. Not only does it fulfill the narcissist's need for praise, but it also elevates Emma's grandiose sense of self-importance. Harriet's aggrandizing of Emma is undoubtedly part of what makes Emma "[love] Harriet so well" and "[value] her affection".

Convinced of Harriet's value, Emma reads social scenes incorrectly to accommodate this narrative. These incorrect social readings often manifest in her schemes to pair off Harriet and

[17] A need for excessive admiration is the DSM-V's third diagnostic criteria for NDP.

Mr. Elton throughout much of the first volume. Consider the ninth chapter, in which Emma, Harriet, and Mr. Elton parse the meaning of poetic riddles. Mr. Elton writes his own charade to an ambiguous "Miss", praising her "ready wit the word will soon supply, May its approval beam in that soft eye!" (105). Although Mr. Elton addresses Emma, the heroine interprets the poem as describing Harriet. The soft eye is "Harriet exactly. Soft is the very word for her eye," but the other lines give Emma some trouble, "Harriet's ready wit! All the better. A man must be very much in love indeed, to describe her so. Ah! Mr. Knightley, I wish you had the benefit of this; I think this would convince you" (106). Emma is set upon her fantasy of coupling Harriet and Mr. Elton, and as a result, she tailors social reality to submit to this fantasy. If Emma did not confabulate, she might realize that "ready wit" does not describe Harriet at all. Instead, Emma attributes Mr. Elton's praise of wit to the fact he must be deeply and in love because her own narcissism blinds her from the truth. The narrator cheekily inserts the irony of Emma wishing Mr. Knightley had witnessed the charade. Mr. Elton's charade would only confirm his *correct* social reading: that Mr. Elton would never deign to court a woman as unimportant as Harriet. The fact that this entire chapter focuses on deciphering riddles takes on symbolic meaning; just as Emma reads these riddles, she reads (or *misreads*) social interactions.

Later in the first volume, Emma has a conversation with Mr. John Knightley which exemplifies her arrogance and confabulation in one of the most significant portrayals of her narcissistic mind. After Mr. John Knightley cautions her about Mr. Elton's romantic attachment to her: "she walked on, amusing herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstances, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are for ever falling into; and not very well pleased with her brother for imagining her

blind and ignorant, and in want of counsel" (136). Austen's satiric narrator employs irony to highlight Emma's arrogance. It is Emma, not Mr. John Knightley who "blunders" because of "a partial knowledge of circumstances" and her "high pretensions to judgement". What Mr. John Knightley intends to be helpful guidance, Emma perceives as a critique of her intellect, matchmaking, and superiority, as a suggestion that she is "blind and ignorant" (136). Emma's reaction to Mr. John Knightley, being "not very well pleased with her brother," also underscores another narcissistic trait, the "cool indifference or feelings of rage...as a response to criticism" ("narcissistic personality disorder"). Mr. John Knightley challenges Emma's narrative about the social world, her grandiose self-perception of her abilities, and consequently, she dismisses his information, unable to realize her arrogance does, in fact, blind her.

When Mr. Elton *does* propose to Emma, the heroine must come to terms with her skewed perception of reality. Focalized through the heroine herself, the reader witnesses Emma's shock first-hand, "But—that he should talk of encouragement, should consider her as aware of his views, accepting his attentions, meaning (in short), to marry him!—should suppose himself her equal in connection or mind! —look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above…It was most provoking" (153). Just as the syntax vacillates, so too do Emma's turbulent thoughts; the assault of exclamations and em-dashes signals Emma's free indirect discourse, her agitation, and the intensity with which she believes herself superior to Mr. Elton in every possible regard. The exclamatory tone also conveys Emma's surprise over how Mr. Elton could be so "blind" to "what rose above" him, to Emma's superior status. Her aristocratic pride and grandiose self-image make her enraged with his "presumption" that he could marry her. However, after some reflection, Emma concedes and

acknowledges her own faults, “If she had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken hers” (154). Confronting the “blindness” of another narcissist, Emma is forced to see this neurodivergent blindness in herself.

Although Emma must learn to correctly read social reality, she nonetheless acknowledges her own mental difference, as well as her unique social position. In a conversation between Emma and Harriet, the reader gleans Emma’s awareness of her cognition,

> “I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! But I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature…I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s” (116-117)

Emma does not want to marry because she already has wealth and power. Marriage, in fact, would decrease her importance and social governance. Her current situation is ideal for a narcissist; she is mistress of Hartfield and “first” in the eyes of a doting loved one. When Emma says “it is not my way” or “my nature”, we can read this as analogous with her narcissism, her difference in cognition. Claire Tomalin echoes this reading “Emma is not ready for a male suitor because she does not want anyone to encroach on a position which allows her to queen it over the little society in which she lives” (249). Tomalin’s use of “queen” evokes the centrality and superiority Emma so desires and *has* at Hartfield. In this way, Emma’s class position eliminates “the usual inducements…to marry” and maintains her power and positive self-image. In the same conversation, Emma goes on to describe her mind itself, “If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an

active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources" (117). The language of "an active, busy mind" with "many independent resources" can be read as the eighteenth-century equivalent of neurodiversity, of cognition that differs from and in some ways surpasses neurotypical minds. Without the language of "neurodiversity" and other psychological terminology, Austen must invent her own language to capture cognitive difference.

Emma's Social Growth (and Intermittent "Relapses")

Emma's blunders and lessons do not occur in linear fashion. To borrow the language of Austen's narrator, the heroine does "relapse" even after moments of newfound self-awareness (154). Indeed, Emma uses this word when she recognizes her slips into narcissistic behaviors. After regretting her misleading matchmaking designs on Harriet, Emma thinks with horror about a match between Harriet and "the pert young lawyer" William Coxe, and then laughingly realizes her slip into old behaviors, "She stopt to blush and laugh at her own relapse, and then resumed a more serious, more dispiriting cogitation upon what had been, and might be" (154). Emma's free-indirect discourse moves from self-realization to narcissistic errors before returning to self-realization and reform again. In other words, Emma's character development is gradual—and humorous—with its hiccups and relapses. Amidst this gradual growth, two key episodes bring about profound self-awareness and improvement for Emma: first, the aftermath of Mr. Elton's proposal in the first volume and second, the moment when Mr. Knightley admonishes Emma at Box Hill, after the heroine has mocked Miss Bates. Indeed, Mr. Knightley plays the particularly important role of neurotypical mentor and makes Emma aware of social errors she would not have realized otherwise. Throughout the novel, Emma's social blunders make her reflect on her own behavior and ultimately, become a better social ruler.

Emma's mistaken reading of Mr. Elton invites self-reflection on her behavior. With some uncharacteristic humility, Emma regrets her matchmaking designs on Harriet and Mr. Elton: "The first error and the worst lay at her door. It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much" (154). For the first time, Emma recognizes the "error" in her behavior. She takes responsibility for her mistake; she realizes "the worst" is "at her door", not anyone else's. She also identifies the flaw in her matchmaking: it "(adventures) too far" and "(assumes) too much". The language of "adventuring" and "assuming" mimics terms related to narcissistic confabulation—distorting and fabricating reality. The word "assuming" might also hint at Emma beginning to understand the extent of her arrogance, her assumption that she is always correct. In other words, Austen's language suggests Emma begins to identify the flaws of her psychological perception, in nineteenth-century vocabulary that tracks with the insights of twenty-first century neuroscience. Emma continues to reflect, concerned about "all that poor Harriet would be suffering" in her future interactions with Mr. Elton. Emma's growing care for Harriet allows her to become more perceptive of her narcissistic blunders.

After Emma informs Harriet of Mr. Elton's marriage proposal and true feelings, Emma has a moment of admiration and empathy for her friend. Emma "tried to console her with all her heart and understanding—really for the time convinced that Harriet was the superior creature of the two—and that to resemble her would be more for her own welfare and happiness than all that genius or intelligence could do" (157). For the first time in the novel, Emma identifies someone else, not herself as "the superior creature" —a moment of growth, however brief. Emma appreciates Harriet's virtues so much that she wishes "to resemble her". Such a phrase evokes

the idea of Narcissus; it's as if Emma looks at her own reflection, and therefore loves Harriet (the reflection). And like Narcissus, because Emma is so absorbed in her "reflection," she may be blind to what goes on around her. Indeed, much of the reason Emma cultivates a relationship with Harriet is that she can self-project onto her. However, despite these narcissistic tendencies, I argue Emma's compassion for Harriet moves *beyond* self-love as the novel progresses. The fact that Emma cares about Harriet's feelings, and her attempts to console her "with all her heart and understanding," marks the heroine's growing ability to empathize with others. After Emma comforts Harriet, the former already seeks to amend her behavior, "she left her with every previous resolution confirmed of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life. Her second duty now, inferior only to her father's claims, was to promote Harriet's comfort". (157). Emma resolves to repress her "imagination," which the reader can interpret as her narcissistic confabulation, her skewed, self-serving perception of reality. The language of "duty" and her "father's claims" likens Emma to a ruler, a social sovereign over Hartfield and Highbury. Where Emma once only cared for her father, Emma's jurisdiction now extends to looking after Harriet. Even as early as the novel's first volume, Emma begins to amend her behavior and becomes a more benevolent, discerning social ruler.

As the novel progresses, Emma's propensity for fantasy persists, but it is also mitigated by her growing social discernment and empathy. After Frank rescues Harriet, it does not take Emma long to jump to conclusions, "Such an adventure as this,—a fine young man and a lovely young woman thrown together in such a way, could hardly fail of suggesting certain ideas to the coldest heart and the steadiest brain. So Emma thought, at least" (295). At the merest "suggestion," in this case, Frank rescuing Harriet, Emma's mind cannot help but conjure the

beginning of a titillating romance. Emma is convinced others might read the situation similarly, even those with "the coldest heart and the steadiest brain," which the narrator gently teases with, "So Emma thought, at least." Although excited by what she perceives as a romantic development, Emma does restrain herself, "Everything was to take its natural course, however, neither impelled nor assisted. She would not stir a step, nor drop a hint. No, she had had enough of interference. There could be no harm in a scheme, a mere passive scheme. It was not more than a wish. Beyond it she would on no account proceed" (296). Emma *has* learned from her previous matchmaking scheme between Harriet and Mr. Elton, so she does not directly meddle in Harriet's affairs. Although her "mere passive scheme" does result in miscommunication between herself and Harriet later in the novel, Emma chooses not to manipulate her friend and interfere in others' affairs for her own pleasure.

Like Marianne's guidance by Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility.* Mr. Knightley acts as a neurotypical mentor and plays an important role in Emma's growth. In an early example of Mr. Knightley's advice, he criticizes Emma's role in convincing Harriet to reject Mr. Martin's first proposal. After Emma commends Harriet's rejection and praises her superiority, a stunned Mr. Knightley counters, "No, he is not her equal indeed, for he is as much her superior in sense as in situation. Emma, your infatuation about that girl blinds you" (97). Mr. Knightley not only understands Harriet's social status and the advantages of her marrying Mr. Martin, but he also recognizes Emma's skewed perception of others. Emma cannot acknowledge Harriet's inferiority, in birth or character, because her infatuation "blinds" her. Unlike Mr. Knightley, Emma cannot see—or empathize with—the realities of Harriet's class and livelihood, which could not be farther from her own comfortable security. Mr. Knightley's advice, although well-

intentioned, falls on deaf ears. Blinded by her affection for Harriet and her love for matchmaking, Emma remains self-assured and unwavering in her opinion. Later in the novel, she will reflect on Mr. Knightley's advice and see its value. But at this moment, Emma lives in a world of her own creation, blind to the social reality outside of it.

In the third volume, Mr. Knightley again intervenes when he perceives Emma indirectly hurting her peers. On the outing to Box Hill, Emma makes a sly comment about Miss Bates being annoying, a comment which Miss Bates fully understands, and mortifies her in front of a group that consists of her niece Jane, Frank Churchill, Harriet, and the Westons. Before Emma leaves the outing, Mr. Knightley feelingly reprimands Emma, "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation? —Emma, I had not thought it possible" (325). In response, "Emma recollected, blushed, was sorry, but tried to laugh it off" (325). Emma's already feels ashamed—she "blushed" and "was sorry" —but she does try to dodge Mr. Knightley's critique. Emma's evasiveness reflects the behavior of narcissistic individuals, "Narcissistic patients use defense mechanisms that limit feelings of explicit shame in response to failures" (Ritter et al. 430). But Emma's "[laughing] it off" does not deter Mr. Knightley from critiquing her treatment of Miss Bates,

> Were she your equal in situation—but, Emma, consider how far this is from being the case. She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to…Her situation should secure your compassion. It was badly done, indeed!....I will tell you truths while I can, satisfied with proving myself your friend by very faithful counsel, and trusting that you will some time or other do me greater justice than you can do now (326).

Not unlike Elinor's guidance of Marianne, Mr. Knightley's "counsel" is motivated by his genuine care for Emma, his insistence on being a true "friend." His harsh language, including "poor," "badly," and "truths," penetrates Emma's reluctance to accept criticism; his terseness reaches Emma and cuts through her. In this instance, Mr. Knightley teaches Emma a lesson about good social governance—a governance that is empathetic and class conscious. If Emma is to be the virtuous sovereign of Highbury, she must not be "unfeeling," but sympathize with those who are vulnerable and lower class. Indeed, Emma has been taught iterations of this lesson with Harriet and Jane Fairfax, but this episode with Miss Bates makes Emma cognizant of her wrongs.

Emma is so mortified she becomes mute and cannot even say goodbye to Mr. Knightley, absorbed in tumultuous self-assessment, "The truth of his representation there was no denying. She felt it at her heart. How could she have been so brutal, so cruel to Miss Bates! —How could she have exposed herself to such ill opinion in any one she valued! And how suffer him to leave her without saying one word of gratitude….!" (326). The use of dashes and exclamation in her free-indirect discourse conveys her agitated state of mind; the syntax mirrors what Emma "[feels] at her heart". Emma feels how "cruel" she has been to Miss Bates which indexes her growing empathy. She is particularly preoccupied with Mr. Knightley's opinion of her. In this scene, the centrality of shame in Narcissistic Personality Disorder becomes apparent, as well as its role in Emma's character growth. In the article "Shame in Patients with Narcissistic Personality Disorder", the authors assert that "A prominent clinical feature of narcissistic vulnerability is the patient's propensity to suffer from feelings of intense shame" (Ritter et al. 429). In Emma's free indirect discourse, the language of "exposed herself" evokes the intense

vulnerability felt by narcissists. What is more, she has exposed herself to the "ill opinion" of a person she values above everyone else. So debilitating is this shame that she is rendered speechless; she could not say "one word of gratitude" before Mr. Knightley leaves. Though paralyzing in the moment, Emma's shame moves her to improve upon her behavior. As Mr. Knightley had asked, she will do him and herself "greater justice" than she did on Box Hill.

After Mr. Knightley's stern guidance, Emma immediately decides to mend her relationship with Miss Bates, "She had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious. But it should be so no more. In the warmth of true contrition, she would call upon her the very next morning, and it should be the beginning, on her side, of a regular, equal, kindly intercourse" (327). Emma not only realizes she has "been often remiss," or hurt others with her behavior, but she identifies the source of her misconduct: "more in thought than fact." Emma realizes that her perception of the outside world—to borrow language from earlier in the novel, her assuming and supposing too much —is skewed. Though Emma does not have access to language like narcissistic confabulation or mindblindness, she comes to understand that her "thought," her unique cognition, can sometimes lead her astray.

When Emma calls on Miss Bates and asks about Jane Fairfax's health, the heroine has newfound empathy for her peers, "Emma was most sincerely interested. Her heart had been long growing kinder towards Jane; and this picture of her present sufferings acted as a cure of every former ungenerous suspicion" (329). Where Emma once had "[suspicions]" of Jane Fairfax, she can appreciate the vulnerability of her situation—not only her illness, but her class precariousness. After Emma's visit to Miss Bates, Emma is more aware of class distinctions,

"The contrast between Mrs. Churchill's importance in the world, and Jane Fairfax's, struck her; one was every thing, the other nothing—and she sat musing on the difference of woman's destiny" (332) Emma has learned the reality that class wholly determines a woman's livelihood. What's more, Emma has compassion for her lower-class peers, the Harriets, Jane Fairfaxes, and Miss Bates of the world. That is to say, Emma has acquired two skills that will be central to her social governance by the end of the novel: greater class consciousness and empathy. Emma acquires these skills precisely *because* she is a neurodivergent heroine, because she struggles with relating to others and therefore, must be taught by the narrative that unfolds.

By the fourteenth chapter of the third volume, Emma realizes the full extent of her social errors. After learning about Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax's secret engagement and impending marriage, Emma grapples with encouraging Harriet's feelings for Frank, "Poor Harriet! To be a second time the dupe of her misconceptions and flattery. Mr. Knightley had spoken prophetically when he once said, 'Emma, you have been no friend to Harriet Smith.' — She was afraid she had done her nothing but disservice" (346). But it is not Frank Churchill whom Harriet loves. Instead, Harriet reveals her feelings for Mr. Knightley, and a horror-struck Emma realizes she inadvertently encouraged this infatuation because she thought Harriet was in love with Frank. Emma reflects on her errors, "She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before. How improperly had she been acting by Harriet! How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on!" (350) The exclamation and repetitive parallel syntax— "how inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling" —reveals just how deeply Emma feels her wrongdoings and marks this passage as a turning point in Emma's self-awareness. By using the

word “blindness,” Emma anticipates the mindblindness that comes with neurodivergence, including NPD. Moreover, the narrator frames Emma’s new perspective as “a clearness which had never blessed her before”; that is to say, it is as if Emma was not born with a neurotypical cognition that would more accurately assess the social sphere. By using the word “blessed,” the narrator recalls the novel’s opening lines, “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence (55). As a neurodivergent heroine, Emma *does* have many virtues, and overcoming her mindblindness is one of her unique challenges as a neurodivergent heroine. Moreover, by using the word “madness,” Emma identifies herself with an eighteenth-century word linked to cognitive difference and disability.[18] Emma continues to think in terms related to blindness and madness after she realizes her feelings for Mr. Knightley, “She saw, that in persuading herself, in fancying, in acting to the contrary, she had been entirely under a delusion, totally ignorant of her own heart—and, in short that she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all!...With insufferable vanity had she believed herself in the secret of every-body’s feelings; with unpardonable arrogance proposed to arrange every-body’s destiny” (353-54). Words like “persuading herself” and “delusion” elucidate Emma’s new awareness of how her mind works, how it fabricates a version of the world that justifies her ideas and sense of self. Emma has even been “under a delusion” regarding her own feelings, “ignorant of her own heart” and that of

[18] For more information on “madness” and disability in the long-nineteenth century, see Dwight Gabbard’s "Disability Studies and the British Long Eighteenth Century” and the introduction by Joyce Huff and Martha Stoddard Holmes in *A Cultural History of Disability in the Long Nineteenth Century.*

others. No longer will Emma leave her narcissistic "vanity" and "arrogance" unchecked; the end of the novel sees Emma become a benevolent, empathetic ruler of Highbury.

Highbury as a Narcissistic Setting: Emma and Other Narcissistic Characters

Like the novel's heroine, *Emma* is framed as self-centered: the very title of the novel foregrounds the narcissistic heroine in question. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the very first sentence and words of the novel revolve around the heroine: "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (55). The novel's first sentence foreshadows the heroine's centrality and alludes to the fact that *something* will come about to "distress or vex her" —arguably, the challenges she faces learning to accurately read the social world and empathize with others, especially those who are not "rich" like herself. Austen sets these expectations from the very first sentence as a cue to her readers that the novel will be about how Emma learns to manage her neurodivergent ways of being.

Like the novel's narrative framing, the setting of Austen's novel also contributes to and engenders narcissism. Although London is only sixteen miles away from Highbury, Emma never leaves her town, save for the one outing to Box Hill. Throughout the novel, Emma never deigns to leave Hartfield and Highbury, the spheres of influence she presides over. The novel itself is self-centered, never leaving Highbury, Emma's place of importance. Indeed, the circumstances of Highbury elevate Emma's influence. The novel frames Hartfield as superior to, if a part of Highbury, "Highbury, the large and populous village almost amounting to a town, to which Hartfield, in spite of its separate lawn and shrubberies and name did really belong" (56). Just as

Hartfield reigns supreme, so do Emma and her father have a special status, “The Woodhouses were first in consequence there. All looked up to them” (56-57). Moreover, when she goes shopping with Harriet, Emma looks outside the shop and remarks, “Much could not be hoped from the traffic of even the busiest part of Highbury” (222). In a town with so little going on, Emma ranks even higher amongst the townspeople. One can also glean a sense of Emma’s boredom with Highbury. Emma cannot “hope” that “the busiest part of Highbury " will provide her with any mental stimulation, which will lead her to seek stimulation from other activities, such as matchmaking.

Several self-centered characters occupy the narcissistic locale of Highbury. Emma is far from being the only narcissist, considering that Mr. Woodhouse, Frank Churchill, Mrs. Elton, and Mr. Elton also populate the novel. In many ways, Mr. Woodhouse is one of the more humorous, mindblind narcissists in Austen’s novel. After Miss Taylor marries and becomes Mrs. Weston, Mr. Woodhouse laments what should be a joyous life event: “Ah! Poor Miss Taylor. She would be very glad to stay” (65). Because Miss Taylor’s marriage, and therefore absence from Hartfield, negatively impacts him, Mr. Woodhouse assumes she must feel the same way. In reality, Miss Taylor is “very glad” to *leave* and become Mrs. Weston, thereby improving her financial security. The narrator remarks on Mr. Woodhouse’s obliviousness later in the text, “from his habits of gentle selfishness and of being never able to suppose that other people could feel different from himself, he was very much disposed to think Miss Taylor had done as sad a thing for herself as for them” (57). Because of Mr Woodhouse’s mindblindness, he cannot imagine that other people experience different feelings than himself. He cannot imagine that Miss Taylor is entering an exciting period of her life. In this way, Mr. Woodhouse’s cognition

differs from Emma. Where Mr. Woodhouse is entirely unable to see the world from another person's point of view, Emma has *some* empathy for others and can imagine how they might feel. The narrator reiterates Mr. Woodhouse's mindblindness as it relates to his hypochondriac tendencies, "He could never believe other people to be different from himself. What was unwholesome to him, he regarded as unfit for any body" (65). Moreover, the narrator describes Mr. Woodhouse in similar language to Emma. As Emma imagines her friends might romantically pair her with Frank Churchill, she remarks on how her father remains unaware, "She blessed the favouring blindness" (193). Again, the narrator uses the word "blindness" to evoke neurodivergent obliviousness or misreading of the social sphere. The word "blessed," while used humorously, seemingly allows space for neurodivergent characters and accepts them as they are.

While the novel lightly teases narcissists like Mr, Woodhouse and Emma, Mrs. Elton becomes an object of ridicule for her overwhelming ignorance and vanity. In one of her moments of excellent judgment and after an early meeting, Emma correctly reads Mrs. Elton, "When the visit was returned, Emma made up her mind. She could then see more and judge better…Mrs. Elton was a vain woman, extremely well satisfied with herself, and thinking much of her own importance; that she meant to shine and be very superior…that all her notions were drawn from one set of people, and one style of living" (249). In many ways, Mrs. Elton's characteristics recall Emma's; both women are "vain" and "[think] much of their own importance". But where Mrs. Elton only cares for herself and her image, Emma cares for others in her community and, by the end of the novel, especially looks over those who lack the material and class advantages she possesses. Additionally, while Emma is "well satisfied with herself" at the beginning of the

novel, she amends her behavior when she realizes how her arrogance and narcissistic confabulation negatively impact others. Later in the novel, Emma's initial suspicions are confirmed, and she criticizes Mrs. Elton and her husband, the former of which is

> "self-important, presuming, familiar, ignorant, and ill-bred. She had a little beauty and a little accomplishment, but so little judgement that she thought herself coming with superior knowledge of the world, to enliven and improve a country neighborhood…There was no reason to suppose Mr. Elton thought at all differently from his wife. He seemed not merely happy with her, but proud" (256).

Once again, the reader can draw comparisons between Mrs. Elton and Emma. But Emma does not remain "presuming" and "ignorant" by the end of the novel; she has learned to rein in her fancies when assessing social situations, and she learns to heed the advice of others, like Mr. Knightley. Where Mrs. Elton's desire to "improve a country neighborhood" is superficial and serves her ego, Emma aims to materially improve the lives of others, especially Harriet and Jane Fairfax, out of a sense of genuine care by the end of the novel. Moreover, Mr. Elton does not "[think] at all differently from his wife" and sees her not as a person, but more of a possession that he is "proud" of, an object that elevates himself.

Mr. Elton's narcissism also appears in his remarks about Harriet. After Emma reveals her matchmaking plans between him and Harriet, Mr. Elton exclaims, "There are men who might not object to—Everybody has their level: but as for myself, I am not, I think, quite so much at a loss. I need not so totally despair of an equal alliance, as to be addressing myself to Miss Smith!" (151). Where Mr. Elton remains entrenched in class haughtiness, Emma has learned to empathize

with her lower-class peers by the end of the novel. Mr. Elton's comment reveals his fixation on wealth in marriage. Emma, on the other hand, is one of the only characters who recognizes Harriet's admirable qualities throughout the novel, qualities which even the skeptical Mr. Knightley eventually acknowledges, "I will do you the justice to say, that you would have chosen for him better than he has chosen for himself.—Harriet Smith has some first-rate qualities, which Mrs. Elton is totally without. An unpretending, single-minded, artless girl…I found Harriet more conversable than I expected" (292). Indeed, many correct social readings are one of Emma's positive attributes: her ability to see Harriet's virtues when no one else does.

For all of Highbury's narcissism and narcissists, Emma stands out from her peer egotists, who serve as foils. Where Mr. Woodhouse and the Eltons are stagnant characters, Emma cultivates a greater sense of empathy, self-awareness of her cognition, and better social discernment—all of which make her a better "ruler" of Hartfield and Highbury. It is this character development Johnson emphasizes in her reading of the novel, "The penultimate chapters of Emma present a different heroine from the one who at the outset appeared to assume the permanence of her power and in that assumption had become a rather unfeeling reader. Pondering the difference of woman's destiny, however, Emma remorsefully relinquishes "all her former fanciful and unfair conjectures" about Jane and Mr. Dixon well before she actually learns their untruth" (384, 137). The novel does not center on the other narcissists; rather, Austen focalizes the novel through Emma, the heroine she seeks to instruct. Emma is the only narcissist who *does* improve her behavior, the only one to become a *feeling "*reader" of others. The novel not only instructs its neurodivergent "reader," but those who read about the heroine's development. *Emma* might be read as pedagogy for managing narcissistic tendencies, teaching

heroine and reader alike to cultivate self-awareness and empathy so they do not resemble the Mr. Woodhouses and Eltons who populate the world.

Reading the Novel's Ending: Emma as Effective, Neurodivergent Ruler

In *Emma*, Austen not only portrays a neurodivergent heroine, but a neurodivergent woman who rules over and governs a social community. Several scholars emphasize the dynamics of female power in their readings. To recall Tomalin's language, Emma's unwillingness to marry stems from her bid to retain power, "Emma is not ready for a male suitor because she does not want anyone to encroach on a position which allows her to queen it over the little society in which she lives" (249). The analogy of queendom and monarchy seems particularly appropriate given the centralized power it represents; after all, Emma was at first reluctant to marry because she would have to abdicate her place of power at Hartsfield and Highbury. Mr. Knightley's decision to live at Hartfield with the Woodhouses, as we will see later, caters to Emma's need to be at the center of social life and upholds her neurodivergent, female rulership. Similar to Tomalin, Claudia Johnson argues that *Emma* is one of Austen's only novels to provide a positive version of female power, and she describes Emma with language that evokes the idea of monarchical governance, referring to Emma as "a woman who possesses and enjoys power" (125) and her management of the social sphere as "diplomacy" (131). Perhaps with this novel, Austen asks her readers: what does neurodivergent rulership look like? What are its strengths and challenges?

For all Emma's errors, she is an overall effective social ruler[19]. Emma's good sense distinguishes her from the other narcissists in the novel, even before her full self-realization has been achieved. Indeed, although Mr. Knightley openly remarks on Emma's social shortcomings, he often praises her good sense. At the ball given in celebration of Frank Churchill, Emma and Mr. Knightley have a moment of reconciliation. Emma playfully remarks, "Can you trust me with such flatterers? —Does my vain spirit ever tell me I am wrong?" (292). Mr. Knightley responds, "Not your vain spirit, but your serious spirit. —If one leads you wrong, I am sure the other tells you of it." (292). Mr. Knightley underscores that while Emma is vain, she only has a "serious spirit" that corrects this narcissistic vanity. Later in the novel, a similar conversation plays out between Emma and Mr. Knightley. Emma admits "I doubt whether my own sense would have corrected me without it" but Mr. Knightley is quick to reassure her, "Do you? —I have no doubt. Nature gave you understanding" (389). In other words, though Mr. Knightley facilitates Emma's realization of her neurodivergent short-sightedness, he also acknowledges her competency throughout the novel. Emma's intrinsic character, which Mr. Knightley refers to as "Nature" , *includes* her neurodivergence and bequeaths her with goodness and "understanding" on the whole.

Like Mr. Knightley, Mrs. Weston is another neurodivergent mentor who emphasizes Emma's capable social governance. In a conversation with Mr. Knightley, Mrs. Weston observes, "she has qualities which may be trusted; she will never lead any one really wrong; she

[19] Similarly, Alistair Duckworth points out "Emma's intuitions are never wholly wrong" (149) and Claudia Johnson argues that while Emma misreads Harriet's "history", it is not to the egregious extent that some critics assert (132).

will make no lasting blunder; where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times" (81). Arguably Mrs. Weston anticipates much of the novel; Emma *does* blunder, but the blunders are not lasting because Emma repairs them. Emma reins in her matchmaking, and Harriet ultimately finds social security in a love marriage; Emma indulges in Frank Churchill's attention but walks away unscathed by his dishonesty. Though she feels jealous of Jane Fairfax earlier in the novel, Emma grows to sympathize with Jane and tries to aid her in the third volume. Not only are Emma's blunders not "lasting" but as Mrs. Weston asserts, where Emma errs, "she is in the right a hundred times." Though Emma undoubtedly blunders in her self-named novel, she also has moments of discerning judgment. Consider one of Emma's initial impressions of Frank Churchill. When Frank Churchill travels to London for a mere barber's appointment, "Emma's very good opinion of Frank Churchill was a little shaken the following day" because his excursion underscores his vanity and disregard for his hosts, his father and new stepmother (202). Later in the novel, Frank Churchill's preoccupation with appearances and disregard of others becomes painfully clear with his secret engagement to Jane Fairfax, and his negligent behavior towards her. In other words, even prior to Emma's fully realized development by the end of the novel, she *does* have moments of acute social reading. Although Mr. Knightley's stern reprobation does bring about Emma's moral improvement, Austen's novel is not about humbling a totally ignorant protagonist. Rather, the novel's main goal is to cultivate the heroine's social awareness, and help her navigate neurodivergent blind spots.

Just as Emma's social reading improves as the novel progresses, so too does her powers of empathy. At the beginning of the novel, Emma's care is limited to her father—and yet, it is an astounding love no less. After Mr. Woodhouse worries over Emma's opinion of Jane Fairfax, for

instance, she instantly "saw his anxiety, and wishing to appease it, at least for the present, said, and with a sincerity which no one could question—'She is a sort of elegant creature that one cannot keep one;s eyes from…I do pity her from my heart'" (177). And yet, though she is utterly attentive to her father, she knows when social politeness must be observed. Consider the moment in the text when Emma's sister Isabella visits Hartfield, and Emma insists on inviting their neighbor:

> Mr. Knightley was to dine with them—rather against the inclination of Mr. Woodhouse, who did not like that any one should share with him in Isabella's first day. Emma's sense of right however had decided it; and besides the consideration of what was due to each brother, she had particular, from the circumstance of the late disagreement between Mr. Knightley and herself, in procuring him the proper invitation. (125-126)

Emma is willing to organize around her father and his needs, which will provide her a basis for thinking about the needs of others. What's more, she cares for her father while also observing social propriety while caring for her peers to the best of her ability, and she hones this skillset at the novel progresses.

As the novel progresses, Emma becomes an even better social sovereign. She learns to empathize with others, her 'subjects' in Hartfield and Highbury, and take them into her utmost care—as a good ruler should. At the beginning of the novel, the reader sees Emma's ability to care for Mr. Woodhouse and accordingly manage the social sphere. As the narrative progresses, this benevolent "reign" (to recall Johnson's language) extends to others in her community. Emma comes to understand the precarious socioeconomic positions of Harriet, Jane Fairfax, and Miss Bates, and strives to make them as comfortable and secure as possible. Indeed, the novel

can only teach its neurodivergent heroine about class consciousness *after* it develops her ability to empathize. Emma reins in her matchmaking fantasies and rejoices when she hears of Harriet's marriage to Robert Martin, Similarly, she amends her relationship with Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax and extends resources to them (such as calling on them at their home, inviting them to Hartfield, and offering carriage rides to Jane when she is ill). What's more, Emma's sympathy for Jane develops and her jealousy ceases; she especially pities Jane after learning of Frank Churchill's ill treatment of her. By the end of the novel, Austen's neurodivergent heroine learns to manage her narcissistic confabulation and reign in self-aggrandizing arrogance, which ultimately improves her relationships with all of her friends in Highbury.

Even after Emma's growth, one should note she remains a narcissist. At the end of the novel, Emma reads a letter from Frank Churchill and hones in on any references to herself, "As soon as she came to her own name, it was irresistible; every line relating to herself was interesting, and almost every line agreeable; and when this charm ceased, the subject could still maintain itself" (376). After her behavioral and cognitive reform, Emma is still *Emma,* proud and self-loving—she is still a narcissist, and one many readers enjoy. She finds the subject of *herself* to be the charming part of Frank's letter, where the rest of its contents merely "[maintains] itself". She is a narcissist that her peers and loved ones, like Mr. Woodhouse, Harriet, and Mr. Knightley, value for who she is. For all the realism of this support system, Emma is not a real person, but a character. And yet, Emma may remind readers of their own self-centered tendencies. How often do people read for their own names, or seek out information that confirms their rightness? Perhaps this is another part of Austen's pedagogy; she reminds the reader to be critical about their own reading practices and seeking validation, while also fostering some

empathy for her heroine with shared moments of self-centered thinking. Where some readers sharply criticize Emma, Austen criticizes her mistakes but celebrates her neurodivergent heroine's virtues and quirks, while teaching her to manage her unique challenges and the social world itself.

The end of the novel preserves Emma's self-importance, and her governance and dominion over Hartfield and Highbury. One might recall how in the first volume of the novel, Emma asserts it unlikely she could be induced to marry because "few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (116-17). And when Emma does marry, she does not compromise these desires at all. Her situation ostensibly does not change; Mr. Knightley agrees to live at Hartfield and now Emma is "truly beloved" and "always first" in the eyes of her husband, as well as her father. Even Emma realizes how unusual her circumstances are, "How very few of those men in rank of life to address Emma would have renounced their own home for Hartfield!" (393) While marriage typically decenters the social position of women, requiring them to move to their husband's home, Emma's marriage in fact intensifies her centrality. It is Mr. Knightley who gives up his home in favor of Emma maintaining closeness with her father, and retaining her dominion of Hartfield.

Just as the beginning novel focuses on Hartfield and Highbury, the end of the novel emphasizes its transformation—its joint rulership by its neurodivergent heroine and her supportive love interest. In many ways, the novel trains its neurodivergent heroine to be the benevolent mistress of Hartfield, so she can fill the position left vacant by her late mother.

Indeed, the novel begins by evoking the absence of Emma's mother, but also Miss Taylor's departure—yet another vacuum of virtuous, patient and wise female rulership. With this indulgent governess and her doting father, Emma's grew up in an environment that would do little to check her self-aggrandizing, self-centered tendencies Therefore, Austen must intervene with something to "distress or vex her heroine" to shift her perception, foreshadowing the pedagogical intent of her novel in its very first sentence (55). In short, Emma *must* learn how to navigate the social sphere to fill the vacancies of female governance left by her mother and her governess. Claudia Johnson emphasizes how the end of the novel condones women's governance, "In moving to Hartfield, Knightley is sharing her home, and in placing himself in her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule" (143). Mr. Knightley relocates and upholds Emma's self-importance, her relationship with her beloved father; he accommodates her neurodivergence and her domestic rulership. The end of the novel celebrates its neurodivergent heroine and her powers of governance alongside her partner, "the perfect happiness of the union" (405). It is Emma's adaptation to the social world, her unique way of governing it, and the support of neurotypical loved ones that does make the end of this novel so satisfactory, so 'perfectly happy'.

Conclusion

By examining the neurodiversity of Jane Austen's Marianne and Emma, we can better understand their unfamiliar minds and behaviors, and we gain new insight into their social development. Along with instructing young women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, I argue that Austen teaches neurodivergent people how to survive their social circumstances. Austen writes what I call neurodivergent pedagogy: a set of lessons that teaches a neurodivergent heroine about her mindblindness and how to navigate relationships with others. But Austen goes beyond instructing her heroines. By celebrating heroines with unique minds, she trains the reader how to mind read her characters and develops their empathy for cognitively different individuals.

Austen's neurodivergent pedagogy and my own approach to studying fictional neurodiversity has implications for her other heroines. In *Northanger Abbey* (1817), Catherine Morland's overactive imagination causes her to conflate novels with the real world and incorrectly read other people. By the end of the novel, Catherine recognizes her Gothic misreading of the Tilneys and admits, "it had been all a voluntary, self-created delusion, each trifling circumstance receiving importance from an imagination resolved on alarm, and everything forced to bend to one purpose by a mind which, before she entered the abbey, had been craving to be frightened" (200). We should note that in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma,* words like "delusion," "imagination," and the "bending" of one's mind have been linked to cognition and neurodivergence. Moreover, though General Tilney is no Gothic tyrant or murderer, Catherine does intuit his unkind, domineering nature. In other words, Catherine's cognition makes her oblivious to social reality—but sometimes she sees something the neurotypical characters cannot or will not disclose to others. Indeed, Catherine's insight recalls moments when Marianne and Emma also have neurodivergent insights: for instance, Marianne's

critiques of arbitrary social norms and Emma's skepticism of Frank Churchill's self-centeredness.

Catherine's cognition, her "delusions" and "imagination," deserve to be reevaluated as neurodiversity. The heroine is usually read as a young woman who erroneously applies the lessons of novels to her reading of the real world; for most critics, *Northanger Abbey* teaches the reader how to read life, which is *not* the same way they read novels. My emphasis on mindblindness in Austen supplements and enriches this discourse on Catherine's novel reading and life reading. Indeed, because of Catherine's novel reading, she misreads the feelings and motivations of actual people, which is the definition of mindreading. Moreover, critics need to reevaluate the novel to determine the following: what part of Catherine's mindblindness stems from her fictional reading practices, and what part might stem from an innate cognitive difference? *Northanger Abbey* has yet to be approached with this framework of neurodiversity.

Analyzing neurodiversity in *Mansfield Park* (1814) would also generate new insights. I argue Fanny Price can be read as someone with an anxiety disorder, particularly generalized anxiety disorder or social anxiety disorder. *Mansfield Park* has a particular stake in the development of the individual when compared to other Austen novels, in part because it is Austen's only bildungsroman that traces the heroine's upbringing from a very young age. Moreover, Austen implements and evaluates her own proto-psychological theories, as she evaluates the roles of nature and nurture in nineteenth-century language pertaining to Lady Bertram and Mrs. Price: "So long divided, and so differently situated, the ties of blood were little more than nothing. An attachment, originally as tranquil as their tempers, was now become a mere name" (427). In this instance, "situation," or socialization, erodes the biological bond of "blood" —and it is far from the only time Austen evaluates the roles of "nurture" and "nature" in

these terms. As we have seen in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Emma,* Austen used the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century language available to her to conceptualize human cognition, to think through the influences of biology and socialization. Austen mentors her neurodivergent heroines, no doubt inspired by the spectrum of humanity she saw in her own life, and helps them navigate difficult social circumstances. Heroines like Catherine and Fanny hone their skills of social assessment because of Austen's neurodivergent pedagogy, not unlike Marianne and Emma do in their respective novels.

Austen not only writes neurodivergent heroines but, as we have seen in *Emma,* neurodivergent secondary characters. I have discussed at length the narcissism of *Emma,* but Austen was writing narcissistic characters as early as *Northanger Abbey.* The narcissism of Isabella and John Thorpe drives much of the plot and Catherine's own neurodivergent development. Austen's later works like *Persuasion* (1817) and *Sanditon* (1817) revolve around health and disability, but neurodiversity deserves more attention in these novels too. Narcissists like Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot, and the many hypochondriacs in *Sanditon*—who may also have anxiety disorders—should be evaluated as neurodivergent and examined in relation to their respective novel's purpose. What social meaning does Austen tie to these neurodivergent characters? How do these characters inform the development of the heroines? Why do these secondary characters *need* to be neurodivergent for the pedagogy of a particular novel? Above all, the proliferation of neurodivergent figures in Austen's texts confirms her interest in creating the "happiest delineation" of the "varieties" of "human nature" (*Northanger Abbey* 60).

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Vita

Alexandra Sausa was born in Atlanta, Georgia on November 15, 1999. Alexandra attended Hillgrove High School in Powder Springs, Georgia, graduating near the top of her class in 2018. From 2018 to 2021, she attended the University of Georgia where she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English. She accepted a graduate teaching assistantship at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville in the English department with a focus on 18th century British literature. Alex is graduating with a Masters of Arts in English in May 2023.