“Little Irritations” in Mansfield Park

Monique W. Dull

Moral as well as Natural Diseases disappear in the progress of time, & new ones take their place – Shyness & the Sweating Sickness have given way to Confidence & Paralytic complaints.¹

Sensibility is enjoying a vigorous afterlife. It has stimulated discussion of the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, especially since R.F.B. Brissenden’s influential Virtue in Distress in 1974.² Jane Austen critics have asked whether Austen was for or against Marianne Dashwood’s sensibility, whether Elinor, or later, Fanny Price, is not sensible to an extent also, and, if so, whether this is good or bad. John Halperin’s critical biography spends pages on the Juvenilia’s games with excesses and absences of sensibility. Halperin summarizes “Evelyn” in the same way he summarizes “Love and Freindship” (sic): “It continues the attack on sentimental fiction; almost all the characters are motivated exclusively by an oversupply or an undersupply, as the case may be, of sensibility.”³

We could either take the centrality of sensibility as proof of sensibility’s discursive dominance (together with Halperin) or we could take Austen’s parody as a pointer to its waning. Even if the young Jane Austen had, by 1790, excavated its psycho-social function, then maybe another layer awaited her analysis. I suggest that this next object of interest, not yet open to her parody because not yet abused by culture, lay within the wider complex of contemporary psycho-physiology now

largely forgotten by historians: the revisionary concept of irritability propounded by the Scottish physician Robert Whytt (1704-1766), with its attendant renovations to the structure of character and plot.

Surveying *Mansfield Park* within the field laid out by British medical theorists from the mid-eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century, what strikes me is not the supremacy of sensibility, but rather the quiet reversal of its fortunes during this span. I will briefly trace what I see as the medical prehistory to the emphasis in *Mansfield Park* on a modern reactive disposition, what I see as the prehistory to its discarding of sensibility as a novelistic touchstone. Then I will analyse *Mansfield Park* for its display of 1814 psycho-physiology, and relate this display to the novel’s tropes of contagion and comparative proportion.

Sensibility and nervousness may have become equals, even competitors, but their original relation was more complex: sensibility was a part of the whole which was nervousness, which in turn exceeded having nerves. Ann Jessie Van Sant best situates sensibility in its context of mid-eighteenth-century neurology. Like Brissenden, Van Sant discusses Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777), the great Swiss neurologist, and his theory that the physiological qualities of sensibility and irritability were strictly distinct. Van Sant uses Haller’s distinction as a basis for her own traditional focus on sensibility, which she takes to be the psychological end of psycho-physiology, and which she juxtaposes with a somatized irritability.

Yet Van Sant’s Hallerian history is a traditionally skewed vision particularly of the British neurological theories of the time. Haller’s contention that within the reactive animal system, nerves were “sensible”, or registered pain and pleasure, while muscles were solely “irritable”, or contractile, was sharply contested by Whytt, whose

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4 Criticism of mid-Victorian literature focuses on the mid-century governing notions of neurasthenia and nerves. This in turn is a stopping point en route to our fascination with late-century hysteria narratives.

5 Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context*, Cambridge, 1993. Her first citation is from Whytt’s *Observations*: “In some the feelings, perceptions, and passions, are naturally dull, slow, and difficult to be roused; in others, they are very quick and easily excited, on account of a greater delicacy and sensibility of brain and nerves” (1). Van Sant’s footnote to this citation immediately breaks Whytt’s connection between body and psyche, giving this Hallerian directive: “It is important to note that physical structures are the location of responsiveness, and their delicacy determines the delicacy and immediacy of feelings; but nerves do not cause the emotions, passions, etc.”