



THE CONTEXT OF *SENSE AND SENSIBILITY*

THE PURPOSE of this essay is to consider *Sense and Sensibility* in the light of Jane Austen's beginnings in prose fiction, with due regard to current tendencies in the feminine novel and to her own early writings. Since we do not have the early epistolary *Elinor and Marianne*, such a study must be incomplete, for we can never know the exact nature, or even the exact date, of the revision that made *Elinor and Marianne* into *Sense and Sensibility*. Something may be learned of Jane Austen's early period, however, by putting *Sense and Sensibility* as we know it into the literary setting of the 1790's.

The title *Sense and Sensibility* immediately suggests a stock theme so common that the ordinary patron of a circulating library could easily have inferred the plot. The point can be illustrated by a brief dialogue in a novel of which Jane Austen disapproved:

"And yet," said Clarentine, "without a little romance in youth, what is life good for?"

"Every rational enjoyment that sober common sense ought to render valuable to us."

"But, my dearest Mrs. Denbigh, do you expect *me* to have already acquired a sufficient portion of this *sober common sense* to think so?"

"No, I know you have not; but a little longer residence with me, I flatter myself, will give it you. There are certain words with which *sentimentalists by profession* nourish their folly, that I have totally effaced from my vocabulary, and never permit even my friends to use if I can help it. *Delicacy* (such false delicacy as they mean) is one; *refinement* is another; *sensibility* is a third; *susceptibility* (the most odious of all) is a fourth; *enthusiasm* is a fifth; and lastly comes that ideal bugbear, *CONSTANCY*, a term of which no woman ought to know the meaning till after she is either married, or positively engaged."¹

These commonplace remarks indicate how the current code tried to dispose of sentimentalism and related ideas in relation to character and conduct. Simply to announce that one was going to present a character embodying a quality had the precedent of classical comedy to justify it, but to start in this way at the end of the eighteenth century, with abstract nouns in the very title, was to drag a lengthening chain of didacticism. Yet the artist was not in exactly the same situation as the moralist. Individuals in a story could never be the mere embodiment of these terms, and social situations, no matter how exactly schematized, could never mirror ideas and principles in an unambiguous way.

It was a favorite idea of the time that these ideas were transmitted principally by reading; sentimentalists expressed themselves in verse and fiction and were somehow created by that same verse and fiction. Such a direct correlation between reading and behavior leads to absurdities like the following, reported in another story by a novelist of whom Jane Austen disapproved.

Having no character of her own, Julia was always, as nearly as she was able, the heroine whom the last read novel inclined her to personate. But as those who forsake the guidance of nature are in imminent danger of absurdity, her copies were always caricatures. After reading *Evelina*, she sat with her mouth extended in a perpetual smile, and was so very timid, that she would not for the world have looked at a stranger. When *Camilla* was the model for the day, she became insufferably rattling, infantine, and thoughtless. After perusing the *Gossip's Story*, she in imitation of the rational *Louisa*, suddenly waxed very wise—spoke in sentences—despised romance—sewed shifts—and read sermons. But, in the midst of this fit, she, in an evil hour, opened a volume of the *Novelle* [*sic*] *Eloise*, which had before disturbed many wiser heads. The shifts were left unfinished, the sermons thrown aside, and Miss Julia returned with renewed *impetus* to the sentimental.²

The presentation in terms of literature is very common, but

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it is often more pervasive: when Fanny Burney's Camilla, the most important heroine of 1796, converses with a mysterious fair one with whom she has struck up an instant friendship, "they did not speak of Tunbridge, of public places, nor diversions; their themes, all chosen by the stranger, were friendship, confidence, and sensibility, which she illustrated and enlivened by quotations from favourite poets."³ The sure marks are "her passion for solitude, her fondness for literary and sentimental discussions, and her enthusiasm in friendship."⁴

In a realistic and critical presentation of character the book or poem that happens to be read is subordinated to the character who is susceptible to the book or poem. This is largely true even of the novel of Jane Austen's which comes closest to being a study of female quixotism, *Northanger Abbey*; even in that story Catherine Morland is not merely another silly romance-reader, a mere imitation of Mrs. Lennox's Arabella. It must be confessed that we could make a neater chronological scheme if *Susan* (the original *Northanger Abbey*) came before instead of after *Elinor and Marianne* (the original *Sense and Sensibility*). The one point at which Catherine approaches absurdity, her Gothic follies during the visit to Northanger Abbey, brings us closer to the free burlesque vein of the juvenilia than anything in *Sense and Sensibility*. But we may consider Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* and Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility* as contrasting studies: Catherine is the docile and for the most part passive reader, one whose reading marks her dependence on social suggestion; Marianne is the ardent enthusiast who looks in poetry, art, and music for a congenial expression of her own temperament.

But Jane Austen, though her early experimentation must have shown her that it was best to center her work on one

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heroine, is here committed by her pair of opposing terms to offer two, Elinor and Marianne, incarnating respectively *sense* and *sensibility*. This is dictated by the current plan of writing about pairs of ethical opposites, Nature versus Art, The Man of Feeling versus The Man of the World, etc. The scheme is so obvious that it is unnecessary to consider the possibility of a direct influence from Jane West's *The Gossip's Story*, though such an influence has been suggested by Miss J. M. S. Tompkins in an ingenious and well wrought article.⁵ Jane Austen could work out her own antithesis, but the comment has been justly made that it is mechanical, and contrasts unfavorably with *Pride and Prejudice*, where we find *pride* and *prejudice* subtly blended in Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, and variously illustrated in other characters. It should be noticed, however, that Jane Austen does not intend to deny intelligence and the seeds of judgment to Marianne; we are told at the end of the first chapter that Margaret, the third and youngest sister, "had already imbibed a good deal of Marianne's romance, without having much of her sense." The concession of sense to Marianne should not be overlooked. Without claiming a direct influence from *Camilla*, a novel read closely by Jane Austen in the summer of 1796, we may say of Marianne what Mme. d'Arblay says of her heroine:

Her every propensity was pure, and, when reflection came to her aid, her conduct was as exemplary as her wishes. But the ardour of her imagination, acted upon by every passing idea, shook her Judgment from its yet unsteady seat, and left her at the mercy of wayward Sensibility—that delicate, but irregular power, which now impels to all that is most disinterested for others, now forgets all mankind, to watch the pulsations of its own fancies.⁶

Elinor, unfortunately, is not complicated even to this degree, and her colorless common sense is not interestingly heightened by Jane Austen's device of making her the ra-

tional observer and telling the story largely from her point of view. Just as in the Richardsonian epistolary novel one of a pair of correspondents is always dominant, so one of a pair of heroines is always dominant. Both Marianne and Elinor are disappointed by the faithlessness or reticence of a lover who should declare himself. The deadly parallel requires that the novelist take two such affairs upon her hands, and it also imposes passive roles upon the heroines. The theme of the story is their moral and psychological education, but the girls are not going to write long letters or analyze their situations elaborately. The story proceeds by presenting the suspense and disappointment caused by the defaulting lovers, revealing the reasons for the lovers' apparent or real defections, and finally offering a remedy or solution. This plot machinery operates through a rather miscellaneous group of people who happen to come into contact with the Dashwood family. The family itself, the widowed mother with the three daughters and the half-brother John Dashwood and his wife, is technically the center of the story, but it does not offer the inexhaustible and varied interest of the Bennet family in *Pride and Prejudice*; though the famous second chapter, in which Mrs. John Dashwood succeeds in inducing her husband to do nothing for his step-mother and half-sisters, is one of the diploma pieces in the Austen gallery. For stimulus and variety *Sense and Sensibility* depends more than the other Austen novels on the casual introduction of people who are unsympathetic or defective in various ways. The introduction and use of such a variegated cast derives from the Burney type of story. The genial vulgarity of Mrs. Jennings, the crudely malevolent Steele sisters (transferred from Bartlett's Buildings, Holborn, to become the hangers-on of gentlefolk in Berkeley Street), the rude Mr. Palmer and his silly wife, the shallowly genial

Sir John Middleton and his selfish and insipid wife, the incredibly disagreeable Mrs. Ferrars, the vapid beau Robert Ferrars combine to represent the heartless world, cutting to some extent across class-lines, to which Mme. d'Arbly's heroines are exposed. The Burney situation of the young girl seeing the world, derived ultimately from Richardson's *Grandison*, is duplicated in form when the sisters go to London under the dubious chaperonage of Mrs. Jennings. As Elinor says, "She is not a woman whose society can afford us pleasure, or whose protection will give us consequence."⁷ Not all this variegated cast has a close bearing on the hopes and disappointments of Marianne, but since Edward Ferrars, Elinor's suitor, had already got himself engaged to Lucy, the younger Steele sister, Elinor's fate is bound up with these people.

In such company the serious and virtuous characters are "out of spirits." The story needs a witty and animated participant, which is perhaps an unfair way of saying that it contains no Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse, no person such as Emma Watson and Charlotte Heywood promise to become in the fragments *The Watsons* and *Sanditon*. As for the respectable men whom Elinor and Marianne marry at last, Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon, we can assure them, as Jack Absolute assures Faulkland, that no one could accuse them of being "the joy and spirit of the company."⁸ Edward, at least, needs to be treated as Jane Austen later treated the pensive Benwick in *Persuasion*. In her letters she deals shrewdly with these young men touched by depression:

We hear a great deal of Geo. H's wretchedness. I suppose he has quick feelings—but I dare say they will not kill him.—He is so much out of spirits however that his friend John Plumtre is gone over to comfort him, at Mr. Hatton's desire; he called here this morning in his way. A handsome young Man certainly, with quiet, gentleman-

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like manners.—I set him down as sensible rather than Brilliant.—There is nobody Brilliant nowadays.⁹

Colonel Brandon's "forlorn and cheerless gravity" can of course be understood when we learn that Willoughby, Marianne's faithless suitor, has seduced Brandon's ward, the daughter of the woman he had loved and lost, and that he and Willoughby have met in a duel.¹⁰ This commonplace Richardson plot is later told by Brandon to Elinor, and by her reported to Marianne; it represents in almost glaring form the difficulty that later imitators of Richardson had in combining the degenerate vein of tragedy derived from *Clarissa* with the drawing-room comedy derived from *Grandison* and modified by the robust variations of that comedy contributed by Burney. The misdeeds of the rake, seducer, or weakling may be necessary as an inciting movement in the plot, but they are kept off-stage, and at their worst touch the heroine only indirectly. Willoughby is a much reduced and softened Lovelace, a Lovelace cut down to size. Jane Austen saw the weakness and absurdity, not the romantic or heroic side, of Richardson's hero-villain; and later dwelt at some length on the absurdity of the extravagance of the admirers of Lovelace in her portrayal of Sir Edward Denham in *Sanditon*. Yet Willoughby must have some degree of worth to be introduced even as a possible suitor for Marianne, just as, on a different scale, there must be some positive virtue in Lovelace, in order that he may at any time be taken seriously by Clarissa; or, later in Jane Austen's work, just as Henry Crawford must have some merit in his capacity as a suitor of Fanny Price. Willoughby is characterized superficially and at arm's length. Jane Austen could integrate Elinor's troubles with the social comedy of the Steeles and the uncongenial Ferrars family, but Marianne, whose mode of sentimentalism pre-

fers the picturesque retreat with only a few choice souls for company, scarcely enters into the doings of the miscellaneous people who take up much of the story. The social comedy is not closely connected with her fortunes, and the tensions within the Dashwood family are not developed in close connection with her situation, except of course that her half-brother is on general principles in favor of her marrying a man with a good fortune. The comedy of the John Dashwoods is almost detachable.

As has been suggested, the two female quixotes Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood do not have much in common. For Jane Austen to do her best work, the supposed quixotism of the heroine must be manifested in and through the social scene; in *Northanger Abbey* this comes about by Catherine's docility; she depends entirely on other people for her attitude toward books and the picturesque, and she is remarkable for her naïveté rather than her folly. Marianne as a female quixote is on her own; the setting for her quixotism is not the drawing-room or public place, but first the family circle in which she cultivates romantic ardor with her mother, and later the companionship with Willoughby. The introduction of Willoughby is separated only by a thin partition from Jane Austen's early high-spirited burlesques of the novelist's manoeuvres. The walk in picturesque country—the sprained ankle—the handsome and gallant stranger. "His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story; and in his carrying her into the house with so little previous formality, there was a rapidity of thought which particularly recommended the action to her. Every circumstance belonging to him was interesting. His name was good, his residence was in their favourite village, and she soon found out that of all manly dresses a shooting-jacket was the most becoming."¹¹

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In discussing Edward Ferrars she had already called for a lover whose virtues should be ornamented by perfect manners and perfect taste.¹² To judge a man by the way he reads Cowper is of course as absurd as the condemnation of a character in *Love and Freindship* because he had not read *Werther*.¹³ But what Jane Austen is really trying to do here is not merely to satirize devotees of the picturesque, and lovers of romance and poetry, but to show in them the errors natural to enthusiastic and impulsive youth. The ages of her characters are always important, but the theme is particularly important in *Sense and Sensibility* because of the emphasis on Marianne's point of view. She is seventeen when the story opens—seventeen is the standard age for the heroine of a late eighteenth-century novel—and Willoughby is twenty-five. Her mother is forty, and Colonel Brandon, who promptly comes into view as a possible suitor for Elinor, is thirty-five. A discussion of ages leads Marianne to the pronouncement that "a woman of seven and twenty can never hope to feel or inspire affection again."¹⁴ Similarly, the theme of instantaneous love and friendship, prominent in the early pieces and in *Northanger Abbey*, enters seriously into Marianne's story: "It is not time or opportunity that is to determine intimacy;—it is disposition alone. Seven years would be insufficient to make some people acquainted with each other, and seven days are more than enough for others."¹⁵ Willoughby and Marianne have already discovered that their tastes are strikingly alike in dancing, music, and books, though it is really Marianne who is taking the lead: "He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her enthusiasm."¹⁶ This little world of sentimental enjoyment is largely Marianne's creation. The withdrawal of Willoughby then subjects Marianne to a long ordeal of misery in which there is nothing for her to do but to remain passive. The story as a whole does

not allow Jane Austen sufficient play for her humor and critical intelligence. The last appearance of Willoughby in person, to Elinor after Marianne's serious illness, represents a tendency, marked toward the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, to bring things on or off by a *coup de théâtre*. The confession and partial defence of this young man is not very interesting, but there is one significant passage which takes us back to the early happy companionship of Marianne and Willoughby. He is talking of the appealing letter which she sent to him in London: "Every line, every word was—in the hackneyed metaphor which their dear writer, were she here, would forbid—a dagger to my heart. To know that Marianne was in town was—in the same language—a thunderbolt.—Thunderbolts and daggers!—what a reproof would she have given me!"¹⁷ Here Jane Austen tries incidentally to protect herself and the reader from the theatricality of the Willoughby affair by introducing an apology for the use of stock formulas. It is a clever adaptation of the device of criticizing or deriding the conventions of the novel while one is in the act of writing a novel. Such criticism can come from characters in the story, or from the novelist herself, commenting on the views or actions of the characters or on her own conduct of the story, and this is the central principle in *Northanger Abbey*. It is not given such prominence in *Sense and Sensibility*, but becomes prominent at the end in the form of criticism of the canons of sentimental morality followed by the conventional novelist. It underlies the famous concluding passage about Willoughby: "That his repentance of misconduct, which thus brought its own punishment, was sincere, need not be doubted;—nor that he long thought of Colonel Brandon with envy, and of Marianne with regret. But that he was forever inconsolable, that he fled from society, or contracted an habitual gloom of temper, or

died of a broken heart, must not be depended on—for he did neither. He lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humour, nor his home always uncomfortable; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity.”¹⁸ If this is Jane Austen’s realistic view of the mixed nature of life, it is also a disclaimer of the strict pattern of moods, attitudes, and destinies followed by the conventional novelist. And there is a direct contravention of poetic justice in disposing of Lucy Steele, who jilted Edward Ferrars for his brother Robert. “The whole of Lucy’s behaviour in the affair, and the prosperity which crowned it, therefore, may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, however its progress may be apparently obstructed, will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience.” This underscores the inadequacy of the didactic novelist. And the inversion of the stock ending of sentimental tragedy appears in the final words on Marianne herself. “Marianne Dashwood was born to an extraordinary fate.” She unromantically overcame a first love and married a man whom she had considered impossibly old. All this “instead of falling a sacrifice to an inevitable passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting—instead of remaining even forever with her mother, and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study, as afterwards in her more calm and sober judgment she had determined on.”

It may seem that in these concluding comments Jane Austen simply opposes one convention of romantic fiction and romantic taste with another convention of disillusioned common sense, which also has its obvious limitations. But in the manipulation of these two conventions she shows inde-

pendent power, even though *Sense and Sensibility* is far from being her greatest achievement. It has been noted that she grants sense and good taste to Marianne from the beginning. Cowper seems to have been Marianne's favorite poet, and we know that he was one of the Austen family's favorites also. Marianne is a devotee of the cult of the picturesque: in one of his few flashes of wit Edward, after speaking of Marianne's enthusiasm for ruins and for "Thomson, Cowper, Scott," continues, "and she would have every book that tells her how to admire an old twisted tree."¹⁰ Though Jane Austen is likely to satirize the cult of the picturesque and of view-hunting, as in the comments on Barton Cottage,²⁰ she would agree with the Dashwood sisters and with Cowper in shuddering at John Dashwood's "improvements": "the old walnut trees" and "the old thorns" are cleared away to make room for "Fanny's greenhouse" and a flower-garden.²¹ Jane Austen entertains the idea that a lack of appreciation of the beauties of nature may point to a moral deficiency; this appears later in the way in which Anne Elliot and Fanny Price are contrasted with the comparatively insensitive people about them: Fanny, for example, responds to the beauties of nature, and Mary Crawford does not.²² On this point Jane Austen would agree, making all due reservations, with Mrs. Radcliffe and Byron.²³ Again, Marianne is a devotee of "local attachment"—"dear, dear Norwood"—and Jane Austen's local attachments were strong also, like Anne Elliot's.²⁴ It is clear that Marianne's error is not so much in enjoying the content of current sentimental poetry and fiction, but in indulging, in Henry Mackenzie's words, "the sensibility of which young minds are proud, from which they look down with contempt on the unfeeling multitude of ordinary men."²⁵ Marianne's change or reform is that she acquires a "new character of candour."²⁶ Dr. Chapman has called attention to the importance

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of this term for Jane Austen, and to her own definition of it, "to be candid without ostentation or design—to take the good of everybody's character, and make it still better, and say nothing of the bad."²⁷ More broadly, candor in the eighteenth-century use means a balanced view of human nature, justly appraising faults and virtues and giving judgment accordingly; for Jane Bennet it would mean less tolerance, for Elizabeth Bennet more tolerance. Elinor Dashwood has it to such a high degree that she lacks dramatic value. Both Elizabeth Bennet and Marianne Dashwood attain candor by hard and disillusioning experience; Elizabeth's schooling is more interesting than Marianne's because her revisals of judgment are kept steadily at the center of the book and completely fused with the family situation and the social comedy.

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NOTES

References to Jane Austen's novels are to volume and chapter in R. W. Chapman's Oxford Edition.

1. Sarah Harriet Burney, *Clarentine* (London, 1796), III, 69-70.
2. Mary Balfour Brunton, *Self-Control* (Edinburgh, 1812), I, 130.
3. *Camilla* (London, 1796), III, 152.
4. *Ibid.*, III, 271.
5. "Elinor and Marianne: A Note on Jane Austen," *Review of English Studies*, XVI (1940), 33-43.
6. *Camilla*, IV, 399.
7. II, 3.
8. Richard Brinsley Sheridan, *The Rivals*, II.i.
9. *Letters*, ed. R. W. Chapman (2nd ed.; London, 1952), p. 331: September 23, 1813.
10. II, 9.
11. I, 9.
12. I, 3.
13. *Minor Works*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford, 1954), p. 93.
14. I, 8.
15. I, 12.

16. I, 10.
17. III, 8.
18. III, 4, as also other quotations to the end of the paragraph.
19. I, 17.
20. I, 6.
21. II, 11.
22. *Mansfield Park*, II, 4.
23. See Ernest J. Lovell, Jr., *Byron: The Record of a Quest* (Austin, 1949), pp. 149 ff.
24. See R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen: Facts and Problems* (Oxford, 1948), p. 47.
25. *Julia de Roubigné* (4th ed.; London, 1787), II, 64.
26. III, 13.
27. *Pride and Prejudice*, I, 4.