Embarrassment in *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*

Steven Berens

Utrecht University

BA Thesis

Table of Contents

Abstract

This paper examines the pervasive theme of embarrassment in two Austenian texts. The

pervasiveness of embarrassment can easily be explained by the historical context of both

literary texts. Because of its recognisable nature, a character's embarrassment is recognised

both by other characters and readers, even if it is not explicitly named. Characters'

embarrassment expresses their sentiments that they are not able articulate verbally. As such

Austen, through embarrassment, seems to criticise the norms and expectations imposed by

society. Moreover, demonstrations of embarrassment are valued and looked at favourably in

the texts. In fact, the embarrassability of a character functions as an important identity marker.

Because they are almost never alone, whom the characters are with drastically changes the

workings of embarrassment. Embarrassment also works to maintain tension throughout the

novels as they keep characters from resolving important situations. Similarly, embarrassing

scenes often foreshadow future events within the literary texts. Thus, embarrassment

manifests itself on many different levels and in many different ways in Austenian fiction.

However, the present study looks only at two novels and future research could reveal a wealth

of further findings among a variety of topics and across more Austenian works.

Steven Berens

5869773

Hoofdstraat 5, 5161 PD Sprang Capelle

Thesis - Bachelor English Language and Culture

British English

30 June 2019

6402 words

<div align="center">Embarrassment in *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility*</div>

<div align="center">1.   Introduction</div>

Austen's characters are indispensably products of their time. This means they find themselves almost always being witnessed. No action or sentence goes unnoticed by their audiences. Moreover, they are caught in a change of societal attitudes where sensibility, previously thought to be emblematic of good breeding, became progressively embarrassing (Bennet 377). This means that the behaviour of Austen's characters is constantly put under a magnifying glass. As such, it must came as no surprise that they are particularly prone to feelings of embarrassment and that such situations manifest themselves with great frequency in Austen's narratives.

This paper hopes to further the understanding of embarrassment in Austen. To do so, the literary analysis will be underpinned by a theoretical framework of a collection of psychological texts that will provide a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. This method allows for a well-defined and relevant new route into Austen's texts. Using the understanding gathered in the theoretical framework, this study hopes to

present new and relevant understandings of embarrassment within Austen and embarrassment in a broader sense.

Firstly, as Austen's characters find themselves so often in public spaces in a society very much concerned with propriety and appearances, the present study hopes to examine how this rather formal and restrictive environment might make characters more prone to feelings of embarrassment. By extension, it might comment yet further on whether, and indeed why, certain characters demonstrate more, or more aggravated, embarrassment. Moreover it be relevant to examine which symptoms Austen's characters demonstrate and how other characters might take note of these. As well as this, it could also be worthwhile to comment on whether feelings of embarrassment are described explicitly or that simply in referring to one of these symptoms the text creates an expectation on behalf of the reader to interpret a character's embarrassment. Similarly, a further question will be what effects demonstrations of embarrassment have on other characters as well as the reader. Much the same, the way an embarrassed character deals with embarrassment, the successfulness of their coping mechanisms and their effect on the narratives similarly offers another avenue into understanding the workings of embarrassment within Austen more comprehensively.

2. Theoretical Framework

The current paper seeks to further understandings of embarrassment in Austen on the basis of a reading of a body of psychological studies conceptualizing the nature of the phenomenon of embarrassment. As such, this body of psychological studies will constitute the theoretical framework which will be taken into the analysis of the primary texts which is to follow. It is this theoretical framework that the current section is intended to outline.

Whereas the concept of embarrassment, it might be argued, is a very complex and multi-layered phenomenon, its manifestation in the real world is inherently momentary. The embarrassing situation and the emotional sensation which follows it, is very brief, lasting mere moments (Miller 30). Nonetheless, in these very few moments a lot happens, and any scene or situation in which embarrassment is depicted or experienced might realistically be categorized as consisting of three stages or components which occur almost simultaneously and interact with one another. Firstly, there is the embarrassing event which acts as the trigger. Secondly, there is a momentary sensation of embarrassment on behalf of the protagonist motivated by an awareness that he or she has indeed done something embarrassing and by his or her expectation of the response of others. Thirdly, the embarrassed person or character will show his or her embarrassment and this is met with a reply from the audience. The structure of the present model of embarrassment outlined in this chapter will try to follow these 3 stages as closely as possible.

Firstly then, an embarrassing situation is always instigated by a trigger, namely a specific moment or action within a situation or scene. The question to be answered then is what constitutes such a trigger, or, rather, what makes a situation embarrassing? Of course, the straightforward answer here would be; any situation that elicits feelings of embarrassment within a given individual. However, this would altogether seem somewhat a deficient and unsatisfying answer. An excellent starting point for the present characterization of

embarrassment, is acknowledging its inherently public nature (Dong, Ping, et al. 2005). Embarrassment inevitably and exclusively occurs in public environments. Embarrassment is public in nature, as opposed to the self-referent nature of other emotions, such as guilt and shame. These, although closely associated, may, in contrast, be experienced without the presence of a real or imagined audience (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Tagney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996 qtd. in Dong, Ping, et al. 2005). More specifically, such feelings occur because an individual is anticipating, and afraid of, undesired opinions from others in their environment (Miller 30-31). This anxiety is motivated by the fact that the people in question are struck by an immediate realisation that they have failed to comply with the norms and expected behaviour implicit to the appropriate situation (Modigliani 313). Thus, an embarrassing situation, is always characterised by the presence, or perceived presence, of an audience and by a failure, or at least a perceived failure, to comply with the norms or expectations implicit to the situation in which the individual finds themselves.

Secondly, the embarrassing event is ultimately rather secondary to the reaction *to* it. That is to say, almost immediate to the realisation of the culprit's failure to adhere to expectations of the audience is the realisation that their failure to do so undermines the positive self they seek to represent (Dong, Ping, et al 2005) to either explicit audiences, or if alone, by imagining what others *would* think (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996 qtd. in Miller 30/31). This second realisation is arguably where the actual feelings of embarrassment within the individual spring from. Fundamentally then, embarrassment seems to be motivated by an awareness and a sense of importance attached to the opinion of others (Miller 31). After all, children, till a certain age, are unaffected by situations that grown-ups would ordinarily consider to be embarrassing (Bennett qtd. in Miller 31). As a simplification of the original theories, the present paper will also draw attention to the idea that instead of a person's own opinion or other people's opinions, embarrassment is fundamentally concerned

with the idea of what someone *believes* others think about them. Indeed, people opinions of themselves tend to hinge largely on (their perception of) other people's opinions. Embarrassment, concerned with momentary and isolated situations, merely epitomises this very idea in an extreme form. In other words, an individual may feel embarrassed if he the disapproval of the audience is obvious even when they themselves do not readily feel that their behaviour has been deficient (Modigliani 225). Because of this situational nature, such opinions, and consequently one' opinion of themselves, are based solely on a small selection of attributes made salient in the encounter in which they are at that time engaged, regardless of what positive attributes he or she may possess in a more general sense (214-15). Therefore, it must come as no surprise then that embarrassed people often over-estimate the severity of the situation, both in how much attention our audience our paying to us as well as in how harshly this audience is judging us (Gilovich, Kruger, & Savitsky, 1999 qtd. in Miller 31; Semin, 1982 qtd. in Miller 31). By extension, it seems logical that an insecure person, with a generally low self or perceived esteem, could be thought to possess greater *embarrassability*. However, whereas a more empathic person might similarly be more prone to feelings of embarrassment, this need not necessarily be the case, only when situations are sufficiently ambiguous could greater empathic qualities have a causal correlation with someone's *embarrassability* (Modigliani 222-23).

Thirdly, the embarrassed individual will show his emotion via a set of typifying expressions and non-verbal behaviour. Amongst the bodily expressions typical of embarrassment ought to be considered the acts of blushing, sweating or stuttering. These typifying clues similarly distinguish embarrassment from other emotions (Dong, Ping, et al 2005; Keltner qtd. in Miller 30-31). It follows then that one's embarrassment is altogether easy to notice or, perhaps rather, difficult to hide, and that those present can easily tell someone's embarrassment apart from other emotions (Marcus & Miller qtd. in Miller 31).

Although this demonstration of guilt may often be perceived as detrimental to the opinions of their audiences, this non-verbal behaviour has in fact got a much more positive effect, as it elicits favourable behaviour from the audience (Miller 31). This means that, even though embarrassment remains an extremely painful experience to the individual, it serves as a remedying agent following (supposed) social indiscretions (Keltner & Anderson 187; Miller 30). In other words, displays of embarrassment work to redeem and restore a person's public identity on the back of the initially negative perception, triggered by the antecedent embarrassing event. Thus, as acknowledged by Rowland Miller, we may characterise embarrassment as "unpleasant but adaptive", and this could go some way to explain the why embarrassment exists (31). Therefore, it seems important to distinguish between the embarrassing event, triggering the initial emotional experience of embarrassment, and reactionary demonstrations of embarrassment within that same individual. Whereas the first two seem detrimental to social interactions and harmful to one's situational identity or at least his or her own perception thereof, the latter, non-verbal display of embarrassment goes some way to repair this damage (Keltner & Anderson 188) and are vital to social order (Goffman qtd. in Keltner & Anderson 190). Moreover, individuals might respond differently to feeling embarrassed. Namely, they might either choose to *hide their face*, refraining from engaging in social encounters, or, alternatively, *to restore their face,* trying to reinvigorate their positive public image. These different coping mechanisms might even be employed metaphorically, by for example wearing dark sunglasses to hide their face or apply restorative facial cream to restore their face (Dong, Ping, et al. 2006). However, whereas restoring one's face, both literally or metaphorically, contributes significantly to decreasing one's feeling of embarrassment, hiding one's face is far less effective (2010).

3. Embarrassment in Austen

3.1 Introduction

Having, in the previous section, outlined the psychological model that will inform the analysis of the primary texts, this section will now examine the representation of embarrassment within the two primary texts; *Sense and Sensibility* and *Persuasion*. The passages discussed in this chapter capture the complexities of Austenian embarrassment vividly. They draw attention not only to elements of the theoretical framework but also, and more importantly, to characteristics of embarrassment not featured in the model. These characteristics concern not only characteristics of the phenomenon of embarrassment essay but also to its relevance and influence to the texts.

3.2 Recognisable Nature, Emotional Dimension and Societal Criticism

Austen's novels capture perfectly the recognisable and irrepressible nature of embarrassment. A character, who feels embarrassed, cannot, even if they wish to do just that, conceal their emotion from their audience. In turn, the audience is likely to acknowledge these non-verbal clues of embarrassment and identify them as such. Consequently, they can discern, almost effortlessly, the state of mind of the embarrassed individual (Marcus & Miller, 1999 qtd. in Miller 31). In Austen, embarrassment works largely in this manner. Indeed, in the passage from *Persuasion* below, Anne Eliot, upon having hid from him just moments earlier, encountering Captain Wentworth outside a shop in Bath, is certain of Captain Wentworth's sentiment when she reflects on his behaviour;

> She would see if it rained. She was sent back, however, in a moment by the
>
> entrance of Captain Wentworth himself, among a party of gentleman and
>
> ladies, evidently his acquaintance, and whom he must have joined a little below
>
> Milson-street. He was more obviously struck and confused by the sight of her,

than she had ever observed before; he looked quite red. For the first time, since

their renewed acquaintance, she felt that she was betraying the least sensibility

of the two. She had the advantage of him, in the preparation of the last few

moments. All the over-powering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong

surprise were over with her. Still, however, she had enough to feel! It was

agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery.

He spoke to her, and then turned away. The character of his manner was

embarrassment. She could not have called it either cold or friendly, or anything

so certainly as embarrassed. (173-74)

There are various typifying multiple non-verbal clues in this scene to make Anne feel certain

of his manner. Firstly, Captain Wentworth's surprise and confusion by the unexpected sight of

Anne hint at his embarrassment. Ultimately though it is his red look that truly gives his

embarrassment away. This look describes potently the most typical non-verbal clue of

embarrassment in Austenian fiction; the blush. Blushing, among other non-verbal behaviour,

like sweating and stuttering is suggestive of someone's embarrassment (Dong, Ping, et al

2005; Keltner 1995 qtd. in Miller 30/31). It is because of these non-verbal clues that Anne can

indeed be *certain* about calling Wentworth's demeanour embarrassment, as opposed to cold

or friendly, or anything else for that matter. Consequently, the blush in Austenian fiction

seems to operate as an inevitable and irrepressible reflex of characters that exposes their true

emotion even if they argue against these (O'Farrell 128). Austen seems to believe that,

whether to the relieve or distress of those who blush, the truth of their blush is, even by

themselves, undisputed (137). As such, Austen represents the recognisable nature of

embarrassment and uses it to her advantage.

However, Austen represents this recognizable character of embarrassment on an even

more subtle, narrative level. What is truly striking about this passage is that in perhaps a

somewhat cinematic terms, the scene can be described as *silent;* readers only *see* the action but cannot *hear* it. Perhaps more accurately described, the emphasis of this passage is on *manner*. In doing so, Austen draws attention to the powerfulness of a character's demeanour, showing their posture to be just as meaningful and insightful with regards their intentions and sentiments as any verbal commentary on these. Indeed, emotions are necessarily dependent on their associated bodily expressions. If one abstracts one's sentiment by ignoring the bodily sensations, all that is left is a cold, empty rationalised thought. Indeed in *Persuasion* Anne Eliot's body overtakes her mind and confronts her with her emotions that have remained till then unacknowledged by herself (Young 81). Moreover, by extension, in focusing on Captain Wentworth's manner, the natural and emotional dimension is emphasized as opposed to the cultivated dimension of speech. Ordinarily, Austen's characters are confined in the norms of propriety, that keeps them in check and often prevents them from fully expressing their emotions. Therefore the emphasis on the non-verbal behaviour in this passage allows characters, at least narratively, to escape society's stronghold. Within the passage above Austen liberates them from the confines of society for while they might control their speech, their bodies talk in spite of themselves. Indeed, whereas Elinor's behaviour might seem proper, it does not seem to allow for her to be honest in social interactions. Marianne's behaviour, although not necessarily always proper, is always guided by real emotion. Generally then, Marianne's unrestrained sincerity has always been favoured by the public over Elinor's careful composure. The fact that Marianne's sensibility are simply not compatible with the socio-historical context in which she lives. It is her sensitive and sincere nature that ultimately nearly leads to her demise Haggerty 221-22). Yet Austen does not seem to condemn Marianne's behaviour. In fact Austen's attitude here, it would seem, is not all that different from a wise father in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* who tells his daughter: "I would not teach you to become insensible, if I could; I would only warn you of

the evils of susceptibility, and point out how you may avoid them." (Bennet 378). At the same time, Elinor, perhaps somewhat similarly to Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice,* shows the pitfalls of being too emotionally guarded and civil (391). Thus, the texts seem to seek a middle ground; Austen seems to be caught between sympathising with Marianne and identifying with Elinor (Haggerty 221-22). Austen does therefore seem to offer societal criticism in her narration of this scene, exposing the artificiality of the composure favoured and imposed *by society*, seeming to favour *herself* an at least somewhat more open and emotional attitude and way of being.

Another striking element of this passage is that the embarrassment of characters is explicitly named and identified by the characters as well as the narrator. Although not the only occasion on which Austen explicitly names embarrassment, more often, readers will find that Austen merely alludes to feelings of embarrassment by referring to a wide variety of non-verbal clues; describing their behaviour and demeanour, without commenting overtly on what this behaviour *means*. For example, when Elinor tries to downplay Marianne's conviction that she and Edward are engaged, she cannot help but laugh at Marianne's annoyance (*Sense and Sensibility* 21). Here Elinor's forced laughter seems to mark her nervousness and embarrassment. Similarly, stumbling on Anne and the hurt little Charles, Captain Wentworth, finding himself all but alone with Anne, is momentarily deprived of "his manners and their usual composure" (*Persuasion* 76). Yet again, the clear awkwardness of the situation is obvious to readers, and although not named as such, readers will undoubtedly consider Captain Wentworth's demeanour as exemplative of embarrassment. Thus, it seems Austen was aware of, and relied on, this recognisable nature and her audience's ability to recognise the representations of embarrassment. This allows her to capture her character's emotion in all their complexity and to free her characters from the constraints of verbal expression ordinarily imposed on them by society.

3.3 Positive Attitude towards Embarrassment and Embarrassability

In broader terms, the novels seem to look favourably at characters with greater embarrassability and manifestations of embarrassment. One of the scenes in which this positive effect is most vividly exemplified, occurs in *Sense and Sensibility,* as Elinor reflects on Willoughby's behaviour after he, Elinor and Marianne meet for the first time in London. Having trapped himself in a situation, as will later be revealed, in which, despite his affection for Marianne, he is forced to be rude and distant to her, Willoughby's embarrassment and general body language seems to reveal some of his true sentiments and his pain in hurting her. Willoughby shows many signs of his uneasiness and pain during the encounter: "[He addresses] himself to Elinor rather than Marianne, as if wishing to avoid her eye"; he speaks hastily; he struggles for composure; he is visibly affected by her touch; and, as soon as he can excuse himself, he hurries away (171-173, see appendix for the full passage). Clearly his embarrassment is acknowledged and, to some degree, valued by Elinor, for she later reflects:

> That some kind of engagement has subsisted between Willoughby and Marianne she could not doubt, and that Willoughby was weary of it, seemed equally clear; for however Marianne might still feed her own wishes, she could not attribute such behaviour to mistake or misapprehension of any kind. Nothing but a thorough change of sentiment could account for it. Her indignation would have been still stronger than it was, had she not witnessed that embarrassment which seemed to speak a consciousness of his own misconduct, and prevented her from believing him so unprincipled as to have been sporting with the affections of her sister from the first, without any design that would bear investigation. Absence might have weakened his regard, and convenience might have determined him to overcome it but that such a regard has formerly existed she could not bring herself to doubt. (174)

Evidently, Anne acknowledges the discrepancy between *what* Willoughby says and *how* he speaks; between his composed speech and his uneasy composure . His embarrassment softens Anne's judgment. Willoughby's demeanour convinces her that he is conscious of his own misconduct and that his intentions were not always foul. For Anne, his attitude suggests, at the very least, a reminiscence of former regard. As such, Willoughby's body language "unfounds" his verbal language, highlighting embarrassment's "legibility"; his body tells his true sentiments in spite of himself (O'Farrell 128-29). Anne can discern an empathic warmness in his manner underneath his cold civility of his words and therefore *read* some of his true sentiments. The result of this is, that Anne's indignation is softened. Therefore, Willoughby's embarrassment, although painful to himself, does indeed serve "an appeasement function", and "[reconciles]" to some degree his reputation despite his breach of propriety and decency (Dacher & Anderson 187).

Anne's softened opinion is emblematic of a more widespread positive attitude towards embarrassment and embarrassability within both novels. Inherently, characters who show a greater sense of embarrassability, show a greater awareness of the norms of decency and propriety. One need only look at the protagonists of both novels, to see that, both Anne Eliot and Elinor Dashwood, are incredibly concerned about what is proper. As a result, they blush frequently for themselves and for others. In this manner, embarrassability becomes an important marker of identity. Ultimately then it is hardly surprising that characters who demonstrate less embarrassability are frowned upon in Austen. They do not blush nearly as often as they should. In *Persuasion*, for example, characters such as Sir Walter Elliot much like his eldest daughter Elizabeth, are perceived negatively because their narcissism and arrogance, leaves them unembarrassed about their forced removal from their Kellynch estate (136). The fact they condemn Anne's acquaintance with Mrs Smith all the while maintaining an acquaintance with another "widow in Bath between thirty and forty, with little to live on,

and no sir-name of consequence" (156), in the form of Mrs Clay, only furthers their ignorance, hypocrisy and general silliness. Although Mr Elliot and Elizabeth do show embarrassability here, their embarrassability is not founded on norms of decency that reflect broader morals and ideals, but rather exemplify their concern with the empty entity of rank as opposed to that of identity. In *Sense and Sensibility,* the Miss Steeles are frequently mocked for their lack of manners. More striking is the difference between the two sisters; Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. Marianne wallows in her emotions whereas, on the contrary, Elinor always keeps herself, respecting the norms of politeness and propriety (Haggerty 221). Elinor frequently criticises Marianne's overindulgence. Therefore, in Austen, what sets characters apart is not necessarily their social status but equally their sense, empathy and embarrassability. Although Andre Modigliani concludes that a more empathic person need not necessarily make them more prone to feeling embarrassed (322), this does nonetheless seem to Elinor and Anne. The two protagonists are very positively displayed, not in the least part because of their awareness of what is proper and decent, and, as a result, their embarrassability. Modigliani's concludes that only when situations are sufficiently subtle and complex, empathic individuals a greater degree of embarrassability (323). Given the historical context, it seems that the situations in Elinor and Anne find are sufficiently difficult to give them greater embarrassability because of their empathy.

Nonetheless, simply acknowledging the relationship between embarrassment or embarrassability and identity would not do justice to the complex nature of embarrassment and embarrassability in Austenian literature. It is certainly true that a character's embarrassment constitutes part of their identity. However, in reality the relation between the two is far more complex. Their perception and representation within the narrative is depended on the sincerity and motivation of a character's embarrassment. Virtuous and prominent characters show great embarrassability because they believe in the underlying ideas of certain

values and their common sense leads them to behave in a *decent* and *civilized.* Less virtuous

and more secondary characters are often unembarrassed when they ought to be or

embarrassed when behaviour might not have been culturally appropriate yet morally correct.

More simply put, characters portrayed somewhat negatively in Austen, are portrayed so

because of a general ignorance of human decency and either a complete ignorance of or total

fixation on empty cultural norms. Generally, then, both *Sense and Sensibility* as well as

Persuasion echo the positive perception of showing embarrassment, rendering such

demonstrations of guilt emblematic of a consciousness of significant norms and values, all the

while rendering a failure to do so as emblematic of ignorance, arrogance and silliness.

3.4 Domestic and Societal Audiences

Part of nature of embarrassment in Austen also depends on the nature of the audience. For

whereas Ashly Bennet draws attention to the complementary but private emotion of shame

(382), it seems that even *if* characters are to enjoy sporadic moments of privacy, the

intrusiveness of society means that characters are often burst upon and must always be on

their guard (Haggerty 229). The notion of intrusive and ever-present society draws attention

to those instances when, although in company, characters find themselves among more

intimate audiences. That embarrassment inherently involves an audience, whether concrete or

imagined, is undisputed (Miller 31). However, Austen seems to draw our attention to the

importance of *whom* that audience is. This notion would rectify a crucial complexity in the

representation of embarrassment as outlined thus far. For the generally positive attitude

towards embarrassability and Austen's subtle societal criticism of societal norms keeping

characters from expressing their true sentiments freely might reasonably thought to be at odds

with one another. Nonetheless, this need not necessarily be true. The nature of the audience,

namely, can vary, and this influences the character of social interactions that the characters

partake in and. By extension, the character of and attitude of embarrassment also varies between varying audiences. When in more domestic circles, embarrassment seems to function very differently. Rather than an admission of guilt, embarrassment here is something that is desired and one character who seems to understand this better than anyone is Mrs Jennings;

> Mrs Jennings, Lady Middleton's mother, was a good-humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar. She was full of jokes and laughter and before dinner was over had said many witty things on the subject of lovers and husbands; hoped they had not left their hearts behind them in Sussex, and pretended to see them blush whether they did or not. Marianne was vexed at it for her sister's sake, and turned her eyes towards Elinor to see how she bore these attacks, with an earnestness which gave Elinor far more pain than could arise from such common-place raillery as Mrs Jennings's. (*Sense and Sensibility* 34).

Although the characters seem to be in company, and therefore in public, the audience here seems to be a lot more domestic and intimate. Mrs Jennings' witty, jokey, teasing manner seems to suggest that her intentions are friendly. Her raillery seems not to be intended to condemn or judge but rather to draw the Misses Dashwoods out a little. She "[pretends] to see them blush," because she wants them to. Their blush would show their openness and humanness. Although portrayed as a somewhat silly woman at times, Mrs Jennings seems to understand that whereas reserve and propriety might be very favourable in public environments, being able to talk freely and comfortably in more intimate circles is just as important. Even though Marianne herself does not seem to understand Mrs Jennings' intentions she, as a more expressive character, also criticises Elinor for being reserved and careful even in a safe environment. When talking about Edward with her sister she exclaims: 'Esteem him! Like him! Cold-hearted Elinor! Oh worse than cold-hearted, ashamed of being

otherwise. Use those words again and I will leave the room this moment." (21). Her mother seems to be of the same opinion for she and Marianne reflect; "[Her] self-command is invariable. When is dejected or melancholy? When does she try to avoid society, or appear restless and dissatisfied in it?" (39). It seems this is the idea that Austen alludes to, and which rectifies the duality that has so far existed in the attitude towards embarrassment and embarrassability; self-command should be variable.

3.5 Foreshadowing, Coping Mechanisms and Plot

Finally, the phenomenon of embarrassment manifests itself on narrative level. Characters embarrassment prolongs the action and tension of the novels by leaving central conflicts and misunderstandings unresolved. The explanation for this lies in the coping mechanisms and reactions characters employ when confronted with feelings of embarrassment. One of the scenes in which this becomes painfully apparent is during Edward Ferrars' first visit to Barton since the arrival of the Misses Dashwoods;

> "I never saw you wear a ring before, Edward," [Marianne] cried. 'Is that Fanny's hair? I remember her promising to give you some. But I should have thought her hair had been darker.'
>
> Marianne spoke inconsiderately what she really felt – but when she saw how much she had pained Edward, her own vexation at her want of thought could not be surpassed by his. He coloured very deeply, and giving a momentary glance at Elinor, replied, 'Yes; it is my sister's hair. The setting always casts a different shade on it you know.'
>
> Elinor had met his eye and looked conscious likewise. That the hair was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne; the only difference in their conclusions was, that what Marianne considered as a free gift from her

sister, Elinor was conscious must have been procured by some theft or contrivance unknown to herself. She was not in a humour, however, to regard it as an affront, and affecting to take no notice of what passed, by instantly talking of something else, she internally resolved henceforward to catch every opportunity of eyeing the hair and of satisfying herself, beyond all doubt, that is was exactly the shade of her own.

Edward's embarrassment lasted some time, and it ended in an absence of mind still more settled. He was particularly grave the whole morning. Marianne severely censured herself for what she had said; but her own forgiveness might have been more speedy, had she known how little offence it had given her sister." (*Sense and Sensibility* 97-98)

Inherently, Edward' embarrassment and uneasy behaviour in this scene seem to be motivated by the fact that his inconsistencies, whereas natural to any individual, threaten to be exposed to his audience (Southward 773). Edward, ashamed himself of his engagement to Miss Steele, feels embarrassed because he fears its exposure to Marianne and, above all, Elinor. The awkwardness of this encounter, and other similar scenes, is chiefly motivated by a disparity of information or characters' failure to interpret the feelings of others and hide their own (770). Bound by the rules of propriety and society's emphasis on appearances and reputation, Austen's characters face great difficulties in understanding others and their intentions without overstepping their ground (775). Even still, Edward actively tries to rectify Marianne's awkward exposure of the hair. He tries to *restore his face*. Pained even more by the knowledge of to whom the hair *actually* belongs, Edward tries to restore his esteem in the eyes of the Misses Dashwoods. However, other than Edward, Elinor, in a metaphorical sense, *hides her face.* She jumps at the opportunity of "instantly [talking] of something else" (*Sense and Sensibility* 97). As concluded by Dong, Ping et al., restoring one's face, reduces feelings

of embarrassment and increases people's willingness to interact with others, whereas hiding one's face does not have such "rehabilitating effects" (2009-10). It comes as no surprise then that Edward's awkwardness and absence of mind return and that his conversational partners are similarly left feeling embarrassment. Effectively, by hastily addressing another topic, Anne torpedoes Edward's attempt to rectify the uneasiness of the moment. Firstly, she shows Edward her awareness that the hair is *not* Fanny's. Secondly, as a result of this, she makes Marianne's feelings of guilt return. In much the same way of Elinor addressing another topic, Anne Elliot is mentioned on different occasions as rushing out of the room at the earliest opportunity (*Persuasion* 24), wishing for nothing but to be observed (70) and for never meeting Captain Wentworth at the hall (92). Clearly then the preferred and predominant course of action by Austen's protagonists is to avoid and escape embarrassment and thus to *hide,* rather than *restore*, *their faces.* Of course, given the unfruitful character of this strategy compared to its alternative (Dong, Ping et al. 2009-10), it would seem fair to suggest that, in doing so, the characters in *Persuasion* and *Sense and Sensibility* prolong the action and awkward situations around which the narrative revolve. Either voluntarily or involuntarily guided by cultural restrictions characters are rather passive, shy away from moments of awkwardness instead of facing these issues head on. As such, by repeatedly making characters avoid addressing the awkward situations in which they find themselves, Austen prolongs and heightens the tension in her narratives, marking embarrassing situations out as key components in the narrative structure of her texts.

At the same time, characters' embarrassment within both Austenian texts frequently exposes some of their true intentions, acting as a foreshadowing agency. Here Edward's embarrassment about the hair and the possibility of the hair belonging to his sister quickly being negated by Elinor herself, all but spells out that some other attachment must exist. Similarly, Captain Wentworth's embarrassed manner in the passage discussed earlier,

suggests very subtly his continued regard for Anne Eliot. After all, it is the first encounter since Anne's (and indeed the readers') discovery that any alleged attachment to either Miss Musgrove is now thoroughly out of the question.

4. Conclusion & Reflection

In conclusion, the theoretical framework allows for a specific, well-defined route into Austen's texts. It outlines a number of typifying elements of embarrassment that are of great relevance to the analysis of the primary texts. For example, the recognizable nature of embarrassment by virtue of a set of typifying non-verbal clues is represented in the literary texts and allowed for characters to interpret other character's sentiments as well as working in a liberating way by allowing characters to express their feelings non-verbally when society does not allow them to articulate them freely. Furthermore, much like the characters, embarrassment in Austen is also highly recognizable to readers; embarrassment is not always overtly commented on but rather described to be recognized as such. Moreover, the positive attitude towards embarrassability and demonstrations of embarrassment within Austen's works not only represent the positive effects of embarrassment but also draw attention to the role of the contemporaneous culture in determining the character of and attitude towards embarrassment within the narratives. More fascinatingly, embarrassability constitutes an important identity marker within Austenian fiction. Furthermore, although capturing this public and cultural character accurately, examination of the primary texts showed that Austen also draws attention to the importance of the idea of whom that audience is in determining the character of embarrassment, suggesting attitudes differ greatly between domestically public – and societally public environments. Finally, embarrassment can also be used as a narrative device within Austen's literature. For example, the different coping mechanisms of either hiding- or restoring one's face, allow for an understanding of how the way in which characters within Austen cope with feelings of embarrassment influences the development of the plot, often prolonging the central problems and misunderstandings between characters. By the same token, scenes of embarrassment frequently act as foreshadowing events within Austen.

In reflecting upon the present study and in offering suggestions for further research, there are a number of aspects that need to be addressed. Firstly, the present study has focussed largely on characterising a coherent representation of embarrassment across the two primary Austenian texts discussed. Moreover, in writing this paper choices have been made in deciding whether to comment on broader patterns across both works and more striking peculiarities or instances that might be interpretively relevant but not as widespread in all the works. Whereas this approach has provided a wealth new insights, the present study has only been able to address a fraction of questions that have been raised during the writing process. Further research, for example, could focus on differences in the representation of embarrassment across a larger number of Austenian texts. Such research might reveal a development in the attitude towards development in the course of Austen's career and offer a more profound and broader understanding of embarrassment in Austen. Furthermore, future studies might explore in more detail the correlation between more private experiences of shame and the more public representations of embarrassment in Austenian texts. Likewise, the pervasiveness of embarrassment and the dominance of female protagonists in Austen might lend itself for feminist literature. These are merely some ideas that might be investigated further, and since this paper has to varying degrees commented on the social, psychological, historical and narrative or thematic aspects of embarrassment, a greatly diverse number of interpretive avenues into embarrassment in Austen remain.

Works Cited

Austen, Jane. *Persuasion*. Penguin English Library. 2012. Print.

Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Penguin English Library. 2012. Print.

Bennet, Ashley. "Shame and Sensibility; Jane Austen's Humiliated Heroines." *Studies in Romanticism* 54.3. (2015): 377-400. *JSTOR*. Web. 26. June. 2019.

Dong, Ping, et al. "The Illusion of Saving Face: How People Symbolically Cope with Embarrassment." *Psychological Science* 24.10. (2013): 2005–12. *JSTOR*. Web. 7. Apr. 2019.

Haggerty, George E. "The Sacrifice of Privacy in *Sense and Sensibility.*" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 7.2 (1988): 221-37. *JSTOR.* Web. 26. June. 2019.

Keltner, Dacher, and Cameron Anderson. "Saving Face for Darwin: The Functions and Uses of Embarrassment." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 9.6. (2000): 187–92. *JSTOR*. Web. 14. Apr. 2019.

Miller, Rowland S. "On the Primacy of Embarrassment in Social Life." *Psychological Inquiry* 12.1 (2001): 30–33. *JSTOR*. Web. 14. Apr. 2019.

Modigliani, Andre. "Embarrassment and Embarrassability." *Sociometry* 31.3. (1968): 313–26. *JSTOR*. Web. 7. Apr. 2019.

O'Farrell, Mary Ann. "Austen's Blush." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 27.2 (1994): 125-39. *JSTOR.* Web. 22. May. 2019.

Southward, David. "Jane Austen and the Riches of Embarrassment." *Studies in English Literature* 1500-1900. 36.4. (1996): 763–84. *JSTOR*. Web. 24. Jan. 2019.

Young, Kay. "Feeling Embodied: Consciousness, *Persuasion,* and Jane Austen." *Narrative* 11.1 (2003): 78-92. *JSTOR.* Web. 26. June. 2019.

Appendix

Full passage referred to in section 3.3:

At last he turned around again, and regarded them both; she started up, and pronouncing his name in a tone of affection, held out her hand to him. He approached, and addressing himself rather to Elinor than to Marianne, as if wishing to avoid her eye, and determined not to observe her attitude, inquired in a hurried manner after Mrs Dashwood, and asked how long they had been in town. Elinor was robbed of all presence of mind by such an address and was unable to say a word. But the feelings of her sister were instantly expressed. Her face was crimsoned over, and she exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion, 'Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this? Have you not received my letters? Will you not shake hands with me?'

He could not then avoid it, but her touch seemed painful to him, and he held her hand only for a moment. During all this time he was evidently struggling for composure. Elinor watched his countenance and saw its expression becoming more tranquil. After a moment's pause, he spoke with calmness.

'I did myself the honour of calling in Berkeley-street last Tuesday, and very much regretted that I was not fortunate enough to find yourselves and Mrs Jennings at home. My card was not lost, I hope.'

'But have you not received my notes?' cried Marianne in the wildest anxiety. 'Here is some mistake I am sure- some dreadful mistake. What can be the meaning of it? Tell me, Willoughby; for heaven's sake tell me, what is the matter?

He made no reply; his complexion changed and all his embarrassment returned; but as if, on catching the eye of the young lady with whom he had been previously talking, he felt the necessity of instant exertion, he recovered himself again, and after saying, 'Yes, I had the pleasure of receiving the information of your arrival in town, which

you were so good as to send me,' turned hastily away with a slight bow and joined his

friend. (*Sense and Sensibility* 171-73).