SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

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With prefaces and notes by Janet Todd

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The Collector's Edition

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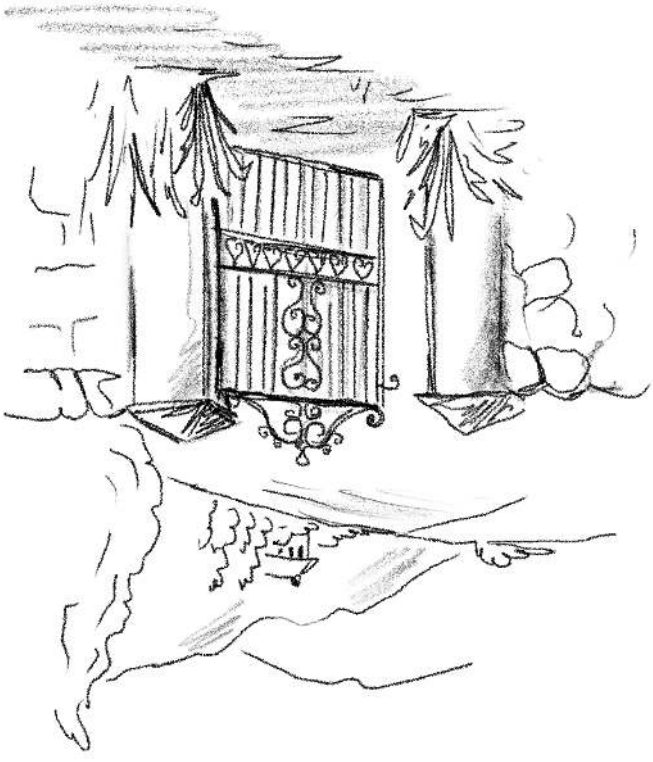
The texts in this edition are based on The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jane Austen (2005–8), with grateful acknowledgement. Readers interested in a more detailed textual account and in further exploration of the novels and their publication history should consult those volumes. The present edition contains explanatory endnotes: under thematic headings, they provide information on a cultural, historical and literary context that might be unfamiliar to a modern reader. A few footnotes indicate words that have changed meaning between Austen's time and our own.



PREFACE

Love and money power all Jane Austen's novels. Characters' incomes, assets, and dowries are as public as their faces. In *Sense and Sensibility* money overshadows romance and women have a clearly articulated price: they are wanted for both their fortunes and their physical attractions, here given precise financial worth. John Dashwood brutally notes that his sister's value in the marriage market has been lessened by her withering illness.

As it passes down the generations, money often eludes women. The book opens with Mrs Dashwood and her three daughters dispossessed of their home and much of their income – as Mrs Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* fears will happen to her and her five daughters should Mr Bennet die prematurely. But men have no monopoly on unjust use of money. Unconstrained by law and custom, it can be employed capriciously by anyone to manipulate the next generation, as dominating Mrs Ferrars shows and Mrs Churchill will echo in later *Emma*. Meanwhile, avarice in both sexes is sanctioned as prudence by society: extravagant Willoughby is not shunned for marrying for money, nor is Lucy Steele for capturing the wealthier Ferrars brother, nor are the rapacious John Dashwoods for treating female relatives shoddily.

To avoid the servile positions of governess, teacher or unwanted hanger-on, relatively poor women needed to marry well – and sometimes to do it cunningly since only men could openly take the initiative. This need is obscured in the genteel Dashwood sisters but nakedly revealed in unsympathetic characters. In the lighter novel, *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella Thorpe, playing the field for the most advantageous catch, is left empty-handed; here, scheming Lucy

Steele is allowed to triumph. It is unattractive to be preoccupied by money, but Marianne reveals hypocrisy – and foolishness – when she professes to ignore it while revealing how much she actually requires for a comfortable life.

Sense and Sensibility was called 'Elinor and Marianne' when first drafted in the mid-1790s. It was later renamed with an abstract title typical of popular, anti-sentimental novels written when the horrors of the French Revolutionary Terror suggested what might happen in England if traditional values of civility and self-control were disregarded. By 1811, at the beginning of the Regency, when the revised novel appeared as Jane Austen's first publication, the dualistic theme seemed to some outdated. The unruly Revolution had given way to the Napoleonic era of renewed hierarchy and imperial expansion, and Britain had responded by accelerating a cultural turn to conservative and nationalistic values. The contemporary journal the *Critical Review* accused *Sense and Sensibility* of a want of 'newness'.

Fortunately, Austen's binary is far from formulaic, and anxieties over desire and emotional extravagance in one heroine, sixteen-year-old Marianne (supposedly representing 'sensibility'), do not obscure the appeal of her youthful spontaneity and passion. The romantic young girl who learns by a near-death experience the need for self-control and kindness delivers much of the energy of the book, and the scream of agony she represses when tested to the utmost is heard by sympathetic readers over two hundred years in the future. Indeed, our problem now is more with the second heroine, 'sensible' Elinor, who carries the consciousness of the book and whose story of repression, fortitude and fulfilment is so confining that her main role sometimes appears to be as witness to the progress of her flamboyant younger sister.

The conflict between a sense that can become self-satisfaction and an emotionalism that morphs into self-destruction and cruelty to others is played out in the various languages Austen displays in the novel. The 'comfortable chat' of civilised society, so absurd to the young and lively who see it as a veneer of 'lies', smooths over the rancour and embarrassments of ordinary life. Talking of weather

has never been funnier and more useful than when insipid Lady Middleton interrupts a painful conversation by an inconsequential remark on the rain. In her theatrical dialogue with her husband, whittling down a deathbed promise to his sisters from an initial £3,000 to an occasional gift of fish and game in season, ghastly Fanny Dashwood speaks from a strictly rational and mercenary point of view, with none of the hysterics she shows elsewhere when thwarted. The tragicomic Marianne later learns that her emotionally charged language has been mimicked rather than shared by her seductive lover and that it has led to her undoing; when he abandons her, Willoughby will use the formal vocabulary of his rich fiancée, proving himself simply a ventriloquist with women. Emotional language is so common in her culture and so often divorced from true feeling that Marianne, when not in romantic or exclamatory mode herself, is silenced through reluctance to use hackneyed phrases.

Some linguistic habits indicate status. The Dashwoods are genteel, consequently civil and reserved except where youthful ebullience in the two younger sisters, Margaret and Marianne, flashes out. Gentility governs domestic as well as social life: despite their closeness, the elder Dashwood women do not confide in each other except in extremity: when overwhelming, emotion is mainly articulated through the body, in illness, near fainting and (usually private) tears. Marianne, Elinor and Mrs Dashwood try to second-guess each other but, like the Gardiners with Elizabeth Bennet at Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, are too well-bred to pry. No such inhibition restrains the ill-bred Steele sisters, who wrangle publicly and eavesdrop behind doors and in cupboards. The snobbishness that such disparity suggests is modified as Elinor and Marianne both learn through kindly Mrs Jennings that goodness can coincide with vulgarity.

Elinor and Marianne form one of the novel's duplicating and contrasting pairs of sisters, the others being Anne and Lucy Steele, and Lady Middleton and Mrs Palmer. The men are oddly interchangeable, one entering the female space where another is expected. Edward Ferrars trifles with a second woman's affections

before being released by the first. Closer to Mrs Dashwood's age than to her daughters', Colonel Brandon is thought by Mrs Jennings to be Elinor's suitor, although his eyes are always on the younger sister.

The Colonel is an unusual hero in an Austen novel. Spectacularly opting out of the financial system that governs so much of the book's action, he shows no concern for exploiting his assets in the marriage or financial markets. He becomes the unlikely *deus ex machina* in the Dashwood story: haunted by a lost love, he finds a substitute in young Marianne to whom he gives the stable love she needs, while his generous offer of a Church living (house and income) to Edward Ferrars ultimately allows Elinor to wed where her heart leads her.

Despite his benevolence, Colonel Brandon may strike readers now as a disconcerting figure. With a backstory sensationally unlike anything else in Jane Austen, he shows mingled pity and horror at female sexual weakness displayed by both of his beloved Elizas, one dead, one left to a ruined life of self-reproach. His ideal of pure and vulnerable womanhood lets him find in Marianne a reincarnation of the first lost Eliza, and it is by marrying her that he can compensate for his failure to save the vulnerable woman he had earlier loved. Marianne, who on first meeting the Colonel had mocked him for being old and wearing a flannel waistcoat, is brought by abandonment, newly learnt prudence and an insistent family to give herself to him in marriage. It is ironic that she reaches her decision after Elinor, who has been so sceptical of the sentimental rake as suitor, momentarily succumbs to the erotic charm of Willoughby as he makes his shallow excuses for treating Brandon's young ward and Marianne so cruelly.

Although we follow Elinor's thoughts through much of the novel, a narrator bustles in comically from time to time to ensure the reader is not carried away by romantic expectations. This narrator recommends a quiet acceptance of the unpalatable and understands that resolute selfishness often achieves its purpose in the world, that the weak and venal do not always end up unhappily, and that happiness in marriage requires, among other things, a

sufficient stock of money. No love duet is allowed for Edward and Elinor – and the narrator *tells* us that Marianne's esteem for the Colonel deepens into love though not into passion.

Yet, *Sense and Sensibility* is a sly, unstable book. While accepting the moral message suggested by the restrained but gently playful Elinor and underlined by the narrator, most readers continue to find something to admire in the young transgressive sister who almost swings loose from the progress assigned to her. The result is an edgy, contrapuntal tale that presents its points not only in shifting abstractions but also through dark humour and memorable bric-a-brac. Who can forget those unvalued locks of hair provided by that unlikely pair of Lucy Steele and Marianne, that absurd ornamented toothpick case craved by Robert Ferrars, or the fine breakfast china that, in rich Fanny Dashwood's view, gives improper consequence to poor relations?