



The Many Duels of *Sense and Sensibility*

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“ [W] E MET BY APPOINTMENT, he to defend, I to punish his conduct” (211). The only duel in Jane Austen’s published novels takes up barely a line—readers miss it if they are not reading carefully. Another novelist would have made full dramatic use of such a life-threatening event. Details would have been supplied of the seconds chosen, the sleepless night of anxiety before the meeting, the time and place that the duel took place, and the intense moment when pistols were raised, or swords drawn, followed by the awful aftermath of the encounter. But not Jane Austen: her duel is passed over in a most summary fashion. Had she omitted it, her plot would have been barely affected, so why did she include it in the first place? What does this duel achieve, and what other forms of duelling does Austen include in her novel?

The concept of a prearranged combat with deadly weapons between two persons, taking place under formal conditions and in the presence of witnesses, is an ancient one. It first arose in Teutonic countries in the Middle Ages. The custom came to England with the Normans in the eleventh century, but it was only in the time of the Restoration that duelling came to be considered a serious social menace. While King Charles II issued a proclamation against duelling, he continued to pardon most offenders. As time passed, friends and acquaintances felt honor-bound to challenge and possibly kill each other for the slightest affront, however unintentional and no matter the extenuating circumstances. Duelling had never been legal, but neither had it been prosecuted. By the time of King George III (and Jane Austen), it was felt that measures were necessary to stamp out duelling altogether (Fullerton 113).

Eliminating duelling did not prove to be an easy task. Laws were passed forbidding duels, and the wearing of swords in such public places as Bath was banned. Anyone caught killing another man in a duel could be tried and hanged for his crime, and in 1810 an anti-duelling society was set up. Enforcing the ban on duels, however, proved very hard to implement. Many continued to regard the activity as a socially essential outlet for personal honor, a method of guarding one's personal integrity. Even such a moralist as Dr. Johnson, a deeply religious man, felt that duelling was not an "unchristian" activity: he told Boswell that "a man may shoot a man who invades his character, as he may shoot him who attempts to break into his house" (2: 463). Colonel Brandon, who fights Willoughby in a duel, is one of Jane Austen's most morally upright characters, and he sees his meeting with Willoughby as "unavoidable. . . . I could meet him in no other way," he explains to Elinor. "Eliza had confessed to me, though most reluctantly, the name of her lover; and when he returned to town, . . . we met by appointment, he to defend, I to punish his conduct" (211).

Jane Austen read about real duels in the newspapers, duels were matter for local gossip (e.g., 8–9 November 1800), and she came across fictional duels in her reading. Unsurprisingly, she mentions the dramatic, violent activity in her own anarchic early writings. In *The Three Sisters*, three young ladies are desperate for marriage and must make decisions about an unpromising suitor. The unheroic suitor, Mr. Watts, is the sort of man, their mother says, who would "run away" from a duel even if the heroine, Miss Mary Stanhope, had "a Father or a Brother" to defend her (*Minor Works* 60). Like the Dashwood sisters and Eliza, the Stanhope girls lack male protectors, which makes them more exposed to the wiles of unscrupulous men.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Austen refuses to treat duelling as a grand romantic gesture of masculine bravado, instead turning it into comedy. Mrs. Bennet, aware that her husband has gone to find Wickham and Lydia in London, imagines him challenging Mr. Wickham: "And now here's Mr. Bennet gone away, and I know he will fight Wickham, wherever he meets him, and then he will be killed, and what is to become of us all?" (287). She clearly has no high opinion of her husband's fighting skills, but she also comically demonstrates her total lack of understanding of the man whose home she has shared for over twenty years. Mr. Bennet, lazy and improvident, with a selfish love of comfort and indolence, is the very last man to endanger his life in a duel. Mrs. Bennet's vision of his fighting Wickham, "wherever he may be found," is wonderfully comic. The imagination boggles at the thought of Mr. Bennet whipping out a sword in Gracechurch Street and challenging Wickham on the spot! To add to

the comedy, we have our old friends, Mrs. Bennet's nerves, reaching fabulous flights of anxiety over this hypothetical duel: "And, above all things, keep Mr. Bennet from fighting. Tell him what a dreadful state I am in,—that I am frightened out of my wits; and have such tremblings, such flutterings, all over me, such spasms in my side, and pains in my head, and such beatings at heart, that I can get no rest by night nor by day" (288). *Pride and Prejudice* would be the poorer novel were this imagined duel removed from the plot.

Willoughby does not run away, as Mr. Watts or Mr. Bennet might do. He faces up to Colonel Brandon and fights his duel like a true gentleman of the era. But by having him fight this duel, Jane Austen makes us question this way of a man's retaining his honor. Willoughby does run away in all the truly important moments of his life. He abandons Eliza, the girl he has seduced and made pregnant in Bath. He runs away from Barton when he knows he should remain and propose to Marianne. He runs from possible meetings with Marianne and her sister in London. Willoughby puts the blame for his own running away on others. When he leaves Barton he blames Mrs. Smith: "I have just received my dispatches," he tells Mrs. Dashwood, and goes on to mutter about his "engagements at present" (76). He blames the girl he left pregnant for "the violence of her passions, the weakness of her understanding" (322), and he blames his new wife for his epistolary cruelty to Marianne. But however he tries to justify his own misbehavior, the fault lies clearly at his own door. Willoughby is unable to face up to the messes he creates or to sort them out honorably. What use is it, Jane Austen makes us ask, if he can face Colonel Brandon at dawn yet be unable to face lifelong responsibilities and resolve the problems of his own creating? Elinor Dashwood shares her creator's view: "a plain and open avowal of his difficulties would have been more to his honour" (81), she believes. Jane Austen had little sympathy for the desire for masculine honor behind duelling. She saw a duel as outdated behavior, an unnecessary pandering to the male ego, a futile assertion of masculine power—as does her heroine Elinor Dashwood. When Elinor hears of the encounter from Colonel Brandon, she sighs "over the fancied necessity" of such a meeting, "but to a man and a soldier, she presumed not to censure it" (211). Her silent criticism tells us much.

Men could load pistols and ride out at dawn to fight their battles. They could gain physical and emotional release from dramatic action and move on, if alive, the quarrel now behind them. Women, Jane Austen knew only too well, had to find other means to "duel" in the important battles of their lives, and they had to do so in confined domestic spaces. The verbal duels, for Austen,

were the ones with real meaning and purpose; those duels interested her more deeply (see also McMaster). Women's duels involve verbal clashes, the inflicting of wounds (emotional and psychological) by words; they reflect the desire to cling to female honor and reputation, or to protect loved ones and homes. Such duels brought out Jane Austen's rapier-sharp wit and irony, as she depicts her female characters fighting for their survival and for what deeply concerns them—fighting not with swords or guns, but with the English language.

The first such “duel” we find in *Sense and Sensibility* is a highly dishonorable one. It occurs in the famous chapter 2 dialogue between John Dashwood and his wife, Fanny. He has just proposed giving his half-sisters a thousand pounds apiece, and Fanny detests the very idea of handing over such a sum. She slashes away at the amount with all the skill of an expert duellist, using the language of crime as she does so (“rob,” “ruin,” no “possible claim”; she even wishes for the death of people owed annuities by her mother [8–11]). We watch Fanny Dashwood brutally cutting down the first considered sum to absolutely nothing at all. One is convinced at the end of this superb scene that the possible “presents of fish and game, and so forth, whenever they are in season” (12) will never eventuate. Through flattery, decision, ruthlessness, and vindictiveness, Fanny Dashwood wins her battle and carries the day. Her husband's half-sisters will feel the wounds from this robbery for some time to come.

We are not given the actual words of the next duel in the novel, that between Fanny Dashwood and her mother-in-law. This is a battle for supremacy: Fanny wants her mother-in-law out of the house of which she was once mistress, she wants to guard her brother Edward against marriage with Mrs. Dashwood's daughter, and she maliciously wants to assert her own power over a woman very unused to verbal duelling. We are not given their dialogue, but the reader is told that Fanny, worried that Edward is falling for Elinor, takes

the first opportunity of affronting her mother-in-law on the occasion, talking to her so expressively of her brother's great expectations, of Mrs. Ferrars's resolution that both her sons should marry well, and of the danger attending any young woman who attempted to *draw him in*; that Mrs Dashwood could neither pretend to be unconscious, not endeavour to be calm. She gave her an answer which marked her contempt, and instantly left the room, resolving that, whatever might be the inconvenience or expense of so sudden a removal, her beloved Elinor should not be exposed another week to such insinuations. (23)

Poor Mrs. Dashwood manages one thrust of her sword in that contemptuous

answer but is forced to retire, leaving the odious Fanny victor of the field. As a result of this little duel, the Dashwood women are forced to leave a much-loved home, rely on the kindness and generosity of strangers, and leave behind all that is familiar to them. The wounds from this duel will take a long time to heal.

But the greatest duels in *Sense and Sensibility* are those between Elinor Dashwood and the so aptly named Lucy Steele. Both women are fighting for their futures. Their dialogues are loaded with double meanings, as they conceal deep emotion behind the rules of civility. One of the opponents has Edward's promise, and the other has his heart. Both need mental energy and deep concentration of mind to win the battle, and the women have a shared awareness that their livelihoods are at stake. They are fighting for establishment in the world, position in society, financial security, and, in Elinor's case, for love. Only one of them can win! Their duels are fought over what really matters in their lives.

Duels traditionally take place outdoors, and the first of these encounters is no exception. Lucy and Elinor are walking from Barton Park to the cottage, when Lucy breaks the unwelcome news that she is betrothed to Edward Ferrars. Elinor is the one at a disadvantage. Totally taken aback by the news and the need to come to terms with the ruination of her dearest hopes, she also must preserve face in front of Lucy. Lucy's sharp eyes miss nothing: she darts sideways glances at Elinor to see how she is responding; she forces Elinor into admissions; she even tries to make Elinor sympathize with her own sufferings.

"I have not known you long to be sure, personally at least, but I have known you and all your family by description a great while; and as soon as I saw you, I felt almost as if you was an old acquaintance . . . and I am so unfortunate, that I have not a creature whose advice I can ask." (132–33)

Later, Lucy speaks insincerely of her own "'jealous temper'" (147) and her conviction that Edward had never "talked more of one lady than another, or seemed in any respect less happy" (148), all conversation designed to hurt Elinor, her opponent in love and words. Lucy, who is herself as hard as steel, has come to her first conversation with Elinor armed with weapons: Edward's portrait in a miniature, Edward's letter addressed to herself, and even a handkerchief, used as a prop to indicate that her heart is "'not quite broke'" (133). Edward's ring set with Lucy's hair is not on her person but is still used by Lucy to achieve another vicious slash at Elinor's happiness. Elinor is left at the end of the encounter feeling "mortified, shocked, confounded" (135), but she is not

beaten. For a short time, she contemplates finding “seconds” of her own and confiding in her mother or sister, but news of this verbal duel, like the physical duel of the novel, does not “get abroad” (211).

Elinor, eager to show Lucy that “her heart was unwounded” (142), wastes little time in returning to the fray. Her opportunity arrives one evening at Barton Park, a venue chosen with the care a male duellist would have used to select the location for a fight. She and Lucy work together on spoiled Annamaria’s fillagree basket, screened by the music Marianne is playing. The work they do involves scissors, and, as they snip away and curl strips of paper, both young ladies use verbal blades against each other as fast as they civilly can. Lucy, “her little sharp eyes full of meaning,” begins by hoping that she did not upset Elinor by her confidence:

“I felt sure that you was angry with me; and have been quarrelling with myself ever since, for having took such a liberty as to trouble you with my affairs. But I am very glad to find it was only my own fancy, and that you do not really blame me. If you knew what a consolation it was to me to relieve my heart by speaking to you of what I am always thinking of every moment of my life, your compassion would make you overlook every thing else I am sure.” (146)

Elinor responds by telling Lucy that her case “is a very unfortunate one” (146) and reminding Lucy of Edward’s financial dependence on his mother. She continues to batter against Lucy’s pretended security in being loved by Edward: “If the strength of your reciprocal attachment had failed, as between many people and under many circumstances it naturally would during a four years’ engagement, your situation would have been pitiable indeed.” This is a hit! Lucy is forced to look up, “but Elinor was careful in guarding her countenance from every expression that could give her words a suspicious tendency” (147).

As the verbal duel continues, we get Elinor’s real thoughts about Lucy and her pretenses, but we also watch her carefully forming every sentence to inflict wounds without seeming to do so. We know that Lucy has been “touched” when she looks up or narrowly watches her opponent in love and words. She even asks Elinor to intervene in getting Edward the living of Norland by asking John Dashwood that favor, as she ruthlessly kills off the present incumbent, who is “not likely to live a great while” (149). Lucy taunts Elinor, suggesting that perhaps it would be wisest “to put an end to the business at once by dissolving the engagement” (149), but Elinor refuses to parry on that point and will not discuss the subject.

Lucy’s next attack is on the point of Elinor’s indifference. Her lack of

importance to Edward, she insists, is why she can ask for her advice: "'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'" (150). Again, Elinor uses silence as the best weapon of defense and, for the sake of her own peace of mind, never revives the subject again herself. When replying to Lucy's news of Edward's letters and the happiness they give her, she shows only a calmness and caution that she is far from feeling. The duels leave her emotionally drained and miserable, but she holds her own against all the verbal steel and wounds that Lucy Steele sends her way.

Soon after Colonel Brandon and Willoughby meet on some lonely heath at dawn to fight their duel, Elinor meets Anne Steele, Lucy's "second" (and who has an appropriately named friend in Martha Sharpe), in crowded Kensington Gardens. Miss Steele continues the skirmish on her sister's behalf. She gives Elinor news of Lucy, forces her into hearing what Lucy and Edward said to each other in private, and shares with a reluctant Elinor all her speculations about their future together. Poor Elinor tries to talk of something else, but Miss Steele "could not be kept beyond a couple of minutes, from what was uppermost in her mind" (275), and Elinor is unable to withdraw.

Lucy is adept at duelling even from a distance. She sends Elinor a letter, barbed and designed to wound from the very beginning: "I hope my dear Miss Dashwood will excuse the liberty I take of writing to her; but I know your friendship for me will make you pleased to hear such a good account of myself and my dear Edward, after all the troubles we have went through lately" (277). She makes great play on Elinor's being simply a "friend." Then, having spread her poison, she almost disappears from the novel.

But Lucy cannot forgive her rival in love and has a parting thrust still to deliver. The Dashwoods' manservant, Thomas, has been on an errand to Exeter, and there he bumps into Lucy Steele, now Mrs. Robert Ferrars. Lucy ensures that Thomas knows that she is now a married woman but of course does not inform him which brother she has married. Even Thomas notices that the bride exudes satisfaction and smugness. The new Mrs. Ferrars promises to call in when next in the area. Elinor naturally believes that Lucy is now Edward's wife. It's a terrible wound for Elinor, who "now found the difference between the expectation of an unpleasant event, however certain the mind may be told to consider it, and certainty itself" (357). She suffers real pain at this news. She imagines the newlyweds in the Delaford parsonage, she aches for

more information about the marriage, and yet she dreads to hear it when it comes. Had she not suffered from Lucy's cruel news, she would have remained hopeful, she would have been able to speak to Edward collectedly when he arrived at Barton Cottage. We get no more of Lucy Steele's words in the rest of the book, but she has remained a sharp, cutting, and vengeful duellist until the last word. Her parting shot from the novel is a cruel and damaging one.

Marianne Dashwood is not as skilled a duellist as her sister Elinor. She lacks the restraint, emotional control, and discipline to make her accomplished at cutting and thrusting, inflicting wounds, parrying and defending. Marianne does her best to protect Elinor's honor when it is slighted, as occurs at Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood's dinner in Harley Street. The conflict, appropriately, is over a pair of screens that Elinor painted as a gift for Fanny Dashwood. Screens are objects designed to protect—from heat, or from prying eyes—but they prove no protection in the verbal duel that ensues. Mrs. Ferrars is rude about the screens and loudly praises Miss Morton—behavior that upsets Marianne:

She was already greatly displeased with Mrs. Ferrars; and such ill-timed praise of another, at Elinor's expense, though she had not any notion of what was principally meant by it, provoked her immediately to say with warmth,

“This is admiration of a very particular kind!—what is Miss Morton to us?—who knows, or who cares, for her?—it is Elinor of whom we think and speak.”

And so saying, she took the screens out of her sister-in-law's hands, to admire them herself as they ought to be admired. (235)

Marianne only succeeds in angering Mrs. Ferrars, Fanny Dashwood, and her brother, John, and in hurting Elinor by her outspoken warmth. Soon Marianne bursts into tears, causing consternation in the room and starting everyone talking about her broken romance with Willoughby. Marianne, as a verbal duellist, needs to know when to use silence as one of her weapons.

The same scene gives us a fabulously comic grandmothers' duel over the respective heights of Harry Dashwood and William Middleton. Only Harry is present in the room, and everyone conjectures and discusses.

The two mothers, though each really convinced that her own son was the tallest, politely decided in favour of the other.

The two grandmothers, with not less partiality, but more sincerity, were equally earnest in support of their own descendant. (234)

Lucy tries desperately to please both sets of mothers and grandmothers, Marianne offends all of them by declaring she'd never thought about the subject at all, and Elinor gives young William the preference. It's a wonderfully funny moment where we see verbal duelling being used for something as trivial as the relative heights of two growing boys. Women's duels, Jane Austen shows us here, are not invariably fought over issues that really matter.

Sense and Sensibility is rich with words evoking duels. There may not be any bodies slashed by sword or rapier, but there's plenty of cutting going on. There are references to needles, needle-cases, and pins. The Steele sisters have their "knives and scissars stolen away" (120) by the naughty Middleton children. Fine trees are ruthlessly cut down in their prime by men with axes. Twirls of paper are cut for that fillagree basket, and Annamaria's skin is cut by a pin in her mother's headdress. Mrs. Ferrars cuts off first one son, and then another, from her financial support. Indeed, she seems to excise them almost from her mind and kill them both off in her uniquely unmotherly way. Mrs. Smith cuts off money to Willoughby when his behavior infuriates her. Willoughby cuts off a lock of Marianne's hair, and either Edward or Lucy once cuts the lock that was set into his ring. John and Fanny Dashwood chop away at the inheritance he'd promised to give his sisters. Lucy's sharp eyes, words, and vicious moves cut deep into Elinor's heart, but our heroine fights back and strives to conceal how much they have hit their mark (see also Walker). More than any other Jane Austen novel, *Sense and Sensibility* speaks of wounds, challenges, blows, hurts, injuries, doctors, and pain.

There's an intriguing little moment in one of the last chapters of the novel, when Edward has returned to Barton Cottage. Mrs. Dashwood has made polite enquiries about the health of the new Mrs. Edward Ferrars, and Edward has just informed the women that Lucy Steele is married to his brother, not to himself:

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." (360)

Jane Austen rarely uses symbolism in her fiction, but surely something symbolic is going on here? Is Edward cutting the fetters that have bound him to

a woman he has long ceased to love? Does the sheath, as Helena Kelly insists, denote a woman's private parts (101), in which case Edward's behavior can be seen as sexually disturbing as he chops away at them. Or is Edward simply releasing stress by fidgeting with whatever has come easily to hand? Perhaps it is, as Linda Robinson Walker has theorized, a reference to male circumcision. Or could it be Jane Austen's statement on masculine duelling? What use are sharp blades or pistols in solving the real problems faced by women in the Georgian world? Men might bluster and rant, then act the hero by turning up at dawn for a fateful encounter. But women, who could not travel to a lonely common, who lacked the finances to purchase costly weapons, who officially had no "honor" of their own to defend, had to fight their battles differently. They use their skill with words, their wits, and their self-control in order to gain for themselves a future and some degree of happiness. Their duels don't have blades or powder and shot; instead, they make the most of their skills with language, and they use intelligence and stoicism, qualities that Jane Austen deeply admired.

When Edward picks up that pair of scissors and destroys the blades and the cover designed to prevent them from causing injury, Jane Austen has him subconsciously destroying a conventionally male weapon. Having blunted the blades, Edward turns to that traditionally female weapon—words. In the next chapter of the novel, we have more of his speech than we've had in rest of the book. We learn of his "incessant talking" (363) with his betrothed; he gives explanations, excuses himself where possible, condemns himself at other times. His tongue has been unleashed. Steeles, blades, hurtful cuts, and wounds have gone from this fictional world. Jane Austen has shown her readers exactly what she thinks of actual duels as solutions to problems: they are as useless as the scissors Edward has just ruined.

It's a lovely touch in the 1995 *Sense and Sensibility*, written by Emma Thompson and directed by Ang Lee, that a male character, Edward Ferrars, teaches a female (the young Margaret) how to duel and comes off worse. Thompson had clearly picked up on the uselessness of male duels and included this nice little "extra" in her film. Andrew Davies's 2008 adaptation of *Sense and Sensibility* includes the duel between Willoughby and Brandon. They slash at each other with swords in the early dawn, and Willoughby is slightly wounded. While Joanna Thaler praises Davies for adding the duel that has been "so frustratingly omitted" from the text and other film versions, I don't agree that the omission is frustrating at all! Jane Austen deliberately avoided

all the theatricality and melodrama of a masculine duel, a duel that has as much to do with the men's rivalry over Marianne as it does over Eliza, "the girl whose youth and innocence [Willoughby] had seduced" (209), a duel that has no clear resolution as to Willoughby's future responsibilities towards his illegitimate child. *Sense and Sensibility* is in many ways a book about the failure of men—to protect, to finance, to support, or to shelter the women in their lives. Many of the men in the story jostle for power, hide important information, betray others, and cause lasting harm. The novel's duel is simply one more example of a society that produces gentlemen whose time is spent unproductively in seducing and fighting. The duel is significant for the novel, but it is significant because it is not described and because it is so rapidly dismissed.

Jane Austen was interested in crime and its consequences. She once went with her brother Edward to Canterbury Gaol, and the book she was working on at the time, *Mansfield Park*, is rich with prison imagery, as I discuss in *Jane Austen and Crime*. *Sense and Sensibility* examines another crime, taking one's own life, which in Austen's day was a criminal act: "Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction," Marianne Dashwood admits (345). Poaching, gambling, theft, and even murder all have a place in her juvenile and mature works; some of her characters are men of the legal profession, while the lurid crimes of gothic fiction fire the imagination of Catherine Morland. Crimes of passion also have a place, with elopements and adultery included in her novels. Hangings and brutal punishments are mentioned in her letters and books. What constitutes a crime and how it should be punished have changed dramatically since the Georgian age, so examining the subtle references to crime in her writings can bring a whole new understanding of Jane Austen's genius. To fight another human being in a duel was a criminal activity. If someone was killed as a result, then the full force of the law could come down on the offender. However, it was a masculine activity and, in Jane Austen's view, an outdated and pointless one. She deliberately includes a duel between two men in *Sense and Sensibility*, and then gives it less than one line of her attention. She was more intrigued by the ways in which women fought for their security and happiness.

And so *Sense and Sensibility* gives us feminine duels of insult and wit, verbal thrusts and parries, wounds and consequences, as her heroines battle to gain the rewards and happiness they deserve. Jane Austen gives us many duels in this rich novel where, as is so appropriate for such a novelist, the weapons are words. And oh, what brilliant words they are!

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