

INTRODUCTION

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* was at least fifteen years in the making: first conceived and written as *Elinor and Marianne* in 1795 (a date from family tradition), converted into *Sense and Sensibility* beginning in November 1797 from its previous epistolary form (also family memory), revised twelve years later in 1809 and 1810 with a view to publication, accepted by the publisher Thomas Egerton in the winter of 1810, and published, finally, on 30 October 1811.¹ This lengthy gestation period is of some significance. For one thing, the ideas and opinions of a twenty-year-old woman writing for family readings and family scrutiny get mixed up with the seasoned thoughts of a mature writer preparing a manuscript for publication. Moreover, traces of its conception years, the turbulent 1790s, coexist in the novel with traces of the years that divide it from its final revision for publication in 1809–10.² Revision dates that can be verified are drawn from Marianne's recourse to the two-penny post in London, increased from one penny to two pennies in 1801, and the mention of Scott's *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, published in 1805. By inference, other revisions were made in the last years before publication. During this long period there were major shifts in Austen's life: the break-up of the Steventon home in 1801 for

¹ David Gilson, *A Bibliography of Jane Austen*, 'New Introduction and Corrections by the Author', first published 1982 (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1997), pp. 7–8.

² Warren Roberts, in *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London and New York: Macmillan Press, 1979), explores the possible alterations in political focus that could have accompanied revisions of the novel (pp. 44, 52); William H. Galperin, in *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), examines the effects of revision from epistolary to authorial narration. Barbara M. Benedict, in 'Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*: The Politics of Point of View', *Philological Quarterly*, 69 (1990), pp. 453–70, also explores the epistolary first version.

Introduction

Mr Austen's retirement to Bath, a retreat into confirmed spinsterhood in the following years, the sudden death of Mr Austen in 1805, a period of financial uncertainty and moving about for the three surviving Austen women, the expedient of sharing lodgings in Southampton with Francis' family in 1806, punctuated by visits to Edward's grand estate in Kent, and, finally, the move to Chawton cottage, arranged by Edward in 1809, the event that enabled the completion of the novel.

Unstable and shifting in its sympathies and issues, *Sense and Sensibility* has long been treated as disappointing and odd, the red-headed stepchild of the Austen canon. Lady Bessborough in its year of first publication confessed that although *Sense and Sensibility* had amused her, 'it ends stupidly'; Henry Crabb Robinson noted on rereading it in 1839, 'I still think it one of the poorest of Miss Austen's novels'; and Reginald Farrer remarked in 1917, 'nobody will choose this as his favourite Jane Austen'.³ Here is consistency of response that makes it all the more remarkable and gratifying to find that in recent years *Sense and Sensibility* has emerged from its shadowed position among the six novels to find both popular and special appeal, particularly among feminists, historians and reader-response critics.

PUBLICATION

Although *Sense and Sensibility* was the first of Jane Austen's novels to reach publication, it was not the first to be offered for that honour. In previous tries, *First Impressions*, the initial version of *Pride and Prejudice*, was refused by Cadell and Davies by return post in November 1797, and *Susan*, the first version of *Northanger Abbey*, was sold in the spring of 1803, but never deemed worthy of publication by the publisher, Richard Crosby.⁴ Jane Austen's determination

³ Lady Bessborough, letter, 25 November 1811, *Lord Granville Leveson Gower, Private Correspondence*, ed. Castalia, Countess Granville (London: Murray, 1917), II, p. 418; Robinson, diary entries for 13 and 22 September 1839, in *Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers*, ed. E. J. Morley (London: J. M. Dent Sons, 1938); Reginald Farrer, Jane Austen, *ob.* July 18, 1817, *Quarterly Review*, 228 (July 1917), p. 16.

⁴ Gilson, *Bibliography*, pp. 24, 83.

Introduction

to see *Sense and Sensibility* in print can be estimated by the financial risk she chose to ensure that it happened. There were four general ways to publication open to her: two of them – publication at her own expense and publication by subscription – were neither of them suitable, and the other two – publication on commission and sale of copyright – came with serious financial risks.

Publication at the author's expense had been famously successful for Hannah More, her novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809) bringing the author £2,000 in a single year, but More, unlike Austen, had £5,000 of her own money to invest in costs, as well as influential friends and an established reputation as a public figure to promote the book.⁵ As for subscription publication, a process in which the buyer of the novel paid an elevated price to be listed in the first edition as a 'Subscriber', this had been a notably successful route for Burney's *Camilla* (1796), clearing £2,000 for the author, but Burney had two successful novels behind her and, like Hannah More, she also had influential friends to forward the subscription.⁶

The two more feasible routes for Austen, sale of the copyright or publication on commission, each had its own problems. Sale of copyright, the preferred and more prestigious scheme at the time, provided immediate funds, no waiting for profits and a guaranteed amount of money. But the copyright for first novels from unknown authors brought very little money. Crosby's payment of only £10 for the copyright of *Susan* was not unusual – Lane's Minerva Press paid as low as £5 for a first novel. Perhaps a publisher more accustomed to publishing and promoting novels than Thomas Egerton, the eventual publisher of *Sense and Sensibility*, might have seen the value of *Sense and Sensibility* and offered a more reasonable amount for the copyright, but Austen's experience with *Susan* could not have been encouraging. There was also a risk that a novel could prove popular and surpass the price of the copyright in its sales.

⁵ M. G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 193.

⁶ Claire Harmon, *Fanny Burney: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), pp. 258–60.

Introduction

Frances Burney's experience with *Evelina* (1778), her first novel, was infamous. She sold the copyright to the publisher Lowndes for 20 guineas and the novel cleared £800 in a single year, with this profit designated to Lowndes alone.⁷

Austen's decision to publish *Sense and Sensibility* on commission with Thomas Egerton was not an unwise way to put her first novel into print, and in the event the £140 that she received from the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* was a highly respectable showing. The established novelist Charlotte Smith (1749–1806) regularly received around £150 for the copyright to her novels, or £50 a volume, though she complained bitterly that others got more.⁸ Susan Ferrier (1782–1854) was paid by the publisher John Blackwood £150 for the copyright to her first novel *Marriage* (1818), but that was after Walter Scott had altered the price structures for novels, and even then it was a previously unheard of price for a first novel.⁹ Austen's triumph, joyfully expressed to her brother Francis, had been stamped and certified by the market itself: 'You will be glad to hear that every Copy of S.& S. is sold & that it has brought me £140—besides the Copyright, if that sh^d ever be of any value' (6 July 1813).¹⁰ In her next venture, the publication of *Pride and Prejudice*, she did sell Egerton the copyright of the novel, having stipulated £150 as the fair price, a reasonable expectation, but for whatever failure of nerve she accepted only £110 for what turned out to be her most popular work.¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁸ Smith's correspondence with the publishers Cadell and Davies (Yale University, Beinecke Rare Books Room, New Haven, Connecticut) shows that this was the pattern of payment for most of her career. Jane Austen treats Charlotte Smith's work with respect in 'Catherine, or the Bower', where the heroine reflects on her responses to *Emmeline* (1788) and *Ethelinda* (1789).

⁹ *Memoir and Correspondence of Susan Ferrier (1782–1854)*, ed. John A. Doyle (London: John Murray, 1898), p. 138.

¹⁰ Deirdre Le Faye (ed.), *Jane Austen's Letters*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 217. The copyrights of Jane Austen's works were eventually purchased in 1832 by Bentley from Cassandra and Henry (including *Pride and Prejudice* from Egerton's executors) for his one-volume editions of 'Standard Novels' for a total of £250, as reported by Deirdre Le Faye, *Jane Austen: A Family Record*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 269.

¹¹ Gilson, *Bibliography*, p. 24.

Introduction

The proofs of the first edition of *Sense and Sensibility* were in Austen's hands by April 1811, but its publication was not advertised until 30 October, price 15s., in an advertisement that appeared in the *Star* on 7 and again on 27 November, and was repeated in the *Morning Chronicle* on 31 October and on 7, 9 and 28 November. It is not known for certain how many copies were printed, though an earlier estimate of 1,000 copies has been revised downwards by recent research suggesting that from 500 to 750 copies of a first novel on commission would have been normal publishing practice for John Murray.¹² All three volumes of Austen's novel were printed by Charles Roworth. The work was promoted as a 'New Novel', an 'Interesting Novel' (a love story) and an 'Extraordinary Novel', besides being written by 'a Lady', 'Lady—' and 'Lady A—'. The first edition was sold out by July 1813, and by September of that year Austen had reported to her brother Francis that there was to be a second. Egerton advertised the new edition in the *Star* on 29 October 1813, at 18s. in 'boards' (pasteboard covers).¹³ Austen's revisions and corrections to the text were made, possibly, as James Kinsley has suggested, from a copy of the first edition without the opportunity to make corrections from proof, a situation that may explain the large number of printer's errors to be found in the second edition.¹⁴ Roworth was responsible for the printing of this edition as well. Austen greeted the second edition with an eye anxiously turned towards making its expenses, that is, towards covering the costs of paper and printing for which her brother Henry had either already paid Egerton or guaranteed him. 'I shall owe dear Henry a great deal of Money for Printing &c.', she writes, 'I hope M^{rs}

¹² William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 578.

¹³ Gilson, *Bibliography*, pp. 8–9, 16. The second edition of *Sense and Sensibility* was also advertised in the *Star* newspaper on 17 November 1813, and in the *Morning Chronicle* on 8 December 1813. St Clair, *Reading Nation*, suggests that in the light of information now available this edition was probably for 500 copies, an estimate downwards from an earlier proposal of 750 copies (p. 578).

¹⁴ 'Note on the Text', *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. xlvii.

Introduction

Fletcher will indulge herself with S & S';¹⁵ and again later, 'Since I wrote last, my 2^d Edit. has stared me in the face.—Mary tells me that Eliza means to buy it. I wish she may . . . I cannot help hoping that *many* will feel themselves obliged to buy it. I shall not mind imagining it a disagreeable Duty to them, so as they do it'.¹⁶ Her first income from the second edition, about £30, was received in March 1815.¹⁷ Later payments are recorded in her note, 'Profits of my Novels', of £12. 15s. in March 1816, and, a year later on 7 March 1817, £19. 13s.¹⁸ This last influx of money stimulated her to something like giddiness in a letter to her niece Caroline: 'I hope Edw^d is not idle. No matter what becomes of the Craven Exhibition [an Oxford scholarship] provided he goes on with his Novel. In that, he will find his true fame & his true wealth. That will be the honourable Exhibition which no V. Chancellor can rob him of.—I have just rec^d nearly twenty pounds myself on the 2^d Edit: of S and S—which gives me this fine flow of Literary Ardour'.¹⁹

RECEPTION

Jane Austen had placed her treasure on the same table of the circulating library with the products of Rachel Hunter, Charlotte Smith and the Mrs Sykes of *Margiana* (1808) whose novel she was reading,

¹⁵ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, 3 November 1813, p. 250.

¹⁶ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, 6–7 November 1813, p. 252.

¹⁷ R. W. Chapman, 'Jane Austen and her Publishers', *London Mercury*, 22 (1930), pp. 337–42, cited by Gilson, *Bibliography*, p. 16.

¹⁸ Jane Austen's note 'Profits of my Novels' (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York); printed in facsimile in *Plan of a novel according to hints from various quarters, by Jane Austen, with opinions on Mansfield Park and Emma collected and transcribed by her, and other documents, printed from the originals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926). It is worth noting that Austen lost the £12. 15s. in the collapse of her brother Henry's bank in 1816, Le Faye, *Family Record*, p. 234.

¹⁹ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, 14 March 1817, p. 334. Gilson notes that the second edition did not sell out immediately. Egerton cites *Sense and Sensibility* in his advertisements of the first publication of *Mansfield Park* and in vol. 3, p. 355 of that novel. There is an advertisement in *The Morning Post* (Friday, 17 November 1815) for what is described as 'a new Edition' of *Sense and Sensibility*. It has been suggested that Egerton was seeking to dispose of the remaining copies of the second edition since Jane Austen was at that time leaving him for John Murray (p. 16).

Introduction

with pleasure, during her final revisions of *Sense and Sensibility*.²⁰ Her niece Anna's casual rejection of *Sense and Sensibility* when she saw it at the Alton library, 'rubbish I am sure from the title', must have prompted some amused, if uneasy, reflections in the author.²¹ Those who actually read the novel, however, were impressed with its superiority to the usual stock of the circulating libraries. Princess Charlotte had 'heard much' of the novel by 1 January 1812, and reported on 22 January, "Sence and Sencibility" [*sic*] I have *just finished* reading; it certainly is interesting, & you feel quite one of the company. I think Maryanne [*sic*] & me are very like in *disposition*, that certainly I am not so good, the same imprudence, &c, however remain very like. I must say it interested me much.²² Mary Russell Mitford's 'Literary Pocket-Book' for 28 November 1819, simply notes: 'Read Sense & Sensibility—very good'.²³ A French translation, *Raison et Sensibilité, ou Les Deux Manières D'Aimer*, by Isabelle de Montolieu (1751–1832) appeared in 1815 with an introduction filled with praise for the two heroines, especially for Elinor, the perfect model for '*jeunes personnes*' and someone you would like to have for a friend. The minor characters are painted with such '*vérité*' that you think you know them.²⁴

The two brief reviews in the English press were equally favourable. The earlier of the two appeared in the *Critical Review* in February 1812, three months after publication, and the second in the *British Critic* three months later, in May.²⁵ Both recommended *Sense and Sensibility* as above the customary fare of the circulating library – 'a work which has so well pleased us', said the critic for the *Critical Review*, and a 'performance' the reviewer for the *British Critic* admired so much as to lament his inability to include it 'among our principal articles' in the journal. The *Critical Review*

²⁰ Le Faye (ed.), *Letters*, 10–11 January 1809, p. 164.

²¹ Le Faye, *Family Record*, p. 191.

²² *The Letters of Princess Charlotte, 1811–1817*, ed. A. Aspinall (London: Home and Van Thal, 1949), p. 26, and note 6.

²³ Unpublished MS, British Library, shelf mark C.60.b.7.

²⁴ Cited by Gilson, *Bibliography*, pp. 149–55.

²⁵ *Critical Review*, fourth series, 1, 2 (February 1812), pp. 149–57; *British Critic*, 39 (May 1812), p. 527.

Introduction

valued the new novel on two counts, distinguishing the plot from the predictable formulae of the contemporary novel, where readers know, 'after reading the first three pages', 'how they will end', and separating it as well from novels where 'something new', or sensational, is pressed into service. Instead, *Sense and Sensibility* was 'a genteel novel', like a genteel dramatic comedy, with an author, 'who displays a knowledge of character, and very happily blends a great deal of good sense with the lighter matter', the good sense justifying it as 'a most excellent lesson to young ladies to curb that violent sensibility which too often leads to misery, and always to inconvenience and ridicule'. The *British Critic's* reviewer especially appreciated the characters, 'happily delineated and admirably sustained', but also felt it incumbent to offer the novel's social and moral utility as the final recommendation: 'We will, however, detain our female friends no longer than to assure them, that they may peruse these volumes not only with satisfaction but with real benefits, for they may learn from them, if they please, many sober and salutary maxims for the conduct of life, exemplified in a very pleasing and entertaining narrative.' Paradoxically, as Clara Tuite notes, both these early reviewers of *Sense and Sensibility* seem mildly unsettled at not finding the clichés they had expected, hastening with their reassurances to prospective female readers, or their minders, of its socially normative status.²⁶

The two best-known early reviews of Austen's work, a review by Walter Scott (1771–1832) of *Emma* in the *Quarterly Review* (March 1816), and a review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* by Richard Whately (1787–1863) in the *Quarterly Review* (January 1821), bear very slightly on the critical history of *Sense and Sensibility*.²⁷ Scott's review scarcely mentioned Austen's first novel and Whately's did not touch on *Sense and Sensibility* at all, but concerned itself with the issue of Austen's realism, her fiction's relation to the

²⁶ Clara Tuite, *Romantic Austen: Sexual Politics and the Literary Canon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 57–61.

²⁷ Walter Scott, *Quarterly Review*, 14 (March 1816), pp. 188–201; Richard Whately, *Quarterly Review*, 24 (January 1821), pp. 352–76.

Introduction

probable and the possible, topics however that surface repeatedly in later discussions of that novel. Scott, like the two earliest reviewers of Austen's first published novel, takes note of Austen's work as a break with the conventional fiction of 'watering-places and circulating libraries' through its introduction of the familiar appearances of every day life. In this, Scott argues famously, 'she stands almost alone'. Despite his praise, however, the 'ordinary life' of *Sense and Sensibility* unnerves him. Austen's rejection of the romantic Willoughby for Marianne's other suitor, a 'very respectable and somewhat too serious admirer', causes Scott to turn aside from his main task, the review of *Emma*, for a wholly unexpected addendum concerning *Sense and Sensibility*. Here he registers his lingering disappointment in the conclusion of Austen's first novel:

Who is it, that in his youth has felt a virtuous attachment, however romantic or however unfortunate, but can trace back to its influence much that his character may possess of what is honourable, dignified, and disinterested? . . . [They] are neither less wise nor less worthy members of society for having felt, for a time, the influence of a passion which has been well qualified as the "tenderest, noblest and best".
 (pp. 200–1)

After Scott, the next resurgence of critical interest in *Sense and Sensibility* followed the reissue of Austen's novels in Bentley's *Standard Novels* in 1833. There had been no further printing of Austen's novels in England after 1818 until Bentley's series, his reprints costing less than half the original price for the three-volume sets. *Sense and Sensibility* was advertised on 28 December 1832, although dated 1833 on the title page. In Philadelphia in February 1833, Carey and Lea published *Sense and Sensibility*, probably 1,250 copies, but edited for an American readership with emendations of 'Oh Lord' changed to 'Oh!', 'Good God' to 'Why!', 'Good heavens' to 'Is it possible' and 'Lord' changed to 'Truly'.²⁸ The next

²⁸ David Gilson, 'Jane Austen's *Emma* in America', *Review of English Studies*, 53 (2002), pp. 518–20.

Introduction

significant edition of *Sense and Sensibility* was issued by Routledge in 1849, and reprinted without change until 1883 when all six novels were reset. In 1892 J. M. Dent published a set of the novels in ten volumes, edited by Reginald Brimley Johnson, a landmark as the first edition of the novels to have any editorial matter and according to Gilson, the first 'to acknowledge the existence of distinct early editions, and to make any attempt at serious consideration of the text'.²⁹ After the 1890s there was a proliferation of editions of the novels, many of them illustrated.

CRITICISM: THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The general reaction to Jane Austen's novels in Britain largely took the form of an appraisal and appreciation of her characters, but with the influence of the Reform Bill of 1832 weighing heavily on contemporary culture, the response was coloured by the sensibilities of a newly minted, politically empowered middle class. Readers of *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, signed on to membership in the upper reaches of this now highly self-conscious class in an article entitled 'Miss Austen', appearing in the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (July, August 1866): 'Jane Austen [wrote] like a cultivated lady', claims the writer, and, 'Miss Austen, though she may not be much read by the general public, is, perhaps, more completely appreciated than ever by minds of the highest culture . . . Who does not know Lady Middleton?'³⁰ W. F. Pollock, in *Fraser's Magazine* (January 1861),³¹ makes a particular point of the moral suitability of Austen's arrangements of class hierarchies:

Mr. Palmer, a gentleman when he pleases, but spoiled by living with people inferior to himself, and discontented, even to rudeness, with his silly wife, is brought out with much humour. We

²⁹ David Gilson, 'Jane Austen's Text: A Survey of Editions', *Review of English Studies*, 53 (2002), pp. 74–5.

³⁰ Citations from the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* (July, August 1866) are found in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. B. C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 139, 200, 208.

³¹ W. F. Pollock, 'British Novelists – Richardson, Miss Austen, Scott', *Fraser's Magazine*, 61 (January 1861), pp. 20–38.