

NORA BARTLETT

EDITED BY JANE STABLER



JANE AUSTEN

Reflections of a Reader



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## 2. *Sense and Sensibility*

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It is a special pleasure to be talking to you today about *Sense and Sensibility*, because it is my own particular favourite among Jane Austen's novels—for a number of reasons, I think. One is that, like *Pride and Prejudice*, it treats love between sisters, and, unlike *Pride and Prejudice*, it also treats the difference and difficulty between them, silences between them, secrets on both sides.<sup>1</sup> That two-sidedness is important. Because *Pride and Prejudice* has only one heroine, Lizzy, only one sister has secrets, but *Sense and Sensibility* has two heroines. As I grow older and reread the novel, I am more and more convinced of that: two heroines, two sisters, living side by side, for much of the novel sharing a bedroom, and sharing a deep silence about the things that are most important to them.

Those silences are a part of what I want to talk about today, but first I would like to talk about another reason why I am so fond of *Sense and Sensibility*, and that is because it was Jane Austen's breakthrough novel, the first to be published. I like to think it made her very happy. It was published in 1811, but written for the most part much earlier. It started as an epistolary novel, *Elinor and Marianne*—note that the two sisters are there from the beginning—was recast, with a new title, suggestive of the antithesis she wanted the novel to deal with, in the late 1790s, then put aside, along with the future *Pride and Prejudice* and *Northanger Abbey*, during the long, difficult, disappointing years of the first decade of the nineteenth century, the peripatetic years which took the Austens to cramped rented rooms in Southampton and Bath. Biographers believe that one of the first things Jane Austen did after settling with her widowed mother and her sister Cassandra into the cottage at Chawton

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1 For a recent discussion of sibling relationships in Austen's fiction, see Peter W. Graham, 'Born to Diverge: An Evolutionary Perspective on Sibling Personality Development in Austen's Novels', *Persuasions On-line*, 25.1 (2004), <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol25no1/graham.html>

in Hampshire that would be her home for the rest of her life (after setting up, like Marianne, the piano with which she liked to begin her day, and which she had lived without for years) was to take out the manuscript of *Sense and Sensibility* and begin final revisions.

In 1810 her brother Henry successfully negotiated a contract with the publisher Thomas Egerton, although the Austens received nothing for the novel, and indeed paid for its publication. Like many other books by women in the period, it emerged anonymously, 'By a Lady', in 1811. It was quickly something of a sell-out, the whole print-run, probably 1000 or less, being off the publisher's hands in a few months. When *Pride and Prejudice* emerged in 1813 it was advertised as 'By the Author of "Sense and Sensibility"'. Jane Austen referred to *Pride and Prejudice* as 'my own darling Child' and loved hearing people praise both novels, particularly in the period when her authorship was not known.<sup>2</sup> *Pride and Prejudice* was, as it has remained, the bigger hit, but *Sense and Sensibility* was praised by such figures from English high life as Lady Henrietta Bessborough, the sister of the Duchess of Devonshire, and poor little Princess Charlotte, daughter of the Prince Regent, who thought Marianne was 'much like herself'.<sup>3</sup> The novel brought Jane Austen a profit of £140, possibly the first money she had ever earned. Cassandra had a small legacy from her dead fiancé, but Jane had subsisted up to the age of thirty-six on pocket money.

I want to leave the moment of publication now and re-enter the novel through the writing, but I want to note in passing that, like *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* remains something of a stepchild for critics. Harold Bloom takes the position that Jane Austen 'wrote four great novels', and Frank Kermode in an article in the *London Review of Books* comments on the 'crudeness' of its plot, its 'stilted, improbable conversations', its 'stark contrasts' and calls it 'easily the weakest of the six'.<sup>4</sup> I will take up some of those issues, especially contrast and

2 *Letters*, p. 201. Austen wrote of *Sense and Sensibility* that 'I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child' (*Letters*, p. 182).

3 *Letters of the Princess Charlotte 1811–1817*, ed. by A. Aspinall (London: Home and Van Thal, 1949), p. 26: 'I think Maryanne & me are very like in *disposition*, that certainly I am not so good, the same imprudence, &c, however very like'.

4 Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Touchstone, 2000), p. 158; Frank Kermode, 'Too Good and Too Silly', *London Review of Books*, 31.8 (2009), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v31/n08/frank-kermode/too-good-and-too-silly>. Kermode writes of *Sense and Sensibility* that 'It is the weakest of the six principal

conversation, in due course, but I would like to look at the question of crudeness right away.

Some of Jane Austen's juvenile writings, such as *Love and Freindship*, the collection of fictional letters and a bit of a play from the section of her juvenilia unceremoniously called 'scraps', date from her mid-teens, so not long before she began to produce the fictional letters that would eventually be transformed into *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and the wry commentary on Gothic novels that would become *Northanger Abbey*.<sup>5</sup> Claire Tomalin in her biography has a wonderful picture of a moment in the later 1790s when Jane Austen has the rapidly growing manuscripts for all three great novels hidden away somewhere, to be rewritten in moments stolen from her busy family and social life.<sup>6</sup> But it is the role of the early manuscripts in that family life I want to look at for a moment. We know that Jane Austen read her juvenile works, and her novels, out loud in the family circle. They were typical of lively, bookish, middle-class families of their time in that reading aloud constituted much of their entertainment. Jane Austen's family were certainly luckier than most, and when we read the juvenilia, with its hearty laughter at subjects such as murder, incest, alcoholism and adultery, we realize that, since they enjoyed this, their staple diet cannot have been sermons, nor even very genteel novels. We can allow something for the toleration a family might extend to a beloved and precocious youngest daughter, but a glance at *Love and Freindship*, with its catalogue of wild-eyed co-incidences, sudden death and disinheritances, all carried off in a very high style ("Yes, cold and insensible Nymph, (replied I) that luckless Swain, your brother, is no more, and you may now glory in being the heiress of Sir Edward's fortune"), will show,

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novels', though he notes that it 'makes an unexpected contribution to feminist and other good causes'. Kermode's objections are to the 'bookish' nature of the dialogue and the hackneyed 'disinheritance novel' genre: 'Can it be that the force which prevents this novel from slipping into oblivion like those earlier "disinheritance novels" is the buoyancy provided by its fellows in the canon?'

- 5 This section of *Volume the Second* is labelled as 'scraps' by R. W. Chapman in Volume VI (*Minor Works*) of his edition of Austen's works. The Cambridge edition of the *Juvenilia*, edited by Peter Sabor does not classify the same section in this way.
- 6 Claire Tomalin, *Jane Austen. A Life* (London: Penguin, 1998; repr. 2000), p. 169: 'Everything was set for her to put in a little more work perhaps on the three manuscripts [...] find a publisher [...] and start on a new novel. This did not happen. Instead she fell silent'.

it seems to me, a sheer pleasure in the sorts of exaggeration to which fiction gives license.<sup>7</sup> This novelist justly famed for her subtlety also enjoyed crude, broad humour, melodrama and gore.

Before we leave the juvenilia, we should note that several of her 'scraps' were plays. Recent Jane Austen criticism has focussed interestingly on these plays, and the other plays she and her family acted out and read around the fire (since, unlike her later heroine, Fanny Price, Jane Austen participated in private theatricals).<sup>8</sup> Their role in her writing was important and I will be referring to this dramatic or dramatized quality, which I find especially strong in the early novels, *Sense and Sensibility* in particular, which can be seen as a comedy of errors.

I am going to be talking chiefly about who knows what, and when, in the novel, but I would like to start with one famous comic scene from Volume I, Chapter ii. This scene (particularly well done in the Ang Lee film)<sup>9</sup> pictures Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood, newly ensconced as master and mistress of Norland, working out the terms of their responsibilities to John Dashwood's stepmother and stepsisters. Everyone remembers this scene, which occupies a whole chapter to itself, and, in a tour de force of dialogue, shows their blindingly selfish progression from something to nothing. After Fanny has ruled out money gifts to the girls and an annuity to their mother, John suggests,

'A present of fifty pounds, now and then, will prevent their ever being distressed for money, and will, I think, be amply discharging my promise to my father.'

'To be sure it will. Indeed, to say the truth, I am convinced within myself that your father had no idea of your giving them any money at all. The assistance he thought of, I dare say, was only such as might be reasonably expected of you; for instance [...] helping them to move their things, and sending them presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they are in season. I'll lay my life that he meant nothing farther; indeed, it would be very strange and unreasonable if he did. Do but consider, my dear Mr. Dashwood, how excessively comfortable

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7 *Juvenilia*, ed. Sabor, p. 134.

8 See, for example, Paula Byrne, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (New York and London: Hambledon, 2002) and Penny Gay, *Jane Austen and the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

9 See Penny Gay, 'Sense and Sensibility in a Postfeminist World: Sisterhood Is Still Powerful', in *Jane Austen on Screen*, ed. by Gina Macdonald and Andre F. Macdonald (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 90–110.

your mother-in-law and her daughters may live on the interest of seven thousand pounds, besides the thousand pounds belonging to each of the girls, which brings them in fifty pounds a year apiece, and, of course, they will pay their mother for their board out of it. [...] what on earth can four women want for more than that?—They will live so cheap! Their housekeeping will be nothing at all. They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company, and can have no expences of any kind! Only conceive how comfortable they will be!’ (I ii 13–14)

Frank Kermode comments that this scene could be based on the scene in *King Lear* in which Regan and Goneril whittle Lear’s attendants down to one and then to nothing, and, while the Shakespeare play that is talked about in this novel is not *King Lear* but *Hamlet*, one can imagine Jane Austen reading *Lear*, with its bad parenting and its bloody excesses, with relish.<sup>10</sup>

Note Fanny’s reliance on words such as ‘reasonable’, which she repeats. In the novel’s terms, Fanny represents ‘sense’ and not ‘sensibility’, an exaggeration of a certain kind of sense, with a strangled-at-birth absence of real feeling. Real feeling is suggested, however, in a shadowy way, by where and when the conversation happens. The undeniable funniness of this sequence is set against a death: this conversation is taking place *because of* a deathbed promise, and within days of the death. This juxtaposition of grief and savage humour is something we’ll see more of in the novel, but I would like to concentrate for a moment on that death. Mr. Dashwood’s is the only deathbed scene in Jane Austen’s novels, and though it is very faint, only two paragraphs of Chapter i, with no reported speech, it shows us the father’s anxious feeling, pleading for his wife and daughters, ‘with all the strength and urgency which illness could command’, and John’s more-than perfunctory response: ‘he was affected by a recommendation of such a nature at such a time’ (I i 5). To stir John to even a momentary flicker of financial generosity, this unexpected death must have been moving indeed. And it is not the first death recorded in the novel. Though the tone of *Sense and Sensibility* is here quite different from the juvenilia, it does polish off two Dashwoods

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10 Kermode, ‘Too Good and Too Silly’. Kermode writes: ‘The little scene sounds like a parodic reminiscence of the scene in *King Lear* when Goneril and Regan reduce Lear’s retinue from 100 knights to none.’

in the first three pages. Perhaps the Austen family, listening to the opening words of *Elinor and Marianne* around the tea table in the late 1790s, became only gradually aware that they were not meant to *laugh* at these deaths—that Norland was indeed a house of mourning.

Jane Austen does not make a great deal of fuss about mourning rituals, but we all remember from *Persuasion* that, at least in baronets' families, mourning was worn for quite distant relatives, and Mr. Elliot, a widower, cannot think of marrying for at least a year after the death of his unloved wife. But when we think about the tone of life at Norland as we first encounter it, we should remember that the Dashwood girls have been in mourning, first for their uncle, and then for their father, for some time. This in part must account for the solitary quality of their life: Elinor, at nineteen, can have been to few balls during this mourning period, Marianne, at seventeen, probably to none at all. When they leave Norland, though they miss it terribly, they do not seem to miss any friends or any society beyond their own family. Life for the Dashwood girls at Norland, even in the happy times before their father's death, seems very different from life among the Bennet girls, with all its shopping and flirting and dancing. Some critics find the early conversations among the Dashwood women stilted and sententious, and they do lack the funniness and flash of the conversations between Elizabeth and Jane—not, I think through incompetence: they were written, and re-written in the same two periods. The Dashwood girls are temperamentally more bookish, less sociable, less socially experienced. Marianne certainly has—and perhaps Elinor has too—that sense of superiority to others, to outsiders, that is sometimes found in thoughtful and bookish children who are not much used to mixing with others.

We hear about Elinor in Chapter i and are told a whole paragraph of things about her:

She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn; and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught. (I i 7)

This introduces us, of course to Marianne. It is interesting that the first term given to her is 'sensible', a word which straddles the 'sense' and 'sensitivity' of the title:

She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great. (I i 7)

More of Mrs. Dashwood, and of that resemblance, later. I want to concentrate on the two sisters, who are introduced here as in part contrasts to one another, not, actually, in quality of feeling, because both are described as tender-hearted, but in control of feeling, even a little more qualified, in terms of desire for control of feeling. Marianne does not wish to learn the skill which Elinor has somehow (how, one wonders? Possibly all that waiting on her bothersome rich uncle?) taught herself.

Many readers have noted that the three early novels depict heroines who have close and mutual ties of love with more than one member of their family: Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* simply comes from a happy family, Elizabeth has her father and Jane, and Elinor has Marianne and her mother, whereas in the later novels there is distance or difficulty, even if only in the form of Emma's superiority of intelligence to her father and sister. But in this most sisterly of novels—for all of *Sense and Sensibility* the sisters remain together, whereas in *Pride and Prejudice* they are for much of the novel separated—there is another kind of division, caused by another paradox. In this novel, this novelist so skilled in dialogue condemns her two main characters to a profound mutual silence. The novel is all about the things they cannot or do not tell each other. It is all about secrets.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the novel is told from Elinor's point of view and it is through her that we experience most of the events in it. However, if we look back at that reprehensible conversation in Chapter ii between John and Fanny, we should note that it remains unknown to any of the Dashwood women and is known in fact only to the reader. Mrs. Dashwood knows about the deathbed promise and expects for a long time (three chapters) that it will be fulfilled, though she has to give it up in the end, since John's

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11 See also Angela Leighton, 'Sense and Silences: Reading Jane Austen Again', in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. by Janet Todd (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1983), pp. 128–41; John Wiltshire, 'Elinor Dashwood and Concealment', in *The Hidden Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 28–50, <https://doi.org/10.1017/cbo9781107449435.004>.

conversation is so full of money worries that it looks as if he might want to borrow money rather than give her or her daughters any! But she does not know the process of infinite regress by which the promise was talked away, and it is important that she does not. Though we see them occasionally talking of money (Margaret, who is thirteen, at one point wishes they would all be given a large fortune) and expense is from time to time mentioned among the mother and daughters, they cannot be shown having the sort of calculating conversation that characterizes Fanny and John. Indeed, already in *Sense and Sensibility*, her first novel, Jane Austen has established the rule, so important in her novels, that concern about details, of money, food, clothing or health, renders characters ridiculous or bad or both.

It is in Chapter iv that Elinor becomes the character through whom we experience the events of the novel. Though we are sometimes in Marianne's mind, it is never for long, and this has led, I think, to a slightly too Elinor-centred reading of the novel. Later I would like to consider the extent to which this is also Marianne's book, but I think it makes sense to start with Elinor. It is through Elinor that we know most of what we know, and also through Elinor—because, all the way through the novel, there are things that Elinor does not know—that we receive most of the surprises which the novel features.

I think in my own first, adolescent, reading of the novel I found Elinor a bit bloodless and correct, and I am always surprised to find, at the beginning, that she is only nineteen and that therefore the gap between her and Marianne is only two years. That makes her the same age as Elizabeth Bennet and younger than Emma—does she not seem older? Of course, she is an eldest child, and, though we know nothing of the girls' relations with their father except that his temper was 'cheerful and sanguine' (I i 5), we can perhaps imagine, since Elinor seems to know how to manage accounts, and to have a more realistic sense of household economy than her mother, that he was at least a bit 'sensible' and that she spent some time in his company, and that perhaps while Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne were reading Cowper together, Elinor was covering scraps of her father's ledger paper with promising doodles.

But we become familiar with Elinor as a viewpoint as she is presented to us, at nineteen, as a heroine of romance: one of Mrs. Dashwood's few accurate perceptions is the recognition, in Chapter iii, of 'a growing

attachment between her eldest girl and the brother of Mrs. John Dashwood' (I iii 17). Mrs. Dashwood takes this recognition and runs with it: 'No sooner did she perceive any symptom of love in his behaviour to Elinor, than she considered their serious attachment as certain, and looked forward to their marriage as rapidly approaching' (I iii 19). This is Mrs. Dashwood we are talking about, not the thirteen-year-old Margaret. She shares this confidence (in both sense of the word) with Marianne: "'In a few months [...] Elinor will in all probability be settled for life'" (I iii 19). Marianne is only partly gratified by this—Edward is a bit stiff, reads aloud without skill (we will revisit this question of his reading skills)—but not because she has any doubt of the outcome.

Of course, as is often the case with the perceptions of unwise people in Jane Austen, they turn out to be right, though, as with Mr. Bingley and Jane, of which Mrs. Bennet was so confident, it takes a little longer for these witless prophecies to work themselves out. The reader coming to *Sense and Sensibility* after *Pride and Prejudice*, as most people do now (though remember that the original readers would have gone the other way), is perhaps startled by how swiftly, and with how little dancing and conversation—Edward does not, in fact, say a word until he re-enters the novel in Chapter xvi—the romance is in train, and worries whether, with all this certainty, there will be any pleasurable waiting and wondering of the *Pride and Prejudice* type.

But Elinor is uncertain, not of her own feelings, but of Edward's, and of the future. In such uncertainty, it is painful for someone of her strength of feeling even to talk of the future, but she allows herself to praise Edward to her mother in Chapter iii and then, in Chapter iv, to speak of him with unguarded warmth to Marianne:

'his mind is well-informed, his enjoyment of books exceedingly great, his imagination lively, [...] his taste delicate and pure. [...] At first sight, his address is certainly not striking; and his person can hardly be called handsome, till the expression of his eyes, which are uncommonly good, and the general sweetness of his countenance, is perceived. At present, I know him so well, that I think him really handsome; or, at least, almost so. What say you, Marianne?'

'I shall very soon think him handsome, Elinor, if I do not now. When you tell me to love him as a brother, I shall no more see imperfection in his face, than I now do in his heart.' (I iv 23–24)

This is truly dreadful for Elinor, who does not share her mother's confidence, nor, after this one mistake, much of her tendency readily to confide. Though Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood do not use the vulgar terms to which the girls will be treated at Barton Park, their imaginations have run away with them down the same route that Sir John's and Mrs. Jennings's go, and their more elegant terminology, as closer to the language of Elinor's own deepest wishes, may be more painful than Sir John's talk of 'setting their caps' or Mrs. Jennings's of 'getting husbands' (I ix 53; I vii 40; II iv 186).

I'd like to draw your attention again to Edward's silences in the opening chapters. One effect of this is that we don't ever hear him tell a lie. We never see him speaking, as he must have to, evasively, only hear about his occasional 'want of spirits', which the first-time reader doesn't understand but the re-reader recognizes as a result of his embarrassment about his engagement, his secret engagement, to Lucy (I iv 25). Here is the state of things at this early stage of the novel: Elinor is in love with Edward, and Edward with her, but he is engaged to Lucy, which Elinor does not know. She will not find it out until the end of Volume I, and she will learn it in a particularly ghastly way, which we will look into in a moment. What is important, I think, is that Edward has a secret that neither Elinor, nor the reader, knows, and that, because of that, his entrance as a speaker—his being given, in dramatic terms, a speaking part—has to be delayed until his arrival at Barton Park, when, suffering under the burden of his secret as he has for half a year, he is presented as almost broken-down. It seems important that Edward should never be presented to the reader as a glib liar. Although he must be behaving, if not dishonestly, certainly evasively, we don't have to hear and judge it, any more than we have to suffer through his lustreless reading aloud.

Willoughby, who enters much more dramatically in Chapter ix, reads aloud beautifully, and we have a great deal of his speech, though as we, the readers, are in the same position as Elinor, sitting on the outside, looking on from a distance at his romance with Marianne, we never hear any of his private speeches to Marianne, except when they are made, 'in a lowered voice', in public (I xiv 86). Willoughby is a complex character, much more so than fellow cad Mr. Wickham from *Pride and Prejudice*, whose thinness and insipidity is apparent after the first reading—and I would like to look at Willoughby again later—but let us examine, in

the same way as we did with Elinor and Edward, the genuineness of the understanding between him and Marianne. Marianne is in love with Willoughby, has been almost from the first, and he, though he was only amusing himself with her at the start, realizes before they part in Chapter xv that he is in love with her too, though he does not say so. He means to say so, but delays, and then events prevent his speaking. But what he knows, that Marianne doesn't, is that he is deeply in debt, means to marry for money, has at least a glimmer of an understanding with the rich Miss Grey, and has recently seduced and abandoned a sixteen-year-old girl in Bath. He claims, later, not to have known she was pregnant, and perhaps he does not. But this is the man who is hesitating over offering his heart to Marianne, while taking hers—these are his secrets.

When he leaves, Marianne knows however that 'except in her heart' they are *not* engaged (I x 58; II vii 214).<sup>12</sup> As Elinor tells Mrs. Jennings later, "he has broken no positive engagement with my sister" (II viii 222). But Marianne's mother and her sister do not know that, and that lack of knowledge, along with Mrs. Dashwood's 'delicate' refusal to inquire, to ask the question that will at least penetrate the aura of isolation which quickly grows around the desolate and self-absorbed Marianne, this all places a distance between the two sisters, which subsists for many, many chapters (I xvi 98).

This is perhaps the moment to speak of Mrs. Dashwood, one of Jane Austen's many foolish mothers and mother-figures, just as Willoughby is one of her cads, but as with Willoughby there is a difference, the important difference that as a personality she is attractive: she is an intelligent woman, and a loving mother, but her actions and her inaction are disastrous. She is cut off from her daughters by a purely fantastic sense of delicacy and honour ("I should never deserve her confidence again" (I xvi 98)) that refuses the maternal prerogative of eliciting trust, as if it would be as vulgar for her to ask her daughters a direct question

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12 The relevant passages are: 'In hastily forming and giving his opinion of other people, in sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was engaged, and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety, he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve, in spite of all that he and Marianne could say in its support.' and "I felt myself," she added, "to be as solemnly engaged to him, as if the strictest legal covenant had bound us to each other."

as it is for Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer to do so. One wonders if there isn't an element of cowardice in her refusal to confront Marianne, as there is, it seems to me, in her willingness to believe, as time passes, that Elinor can forget about Edward. When she is brought, at the novel's end, to a dramatic realization of how much she has erred, it is gratifying, but perhaps more gratifying than plausible. One might make allowances for a recent widow; I'm not sure Jane Austen does.

So, as the first volume heads towards its close, Elinor is ignorant, not of Marianne's feelings but of her true situation; Marianne is too wrapped up in her suffering to think of Elinor's situation or her feelings; their mother is ignorant of both. If one glances sideways here, at *Pride and Prejudice*, one finds at about the same point that Jane and Elizabeth have decided mutually not to discuss Mr. Bingley any more, as it is too painful for Jane. This is not the case, of course, with Mrs. Bennet. Mothers don't seem able, in Jane Austen, to get it right.<sup>13</sup>

In *Sense and Sensibility*, however, once they get to Devonshire, the Dashwood women are surrounded by talkers, Sir John and Mrs. Jennings, who are also ignorant of the feelings they may be injuring, who have no secrets of their own and can imagine no secrets that will not be better for sharing. "Come, come, let's have no secrets among friends" (II iv 186), Mrs. Jennings says eagerly to Colonel Brandon, a man with secrets and not a talker. These talkers are two of Jane Austen's finest minor characters.<sup>14</sup> Particularly interesting is the way in which they, Mrs. Jennings especially, reveal their decent, if not very intellectual, qualities. One aspect of the novel's being told from mild, tolerant Elinor's point of view rather than irritable Marianne's, is that their essential good will is gradually demonstrated, and the reader realizes that, though these figures possess neither sense nor sensibility, they are not part of the cold world inhabited by Mrs. Ferrars and her daughter and son-in-law. Because we see these figures, and less important ones such as Mr. and Mrs. Palmer, through Elinor's critical, but not unforgiving, point of view, they remain droll but decent people, capable of generous and unselfish acts even while remaining "ridiculous", as Mrs. Palmer says, with unwitting accuracy, of her husband (I xix 124). Seen through other eyes than Elinor's, the two unequal marriages that Mrs. Jennings's

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13 Nora discusses problematic mother-daughter relationships in the next Chapter.

14 Nora discusses Mrs. Jennings in Chapter 4.

daughters have made might seem not comic but tragic, in their lack of shared interests, or even shared topics of conversation. Jane Austen likes to set up patterns of contrasting pairs, especially in these early novels, and Lady Middleton and Mrs. Palmer are another pair of sisters, another set of mother and daughters, though with all the talking at Barton Park, when Lady Middleton speaks to her mother it is usually an attempt to shut her up, and Lady Middleton and Mrs. Palmer do not seem to speak at all—another sort of silence between sisters.

Just before the end of Volume I, a third pair of sisters is introduced at Barton Park: the accurately named Steeles, Mrs. Jennings's cousins. Mrs. Jennings has many virtues but almost no judgement and she cannot see past Lucy's prettiness and her polite manners, though Elinor and Marianne can, and the reader can, taking Lucy at first to be a kind of Mrs. Elton figure, unpleasant but not much to do with the plot. Marianne sees her in this way for much of the novel, but Elinor, for good reasons, cannot.

The two scenes at the end of Volume I and the beginning of Volume II, the scenes in which Lucy forces her confidence—her secret—on Elinor, are central to the way the novel works, and I want to examine them in some detail.

Lucy and her sister Anne are introduced in a series of effective comic vignettes which reveal them as flatterers and sycophants, fawning on the higher status of the family at Barton Park, but also show them as sharp and rather desperate young women, the older sister pathetically *jeune-fille* in her manner, the younger eagerly attentive to her own interests. They are some years older than Elinor and Marianne, and Elinor initially pities them. She is also made curious by their appearing to have some previous acquaintance with Edward Ferrars. Marianne, of course, lost in her daydreams of Willoughby, takes no interest in them, and no part in their conversation, but Elinor is polite and Lucy more than polite: she 'missed no opportunity of engaging her in conversation, or of striving to improve their acquaintance by an easy and frank communication of her sentiments.' (I xxii 146).

The first serious 'communication' comes on a walk from Barton Park to Barton Cottage. Lucy asks Elinor, utterly unexpectedly, whether she knows Edward's mother. This approach is significant, because it is Edward's mother, who holds the purse-strings, that interests Lucy

most. It is Edward's mother, whom in hardness of heart and mercenary motives she resembles, with whom in the end she builds the closest relationship. Startled, Elinor replies truthfully that she does not.

'I am sure you think me very strange [...],' said Lucy, eyeing Elinor attentively as she spoke; 'but perhaps there may be reasons [...] I hope you will do me the justice of believing that I do not mean to be impertinent.' (II xxii 147)

Let's look at those attentive eyes. The walk from the Park to the Cottage is said to be full of natural beauty, but Lucy's eyes are all for Elinor as she continues to produce her carefully prepared, but artfully hesitating, tale:

'the time *may* come [...] when we may be very intimately connected.' She looked down as she said this, amiably bashful, with only one side glance at her companion to observe its effect on her. (I xxii 148)

Note the glance to the side: Lucy is acting a part. Elinor, here utterly astonished and unprepared, is not. She grasps blindly at possibilities. Can Lucy have some connection with the younger brother, Robert?

'No,' replied Lucy, 'not to Mr. *Robert* Ferrars—I never saw him in my life; but,' fixing her eyes upon Elinor, 'to his elder brother.' (I xxii 148)

Keep an eye on those eyes: she is watching the effect she is having. And it takes all of Elinor's considerable reserves of strength—one thing we see happening through the novel is a series of enormous demands on that strength—to hold on to her 'astonishment' and 'incredulity' as Lucy produces the miniature of Edward which is the first of a series of tokens, of props, by which she proves the truth of what she is saying (I xxii 148–49). Elinor ventures only one earnest look at the other girl, trying to see if she is lying. But, though completely disingenuous, she is completely truthful too, and, sinkingly, Elinor must acknowledge it. As Lucy's bits of stage business, the handkerchief, the plea for advice, the letter, proliferate, demonstrating the truth of her claims, Elinor is only barely able to hold onto her composure before circumstances relieve her of her companion—or her assailant, for Lucy means to crush her rival, treating her as 'Edward's sister', as 'an indifferent person' (I xxii 149; II ii 172), treating her indeed, as if she were the younger girl and Elinor an elderly spinster. And Elinor is very nearly crushed: 'She was mortified,

shocked, confounded. [...] Elinor was then at liberty to think and be wretched' (I xxii 155). That is the close of Volume I.

When they next meet, however, Elinor is better prepared. When they next speak together, at an evening party at Barton Park, both of the young women are acting, and the scene is like a stage set. They are seated opposite one another at a work-table, making a filigree basket for a spoiled little girl. Upstage left, the others play cards, and their noise covers the girls' conversation. The spotlight is on Elinor and Lucy. Elinor starts the subject, for more reasons than one:

She wanted to hear many particulars of their engagement repeated again, she wanted more clearly to understand what Lucy really felt for Edward, whether there were any sincerity in her declaration of tender regard for him, and she particularly wanted to convince Lucy, by her readiness to enter on the matter again [...] that she was no otherwise interested in it than as a friend. (II i 162)

I am not exactly sure what filigree work entails, whether there are any sharp implements involved or not, but in this exchange there is more than one steely young woman seated with busy hands at that work-table.

'Indeed you wrong me,' replied Lucy with great solemnity; 'I know nobody of whose judgment I think so highly as I do of yours; [...] if you was to say to me, "I advise you by all means to put an end to your engagement with Edward Ferrars [...]," I should resolve upon doing it immediately.'

Elinor blushed for the insincerity of Edward's future wife, and replied, 'this [...] raises my influence much too high; the power of dividing two people so tenderly attached is too much for an indifferent person.'

"'Tis because you are an indifferent person,' said Lucy, with some pique, and laying a particular stress on those words, 'that your judgment might justly have such weight with me. If you could be supposed to be biased in any respect by your own feelings, your opinion would not be worth having.' (II ii 171-72)

Lucy's feral savagery seems more than matched by Elinor's determination not to be overpowered. In a fair fight, in fact, I'd back Elinor, but Lucy, of course, isn't fair.

What has happened now is that Edward's secret is known to Elinor, and one imagines that an early missive from Lucy, in that correspondence licensed by even a secret engagement, informs Edward of the fact. His misery at this time can be imagined, too, and is, by

Elinor, but she can tell no one because she has been sworn to secrecy by Lucy: real, positive, dramatic secrecy, instead of the numb and wounding silences she is living through with Marianne. Lucy, in fact, is a grotesque counterpart to both Elinor and Marianne, a sort of twin in a dark mirror: an impecunious dependent cousin, who must marry to survive, just as Elinor and Marianne must. Her sniping relationship with her sister Anne, which like Lady Middleton's with her sister, consists of suppressing her vulgarity, is also an exaggerated version of Elinor's frequent moves to cover for Marianne's flouting of convention. But by forcing this undesired confidential relationship onto Elinor, just as Marianne is withholding her confidence, she becomes a taunting version of Marianne, while, engaged to Edward, she is also standing in place of Elinor.

Lucy is symbolically ubiquitous but also physically ubiquitous—consider the scene near the end of Volume II when Edward arrives at Mrs. Jennings's to find her sitting with Elinor—and, as she is a genuinely malicious character, worse in her way than either Fanny or Mrs. Ferrars, this ubiquity is frightening and terrible, as well as ferociously comic. With her sister, poor Miss Steele, with her talk of “smart beaux” and her delusions about “the Doctor”, she forms a brilliant comic duo (I xxi 142–43). Recall the scene in Volume III when Miss Steele fills Elinor in on the details of a tender scene between Edward and Lucy, after the exposure of their secret engagement, only to reveal to Elinor that she acquired her information by listening at the keyhole. Again, the squalidly intimate, openly quarrelsome, but also quarrelsomely open, relations between these two, contrast with the Dashwood inhibitions. Later Lucy will make off with Anne's last penny when she is running off with Robert. This is all grotesquely dissimilar to the mutual delicacy of Elinor and Marianne, but it is that mutual delicacy that leaves them both, at times, alone.

I would like to return to Elinor before we close, but now I want to talk about Marianne for a while. A standard way of reading the novel is to note that both young women—it's stated in Chapter i—have sense and sensibility in different proportions, but that over the course of the novel there is some shifting of those proportions. In that reading, Marianne is taught by Elinor's example to become, broadly speaking, more sensible, while Elinor's clinging to her early romantic

feeling for Edward, proves her sensibility, but the bulk of the learning is done by Marianne, who is the sister who most needs it. I am not entirely happy with that. There is, certainly, a narrative tone at times that is very critical, almost exasperated with Marianne, as in Volume I, Chapter xv: 'She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself' (I xv 95). This is in obvious contrast with Elinor's hard-won, and truly admirable, self-command, which is commended, there is no doubt, throughout. But does this anti-Marianne voice prevail, I wonder? It seems close, to me, to what seems the only real weakness in the novel, which is an occasional tendency to glib sermons, as when, during the stunning Gothic-style encounter with a night-time, desperate, but still glamorous Willoughby, Elinor prosed on internally about 'the irreparable injury which [...] idleness, dissipation, and luxury' had made on him, without making him, one feels, a whit less sexually attractive to her or her sister! (III viii 375).

I think we see Marianne, as the novel really sees her, in her escapades of quixotic kindness, as when in Volume I she embarrasses Elinor by staring at her when 'leaving their hearts in Sussex' (I vii 40) is mentioned by Mrs. Jennings, or when in Volume II she takes up Elinor's pieces of artwork after they have been rejected by Mrs. Ferrars, in order 'to admire them herself as they ought to be admired' (II xii 268). Or when she barges into the awkward threesome of Lucy, Edward and Elinor, greets Edward so warmly, and assures him in a noisy aside that Lucy won't be staying long. Marianne is both a wonderful comic character, and a nearly tragic one, and it is this knife-edge of her presentation that gives the novel its peculiar character—there are two women in this book. The brilliance of the novel is that, though one is seen almost exclusively through the eyes of the other, both are there.

Consider Marianne's 'mad scene'—recall that she and Willoughby were reading *Hamlet* (had they got to Act IV, scene 5?)—which takes place, as all will remember, at a party given by a friend of Lady Middleton's, another brilliantly staged scene. Elinor sees Willoughby first, talking to his fiancée, and he sees her and gives a distant nod. It is a few moments before Marianne, sunk in gloom, notices him: 'At that moment she first perceived him, and her whole countenance glowing with sudden delight, she would have moved towards him instantly, had not her sister caught hold of her' (II vi 200). That spontaneity, particularly when it

is contrasted, not with Elinor's restraint, which is moved by protective love, but with Willoughby's distant courtesy as he crosses to her slowly and greets her stiffly, speaking the dialect of 'sense' which his straitened circumstances have forced him to learn: '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' (II vi 202). His 'slight bow' rebuffs Marianne's "'Will you not shake hands with me?'" (II vi 201). The reader is not inside Marianne's shocked, hurt, disbelieving thoughts, but knows what she is feeling, wonderfully, through Elinor, who, herself disappointed in love, feels Marianne's pain as her own. Elinor still, at the end of that scene, does not know the story, does not know there was no engagement, but she knows what Marianne is experiencing, and, through her, the reader does. Even those whose hearts have been hardened by Marianne's many insufferable and thoughtless remarks, will feel her 'silent agony, too much oppressed even for tears' on the long carriage ride back to Mrs. Jennings's house, because Elinor does (II vi 203).

Elinor is also the reader's entry point to the scene in Volume III, Chapter vii, in which Marianne lies, at Cleveland, near death from a fever. This scene is so beautifully constructed that, though I have read the novel many times and I *know* Marianne gets better, I cannot stop reading until the night is over and the apothecary had made his second visit in twelve hours (those were the days) and 'About noon [...] she began—but with a caution—a dread of disappointment, which for some time kept her silent, even to her friend—to fancy, to hope she could perceive a slight amendment in her sister's pulse' (III vii 355).

Now that we know it is going to come out all right, let us look back at the previous night:

Elinor remained alone with Marianne.

The repose of the latter became more and more disturbed; and her sister, who watched with unremitting attention her continual change of posture, and heard the frequent but inarticulate sounds of complaint which passed her lips, was almost wishing to rouse her from so painful a slumber, when Marianne, suddenly awakened by some accidental noise in the house, started hastily up, and with feverish wildness, cried out—'Is mamma coming?'—

‘Not yet,’ replied the other, concealing her terror, and assisting Marianne to lie down again, ‘but she will be here, I hope, before it is long [...]’

‘But she must not go round by London,’ cried Marianne, in the same hurried manner, ‘I shall never see her, if she goes by London.’ (III vii 351)

Marianne’s almost infantile whimper, and Elinor’s ‘terror’, convey the uncanny quality of delirium: Elinor is afraid *of* Marianne for a moment as well as *for* her, and that moment of vulnerability in Elinor is almost frightening for the reader, who relies, as everyone else does, on her strength. What will we do, we think, if *she* breaks down?

There will be one more such moment, which I want to close by looking at, but I want to move towards it via some of the moments of comedy, in particular of comic misapprehension, that mark this novel, whose subject is really neither sense nor sensibility. Like *Pride and Prejudice* and also like *Northanger Abbey*, its subject is the education and miseducation of the heart. Its characters learn, even Elinor learns, through error. There is a pattern, discernible throughout, of misapprehension. Colonel Brandon, that decent and deeply romantic man to whom I haven’t paid sufficient attention, is thought by Mrs. Jennings, presumably also by the Middletons, to have a natural daughter. Though there is no evidence that these three read novels, or read anything, they have evidently heard of the novelistic convention by which ‘ward’ means ‘illegitimate child’. Mrs. Palmer thinks Colonel Brandon wanted to marry her; she also, like Marianne, thinks him dull—“‘He is such a charming man, that it is quite a pity he should be so grave and so dull’” (I xx 133). If Mrs. Palmer thinks it, it can’t be true, so if the reader finds Colonel Brandon dull, the reader is wrong. On several occasions Marianne mistakes the Colonel, when he knocks or when his step is heard on the stair, for Willoughby. On another occasion she mistakes Edward for Willoughby—but then Edward and Willoughby, those unstable lovers, those men with secrets, have, superficially, much in common. But towards the end of the novel, Elinor mistakes Edward for Colonel Brandon. Lucy seems to have mistaken Edward for Robert, or Robert for Edward, as she is engaged to one but marries the other. Mrs. Ferrars has sometimes two sons, sometimes one, sometimes none, and Robert, though born later, somehow becomes permanently the older son. John and Fanny, who are full of sense, but always wrong, think Edward or

Robert will certainly marry Miss Morton; they think Colonel Brandon is in love with Elinor. But then, Edward thinks Colonel Brandon is in love with Elinor, and Mrs. Jennings is so certain he is in love with Elinor that there is a hilarious (though structurally odd, since it entails a sudden shift to her point of view) scene in which she imagines the Colonel is proposing and wonders why he is saying, "'I am afraid it cannot take place very soon.'" "Lord! what should hinder it!'", she almost cries out, in an ecstasy of error (III iii 319).

The misapprehensions which are not at all comic, of course, are those of Elinor's mother, with respect to Elinor as well as Marianne. She has had to concentrate on Marianne and has done so by convincing herself that Elinor is indifferent to Edward. At the news that "'Mr. Ferrars is married'", her daughters' shocked reactions, Elinor's pallor and Marianne's fainting fit, force Mrs. Dashwood to see what Elinor has been living with for half a year (III xi 400).

I would like to close with a consideration of Edward's announcement, because, while it presents an absolutely vertiginous plot movement which is at once astounding and convincing, it also brings together the almost unreconcilable extremes of comedy and feeling which this novel contains. And, of course, it features that characteristic trope of mistaken identity. Edward has appeared unannounced. Through gritted teeth, Mrs. Dashwood asks after 'Mrs. Ferrars'. Edward stutters,

'Perhaps you mean—my brother—you mean Mrs.—Mrs. *Robert* Ferrars.'

'Mrs. Robert Ferrars!'—was repeated by Marianne and her mother, in an accent of the utmost amazement;—and though Elinor could not speak, even *her* eyes were fixed on him with the same impatient wonder. He rose from his seat and walked to the window, apparently from not knowing what to do; took up a pair of scissors that lay there, and while spoiling both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke, said, in an hurried voice, 'Perhaps you do not know—you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to—to the youngest—to Miss Lucy Steele.' (III xii 407–08)

Notice that change of emphasis: Edward, though beside himself, is not going to risk any further mistakes.

'Yes,' said he, 'they were married last week, and are now at Dawlish.'

At which the careful reader, remembering Robert's yearning to go to Dawlish, must explode, but only for a moment, because in the next line comes Elinor's acute, her agonized, response, the break in her iron self-control:

Elinor could sit it no longer. She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy; which at first she thought would never cease. (III xii 408)

The others see, they hear, her emotion, but for once she doesn't care. More than a year of suffering is about to end, and it will end soon, for both sisters. Marianne does not speak again in the novel after that echoed "'Mrs. Robert Ferrars'", does not even play the piano, and this silence is perhaps the source of some readers' dissatisfaction with the conclusion of the story. But I do not accept the notion that the meaning of the title is reversed in the end, and that Marianne's marriage is a sensible one. I think that in the way in which Edward realized when he met Elinor that he was mistaken about Lucy, and that, comically and viciously, Lucy realized that she was making a mistake about Edward, Marianne realizes when she finally learns to know Colonel Brandon, that he is the real, romantic match for her. They will read Shakespeare together, though they may never get around to finishing *Hamlet*. The comedy of errors is brought to a perfect conclusion.

