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# The “Real Work”: Ecocritical Alchemy and Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

In these cases what is needed is real work.  
—C.G. Jung (12: 32)

## Introduction

Jane Austen's 1811 novel *Sense and Sensibility* contains an anxiety about work. Without useful employment, the eligible Edward Ferrars suffers from a sense of alienation. Arguably, his condition could stand for the history of work in Western industrialized societies. Here, the cultural evolution of work is a progressive estrangement from nonhuman nature. Edward's fate in this astute novel is subtly contrasted with the impoverished heroines, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. For it is their gender that precludes them from the embodied action he seeks. Women, this novelist reveals, are assigned in this society burdensome *psychological* work. The near death of Marianne Dashwood demonstrates just how far psychic stress can endanger their bodies.

In narrating this space of psyche, body, and nature, *work* in *Sense and Sensibility* revisits an earlier cultural practice, that of alchemy. Here, a particular historical moment in the Western narrative of (un)alienated work occurred as late as the English Renaissance. In this period, alchemy united material chemistry, artistic symbol-making, and psychological labor. One of the defining ingredients of the practice of alchemy was

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myth. Enticing and frustratingly enigmatic, alchemy had a rich cultural significance because it joined dominant Christian ideas with older myths of the sacred as innate in matter.

More deliberately than the heroines of Austen's novel, Carl Jung drew on the psychological dimension of alchemy over a century later. Like the alchemists, he wanted to invoke older mythical structures of the sacred in order to re-imbue the world with psyche. Jung therefore explored alchemical symbols for their dream-like potency. Reviewing Jung's alchemical and "poetical" psychological works, I argue that psychoanalysis is a powerful intervention into consciousness because it is a reframing of creation myths. For this very reason, it may have the potential to undo the long, sad history of the alienation of work. Jung's psychological treatment of alchemy reconnects psyche and body, human to nonhuman nature. In understanding his writing, I suggest that psychological alchemy has potential as an ecocritical practice. As I shall show, an ecocritical and psychic alchemy can explore the estrangement from nature of both Edward Ferrars and Marianne Dashwood.

### Alienated Work and Nature

I want to begin with the notion of *work*, which as noun and verb embeds the making of literature in our embodied lives. Writing is *work*; an author makes *a work* to be liberated from paper into flesh by means of the *work* of reading. Yet "work" itself is an even more fundamental theme of human life. For most of our cultural development, work was a bodily immersion in nature. To begin with, hunter-gatherers gleaned from a wilderness, leaving it relatively unchanged. However, soon enough came the ancient agricultural revolution and a transformation of landscape.

Farming was work that paved the way for humans to live in cities, to become progressively more disconnected from the planet's bio-rhythms. Nevertheless, for many centuries, mankind remained fueled by a majority of citizens digging the earth. Only through the mechanization of labor on the land were artistic laborers freed from literally handling the soil. The writer is born as one who scratches paper, rather than soil. Eventually, he feels a psychological need to compose about, or even for, his lost connection to the body of the earth. He becomes beached in modernity, someone questing through art to find a literal, "lettered," way back to nature.

What is "work" if it no longer embeds us in the nonhuman nature that sustains our bodily existence? Ecocriticism is justifiably ambiguous about the cultural trajectory of work. In the 1970s, Lynn White, Jr.

pointed out that the unfeeling exploitation of nature is visible as early as medieval Europe. Work intensified there through the invention of a plough so potent that it violated existing soil structures and ended subsistence farming (14). Today, work practices that respect the nonhuman are to be found in many indigenous cultures, but the future of the whole planet is threatened by global warming caused by the unfettered evolution of "work" in the West. "Modernity" is a condition of a society that has moved from farming to factory farming.

White makes another point that suggests a role for ecopsychology in this critique of the Western culture of work: that attitudes toward nature are, in essence, religious (10). For example, Jung believed that attitudes to psychic nature are, at root, religious, and moreover that psychic nature is the nonhuman nature in us (*The Structure* 8: 412). Or, to be even more precise, religion was the traditional mode of symbolizing the space between what is human and what is not.

Therefore, White argues that medieval peasants who ploughed more and more of the earth were secure in their sense of righteousness because they worshipped a male God who created the earth and then stepped aside (9). God's transcendence of nature was shared by man, or at least *men*. Woman, as was well known, partook of the lesser nature of "matter" as a secondary creation for the benefit of man. As in Eve's deviousness with hapless Adam, woman, unforgivably, stood for matter, sexuality, body, and the bringing of death into the fate of humankind. Here, of course, woman *is* nature and man the culture that seeks redemption by perfecting his dominance over her.

Hence, work, in the dominant forms of Christian society, became the great task of perfecting matter, of achieving the transcendence of the divine from nature. So, if "work" is to imitate the founding labors of God's creation, it is unsurprising that man initiates a technology that begins with gouging the earth, and develops into disembodied cyberspace. Yet, it does not have to be so. White argues that pre-Christian religions had a different structure for relating to nature and therefore a different work and technology (9).

"Animism" is a term used to describe a religion where the sacred inheres within the nonhuman world; it is not essentially separate from it. Every mountain, stream, tree, season, wind, and valley is sacred and has its own spirit. Under certain conditions, these spirits can be articulate. One hugely important type of human work is to learn to talk to them. So, to live in these cultures is to evolve forms of work that grow through their careful, complex relationship with the sacred entities of nature. Here, "work" means becoming more and more a part of nature.

In this paper, I want to look at work as both an estrangement from nature and as a way to seek out its embrace. As a vital aspect of human interaction with the nonhuman, work is a theme in literature, particularly that of the realist novel, of which Jane Austen was one of the literary pioneers. While Austen does not appear to be a novelist primarily of work or the body, *Sense and Sensibility* is surprisingly acute about the high psychological costs of estrangement from nature in work and physical embodiment. Linking this realist novel and the history of the alienation of work from the body in nature is alchemy and myth, as I shall show.

On the one hand, there is the history of working the land in which the stark cruelties of slavery seem to be encoded. Does not industrial farming work the land inhumanly, like a human slave? Here, we approach Edward Said's ground-breaking exposition (1993) of what is not directly represented in the work of the text: namely, the slavery underpinning the grand house of *Mansfield Park*. Similarly, I suggest an undercurrent of work, myth, and psyche surrounding the two heroines of *Sense and Sensibility*. Indeed, the novel can first be fruitfully scrutinized as the sorry tale of psychic and bodily alienation from the land. Yet, I will also suggest a mythical resistance to the alienation of the body in nature in Austen's deceptively subtle depiction of the feminine. After all, ecocriticism contains a profound optimism. Can writing, can literature, be a work back to, even of, nature?

With such an ambitious program, a first stage is to explore alchemy's possibilities as a weaving of psyche, symbols, and art.

### Alchemy and the Work of Sacred Nature

My argument is that alchemy is an important topic for ecocriticism because it contains two central tasks of ecocritical work. Ecocriticism researches and critiques our disastrous relations with nature and also, optimistically, seeks ways of rebuilding ourselves as ecologically integrated beings. In such a context, alchemy contains destructive and constructive histories. Alchemy is both an engine of the anti-ecological aspects of modernity and a space in which "other" religious attitudes to nature can be (re)discovered. Through this complex symbolic practice, we can glean more understanding of the West's tenacity in ripping apart landscapes. Yet, alchemy is also a practice for seeking alternative ways of relating to nature and is even a more ecological means of construing writing, symbols, and our "indigenous" psyche.

In the popular version of the attempt to turn lead into gold, the alchemical project is over. It belongs to the pre-scientific age where its place is as the precursor of chemistry as a de-spiritualized material

science. Such a reductive dismissal of alchemy ignores its profound cultural influence, and, as I shall show, its role in the mythic imagination. Known to exist in the West from the first century CE, and rumored to be Egyptian in origin, alchemy was far more than chemistry by amateurs. It was a practice and a lore that united psyche and body, work and nature, the sacred and art.

"The Great Work" was a resonant phrase that for many centuries denoted the labor of the alchemist. He (most were male) was one who sought by imagination, writing, and the manipulation of chemical substances to facilitate the divine work in nature. Alchemists could never be straightforward Christians of the dominant patriarchal mode of the Church. They saw nature and matter as containing the sacred, not divided from it. More than this, there was a continuum between the spirit in matter and the spirit in the mind and body of the alchemist. In a very real sense, alchemy preserved the animist view of nature as inhabited by divine spirits. Mircea Eliade, in *The Forge and The Crucible* (1956), is explicit about alchemy as a practice of an ancient sacred myth of nature, the Earth Mother: ". . . [I]f streams, galleries of mines, and caves are compared to the *vagina* of the Earth-Mother, everything that lives in the belly of the earth is alive, albeit in the state of gestation" (42). Mining, according to Eliade, began as part of the alchemical tradition that believed that all metals were organic. They grew in the womb of Mother Earth until they reached their perfection as gold. Far from being a violation of nature, both mining and alchemy aided nature in speeding up the growth into gold. Moreover, alchemical gold is not just the inert metal of modern chemistry. For the alchemists never let go the notion of a spirit in matter. Gold has a material form in the sparkling metal; it also has spiritual forms such as divine water that grants immortality. Alchemists worked with Mother Earth, yet also toward a male sky father god in "liberating" the divine spirit.

What is fascinating in alchemy is its role in keeping together two myths of human relations with nature: the myth of a (male) God who separates himself from the mundane world and the myth of the Earth Goddess who is animistically omni-present in matter. In this crucial tension, modernity results from the dominance of the mainstream Christian attitude to nature. As Jung shows in his work on seventeenth-century alchemy texts, the practitioners were able to claim that they rescued a sleeping god from matter (*Psychology and Alchemy* para. 455). So, the divine spirit they strove for, whose proper place was ethereal and above, could ultimately be identified with the image of the risen Christ himself. Alchemy began in divine immanence, the sacred within

nature, and devoutly achieved transcendence—God outside nature, as the Church insisted.

Eliade shows the far-reaching consequences from “the freeing of Nature from the laws of Time” (171). For if you believe that the great work is to supersede nature in the ripening of metals, then the acceleration of time by ever more efficient technological exploitation is to be welcomed. Unfortunately, when human beings take on the role of Time by substituting technology for nature, they lose the sacred role of the Great Work. For once technology has so far advanced that it substitutes for the natural time of ripening Mother Earth, then the masters of technology—modern man—lose the spiritual bond with nature (in the “work” of rescuing the spirit from nature). Work and matter become spiritless.

So, on the one hand, alchemy's fate was to be stripped of its spiritual dimension and to sponsor a tradition of despoiling the earth. Yet that was not the whole of its legacy. On the other hand, to alchemists “The Great Work” also meant work with the psyche envisioned as part of a dimension that included sacred nature. Eliade suggests that late into Western history, alchemy preserved psychic practices of becoming spiritually embedded in nature that we know from non-Western societies as initiation and shamanism (17). In effect, the shamans who served a long spiritual training in order to speak to spirits in animistic culture had a parallel in practicing alchemists in the West. Despite the “work” breeding the dangerous fantasy of escape from nature, it also connected the alchemist to it.

Therefore, buried in the history of alchemy are some of the almost forgotten roots of Western animism with regard to the nonhuman world. It would take the invention of a new scholarly discipline of psychology and a neo-shamanistic practice of psychotherapy to make visible some of the alchemical practices of psychically imbuing the body in nature. For what the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Jung does is to re-orient the creation myths structuring consciousness and our relations to nature. Moreover, prior to the invention of psychotherapy, such interventions into rebalancing the Western psyche could be found in art, the novel, and in the works of Jane Austen. Therefore, I will first of all explore psychoanalysis and myth before revealing the role of the sacred feminine and nature in *Sense and Sensibility*.

### Creation Myths and Their Return to Modernity

It is not news that psychoanalysis is keen to scrutinize myths that have played a shaping part in structuring the modern psyche. Freud's fascination with Oedipus and his fatal attraction to his mother (after

unwittingly slaying his father) has been seminal. My point here is to emphasize how far psychoanalysis itself is a mythical practice of work intervening in the psyche. Seen within the larger framework of alchemy, psychoanalysis is an attempt to renegotiate the creation myths founding Western consciousness. These myths are found in various forms and combinations in the ancient religious texts, most notably, of course, in Genesis.

Creation myths and modern consciousness have been rethought by Ann Baring and Jules Cashford in *The Myth of the Goddess* (1991). They point out that archeological evidence suggests that the very earliest myths were likely to have centered upon the earth as a sacred mother. From her fecund body, all life is generated, and so consciousness is grounded upon body, connection, sexuality, and the earth as animate. Animism is the religious practice sponsored by this myth of psyche. Eventually, another kind of myth arose when patriarchal tribes with sky father gods took over the fertile Mediterranean regions. Here was a mythical structure of divine creation of nature as separate from oneself (494).

It follows that sky father structuring institutes dualism in which the male is made in the image of god and the female becomes the subordinate other. So, not only is consciousness erected here upon a mythical separation and repression of the body as other, but also we have the construction of a patriarchal system of exclusions in which woman is allied to body, sexuality, and nature. All these “feminine” and “natural” properties are inferior to masculinity, with its reason, and disembodied mind, which are defined as allied to divine transcendence.

Of course, the structuralist identification of these two different types of myth of consciousness only reveals that *both* are necessary to psychic functioning and have always existed within human cultures. What Jung, in particular, intuited was that the imbalance of these two paradigms in Western modernity and its history was dangerous to individual and collective health (*Psychology and Alchemy* para. 12). Both Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis aim to restore psychic wholeness by intervening in the structuring power of myth in the human psyche. Jung, more than Freud, realized that the realignment of creation myths would have what we now call “ecological” consequences. Unsurprisingly, these psychoanalytic founding fathers oriented their own myths slightly differently, with significant consequences for later ecocriticism.

For both Jung and Freud, the earth mother lives again as the origin and matter of being in the pre-Oedipal Mother. Like the Goddess of ancient myth, the psychoanalytic entity is prior to the division of

genders. Unlike the myth, Freudian psychoanalysis seemed to place more emphasis on separation from her as the origin of consciousness. In the Freudian Oedipus complex, the ego learns to favor the sky father myth over his gestation in the Mother. Recognizing the Father, due to his difference, the boy child fears castration and learns to base his being upon repression of bodily connection to the Mother. Signifying sexuality as forbidden, the founding act of repression splits subjectivity between ego and the new formed unconscious forever associated with unlawful desires. This for Freud is a hero-ego dedicated to the sky father, or the phallus, in Lacanian terms. Earth mother consciousness will continue to be marginalized in these stories of origin; Freudian psychoanalysis either legitimates sky father dominance of modernity or diagnoses it, depending upon the emphasis. Jung's treatment of myth is vitally different.

First of all, since consciousness is the matter of myths, to Jung, there cannot be one sole myth of the human ego. He considered the Oedipus complex to be a significant psychic structure, but not of overwhelming importance. For only one notion is unchallengeable to Jung: the intrinsic creativity and, in part, unknowability of the unconscious (*Structure* para. 358). Here, we need to realize that this characteristic principle reinstates the earth mother in her position as creative of herself and home of the sacred. To put it in the words of psychological rather than mythic narrative, Jung's pre-Oedipal (m)Other is not an abyss of being; she is rather an unconsciousness desiring to give birth to the ego. Hence, the Jungian Oedipus complex has to be more of a co-operative partnership between (sky) Father pulling the ego-hero away and (earth) Mother willingly pushing the ego-hero away.

In this figuration of psychoanalysis, "nature" is animate—both the nature we are born from in the physical mother and the unconscious (m)Other figure as potential sources of meaning. So, Jung sees human nature as rooted in nature we get from our mother, which is, in turn, part of a continuum of Mother Nature, the Earth Goddess. It is therefore unsurprising that Jung downplays the necessity of repressing the unconscious and advocates a positive relationship with it. Healthy subjectivity means "individuation," becoming more and more individual by living out both creation myths.

Very important for ecocriticism is Jung's description of myths as working the psyche through symbols. A symbol is a psychic image (visual or verbal) that is imbued with the unfathomable powers of the creative, mythically structured unconscious. His symbol is an image that points to the not-yet-known or unknowable. It is mobilized by narratives we call myths and is connected to the body through the inherited principles of potential meaning Jung called "archetypes."



What this means is that Jung theorizes a kind of language (symbol and myth) that is of the body, not repressing it, and is therefore linked to the nonhuman. Symbols and myths are suffused with unconscious nature in us that Jung says has continuity with nature outside us. A symbol or mythical narrative is sedimented by nature speaking through our imagination. Art energized by the unconscious psyche is a way of reciprocal communication with nature. Therefore to re-invigorate the earth mother creation myth in modernity is to seek a semiotics of the nonhuman.

Culturally, Jung was delighted to find in alchemy what he regarded as a more positive tradition of practicing both creation myths. He saw in alchemy texts symbols that recalled the dream images of his patients. Alchemical art animated symbols through stories that are evidently myths, since they bring together psyche, matter, and spirit. Jung particularly liked alchemy's stories of Mercurius, whose liveliness denotes the "quickness" of the liquid metal mercury, also called quicksilver. To Jung, Mercurius also stood for the unconscious, for he began as the poisonous base "leaden" matter who could be refined into an airy spirit (*Psychology and Alchemy* paras. 26, 84). After all, what is work in modernity but a leaden burden desperately needing to (re)find its animation? Two modern figures burdened by their lack of such animation are Edward Ferrars and Marianne Dashwood.

### Nature and the Crisis of Work in *Sense and Sensibility*

Jane Austen's novels appear supremely comfortable with the notion of a disembodied psyche. And yet a challenge to a mind considered as disembodied and as wholly apart from nature is to be found in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*. Indeed, the text proves highly ambiguous about the end of regarding work as a committed immersion in nature.

At the beginning of the novel, when three sisters and their widowed mother face the prospect of being uprooted, Marianne laments that nature at Norland Park is inanimate and will not miss them: "you will continue the same; unconscious of the pleasure or the regret you occasion" (23). Written before the age of modern psychology, Austen's term "unconscious" signifies a lack of sympathy, an inability to generate meaningful response.

Later, Marianne is able to link the lack of reciprocity she finds in nature to the rare communion she believes she has established with Willoughby. He, perhaps ironically on the part of the author, rescued her from nature's excesses in the cold and rain. Marianne is by then

established as a character reveling in nature's changing seasons, including dying vegetation. Marianne observes,

[W]ith what transporting sensations have I formerly seen [leaves] fall! . . . Now there is no one to regard them. . . .

"It is not everyone," said Elinor, "who has your passion for dead leaves."

No, my feelings are not often shared. . . . But sometimes they are. (76)

In this novel, human culture estranges people from nature more than it returns them to it. Elinor repeats the note of "dead leaves" here perhaps to indicate how Marianne's immersion in Willoughby threatens to turn natural in the inescapable process of death. Marianne believes herself "transported" by looking at falling leaves, an image whose ironies in Austen have been well established in relation to *Mansfield Park*, with its haunting, absent presence of the transportation of slaves. Like the central character in the later novel, Marianne and her family are unenthusiastically transported from their "natural" home of birth to another residence far away. In what begins as an exile to Marianne, she finds communion with an attractive young man. This very relationship proves even more perilous than dipping herself in a nature she does not think reciprocates.

On the other hand, Marianne's adventures in the noncultured environment outside do suggest a metonymic relation to her fate. In the quotation above, she connects her passion for dead leaves with her captivity by Willoughby. Although he begins his courtship by bringing her to safety out of the rain, he later deserts her. She then contracts what could have been a fatal illness from the "indulgence of solitary rambles in inclement weather" (265). Nature is here surprisingly embodied and erotic. Unfortunately, it is also dangerous to her health and sanity.

Meanwhile, back at the family home of origin, Norland, with its new, fashionable owners, what is ancient, loved, and organic must give way to what is modern, convenient, and productive. The "natural" is cut down, literally in the felling of inconvenient trees, done explicitly to serve household economy. Here, it is Elinor who is distressed to hear that "the old walnut trees are to be felled to make way for Fanny's greenhouse" (197). She is silent at the news, however, preferring to be politic. She simply notes to herself and thus the reader how much more voluble Marianne would be at such a violation of their childhood home. Her brother and his wife treat their estate as a

source of money and status. This greenhouse is part of a social vision that is blind to natural cycles and beauties. Indeed, for the new owners of Norland, the circulation of money is valued more than the trees' part in the circulation of oxygen.

Here, Elinor's restrained valuing of nature as something more than an ingredient of a business enterprise is favorably contrasted with the new regime at Norland. It also reminds us of how Elinor functions as a warning hint to Marianne, that recklessly tossing her emotions into an "other," dead leaves or Willoughby, is dangerous.

This debate about nature and attitudes to it comes to a head between Marianne and Edward Ferrars, who is suitor to the more restrained sister, Elinor. Their discussion about a cultivated landscape shows a dissonance between ethics and esthetics that is suggestive of the growth of modernity's "objective" separation from nature. Edward is a visiting gentleman portrayed as a sensible man who ought to be worthy of Elinor. He markedly disagrees with Marianne about valuing what for him is evidently the work of a largely disembodied mind:

"I like a fine prospect, but not on picturesque principles. I do not like crooked, twisted, blasted trees. I admire them much more if they are tall, straight and flourishing . . . I have more pleasure in a snug farmhouse than a watch-tower – and a troop of tidy, happy villagers please me better than the finest banditti in the world." (84)

Even here, Edward's ethical perspective is not entirely devoid of a sense of bodily solidarity with nature. He prefers trees "flourishing" to the crooked blasts of the darker, Gothic side of Romanticism. There is an instinctive association of physical well-being in evoking healthy bones in strong straight trunks. Nevertheless, Edward's nature is benevolent in the distant manner more allied to separation from the nonhuman than a desire to rejoice in intimacy with it.

In contrast, Marianne's erotic embrace of nature is deeply embodied in ways crucial to the plot of *Sense and Sensibility*. In her we see the survival of a human connection with nature that is not so much a way of looking but a way of being. Marianne is a user of intuitive knowledge gained though a psyche united with her body in the landscape. Never mind that her education has taught her that nature is inanimate; through her body and sexuality, she is drawn into the natural world. Unfortunately, her immersion in nature threatens literal death. Yet, her recovery to love again is not a renunciation of her tacit unconscious connection to nature. Indeed, Marianne's near death draws her more repressed sister into something closer to her own corporeal nature. Through this narrative, both sisters come to possess a psychic

creativity in their physicality, one that Jung was later to recognize in his notion of the creative embodied unconscious.

Therefore, although Elinor is content to hold back from uttering her own sympathy with nature for the sake of family harmony, she does not hold back from identifying psychically, and even corporeally, with her dying sister. During Marianne's dangerous illness, Elinor endures "almost equal suffering" (273). When her sister is finally starting to improve, it is her body and countenance that Elinor reads before her own physical breakdown in (and a Marianne-like reaction of) "tears of joy" (275).

"Her breath, her skin, her lips, all flattered Elinor with signs of amendment, and Marianne fixed her eyes on her with a rational, though languid gaze." (275)

Here, I argue that Marianne's rationality is far from heedless of natural bodily vulnerabilities and desires. Marianne is a character in touch with the earth mother in a world that refuses to support such a way of being with nature. Furthermore, I would suggest that Marianne's lack of an ethical sense of nature is demonstrated in the novel to be bound up with the estrangement of women from work. Marianne's connection to nature betrays the sky father dominance of her culture because it is not materially, or more precisely, biologically, connected to her being. All she has is a psychic bond with a nature who (or which) does not talk back to her. In plot terms, this natural bond becomes a psychic bond with Willoughby, who refuses to talk to her in London. Hence, Marianne's bond with nature is the road to death.

Lacking work or labor to provide sustenance from the land, Marianne does not consider that her food comes from the neat cultivation around her and not from the lonely crags. She is therefore unable to see nature as sustaining work, even if it is now work that sustains only body, not an ensouled body that responds to the animation of nature in a reciprocal creative relationship of earth mother-oriented cultures. Denied even the very limited validation of work, Marianne fortunately has another way into nature that is not merely her extinction: through Eros, the body and myth, as I shall show.

Edward, on the other hand, is characterized in the novel as a man lacking work. His mother, who controls all the family money, will not allow him to become a clergyman. So, it is suggestive that his reaction to Marianne's "transports" is to argue for a pastoral sense of environment in both the agricultural and the spiritual sense. At this point in the novel, Edward laments his lack of meaningful work while describing nature as worked by man for the benefit of a whole community. It is an embodied ethics, yet one that, like Marianne, regards nature as having

no say. Work in *Sense and Sensibility* can allow a person to generate a meaningful life, whether it be the work of the laborers or of Edward who becomes a pastor. Nevertheless, it remains a work largely severed from a sense of reciprocal signifying with the land. Even Marianne enters into the corporeal work of marriage and motherhood. Enabling her to do so is another kind of “rescue” than the male heroism of Willoughby: it is the feminine, in the form of Elinor’s bodily intervention, that allows Marianne to be reborn from the sickbed.

Those characters the novel deems morally acceptable acquire the notion of meaningful work in touch with nature as nonhuman (Edward’s pastoral landscape) or through the human body (marriage and motherhood). What they do not gain is a sense of nature as having ethical value for itself—nature as an intrinsically creative other. Austen’s nature here is primarily the gift of the sky father. It is to be respected as such. In this finely crafted moral sense, those who chop down walnut trees, disrespectful of their value to the human community, will not fare well.

Yet such a settlement into dominant sky father attitudes to the non-human does not account for all the mythical qualities in the novel. In fact, *Sense and Sensibility* has a surprisingly radical and even alchemical renegotiation of feminine myths of heroism and ecology.

### Re-working Creation Myths for Nature in *Sense and Sensibility*

One further argument about the negotiation of nature in *Sense and Sensibility* is the way it shapes meaning into myth. When Edward sees a cultivated pastoral landscape as possessing a spiritual dimension for him as a clergyman or pastor, he is, of course, striving to embody a benign sky father myth of watching over his human flock. They, in turn, have a residual earth mother connection to the land in their bodily labor.

Of course, as White would remind us, these workers will share Marianne’s sense of nature as dumb. While she laments nature’s lack of reciprocal communion, the workers are likely to be preoccupied with the growing mechanization of tilling the soil. Sky father values predominate to the extent of shutting off any animation for nature; work is becoming divorced from spiritual value. Long before, agriculture was culture in the sense of a spiritual value rooting the work. In animistic societies, cultivation meant to work with the spirits of nature. For Austen’s world, only in the biblical version of pastoral, taking care of the parish is a myth fully embodied, and it is one heavily weighted toward transcendence of nature on the part of the divine mind. A clergyman is encouraged to imitate God and care for

his flock in ways that emphasize a disconnection of spirit from body. For the poor, bodily labor does root them to the earth, but the earth offers back little meaning.

However, Marianne and Elinor do manage to articulate an-Other myth through their trials of the body as deeply connected to both psyche and nature. Radical and fitting for a novel pioneering women as heroes, these sisters remake the feminine myth of Persephone and Demeter. Indeed, Marianne is endangered by failing to recognize herself as Persephone. To her peril, she believes that she is living an erotic myth where she is feminine prize to Willoughby's dashing hero. In fact, instead of being the passive reward to a patriarchal construction of Eros in heterosexuality, she has to learn to be her own hero. Given the hindsight of later developments, Willoughby's so-called rescue is reframed in the novel as Hades dragging Persephone down to Hell. Marianne is a Persephone who imagines herself to be in one myth, only to discover herself after being dragged into the underworld of the psyche.

In one sense, Marianne reaches Hades or Hell when her depression after Willoughby's desertion extinguishes her spirits. A more literal Hell appears when her body declines and she lies near death. The original myth has her rescue by her mother, Demeter, goddess of cereal fertility. Austen effectively de-essentializes the position of the "mother." In her novels, mothers are not always motherly; other women may nurture more successfully. Here, mother as Goddess of Fertility, Demeter, and earth mother is Marianne's sister, Elinor. Like Demeter, Elinor visits hell to retrieve the one she loves. Like Persephone, Marianne leaves something of herself there; she retains a connection to her underworld for the rest of her life, as her altered demeanor after the illness indicates.

Jung showed that myth is found or made or remade when the creative psyche helps animate nature to be articulate through culture. The unconscious is a word for processes when psyche meets body and nature. All three entities—psyche (conscious and unconscious), body, and nature—manifest in symbol and myth. Myths are dynamic; their signifying is work, the creative force in the world of psyche, body, and nature. As soon as the framing creation myths become unbalanced, the subsequent repression stultifies animation and signifying. In the sky father myth of nature, Edward finally gains work, while his laborers merely toil. Marianne and Elinor manage to acquire work by forming a mythical connection to bodily nature for each other. Fanny's greenhouse tells us how far a capitalist attitude toward nature has killed the sacred in work.

Arguably, the most passionate moment in the novel is Elinor's outpouring of grief and relief when Marianne is "rescued." The loving

relationship between the sisters is an important counterpoint to the prevalence of sky father attitudes depicted in the social setup within the text. Here, *Sense and Sensibility* is alchemical in a Jungian and ecocritical manner. By embodying Persephone and Demeter in Marianne and Elinor, the earth mother is enabled to live in the novel as Persephone's embodied descent into Hell and the sisters' embodied love for each other. Marianne is Persephone in having to become a female hero. She, as hero, negotiates a relation with nature as death and rebirth, and manifests as the flower maiden who confidently argues with Edward about the delights of dead leaves.

Elinor is more reticent than her sister, yet she powerfully acquires the role of Demeter. She will suffer and inflict death if she loses Marianne/Persephone. As Demeter, Elinor stands for many aspects of earth mother in her creation myth of consciousness in her unstinting embodied fertility to her sister and mother. Also, in taking on the narrative of Persephone and Demeter in their bodies and psyches, Marianne and Elinor become Jungian symbols. They point toward the unknown or not-yet-known. As symbols they are therefore powerful alchemical agents in the mythical reframing of creation myths of consciousness. In these senses, the sisters are performing ecocritical alchemy; they invite the reading psyche to participate mythically and symbolically in reconnecting us to nature.

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