



“He to defend: I to punish”:  
Silence and the Duel in  
*Sense and Sensibility*

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AT THE HEART OF *Sense and Sensibility* we find a little-noted duel, an affair of honor conducted between Colonel Brandon and Willoughby, two of the three male principals in the novel. The duel, though heavy with significance for the novel, is interestingly underemphasized in the text itself and largely unacknowledged in critical discussion. A Regency duel is an example of what Peter Gay calls “the cultivation of hatred,” i.e., the sublimation of raw aggression as well as the deliberately nurtured expression of that same resentment.<sup>1</sup> The “hatred” sufficient to provoke a duel arises over Willoughby’s seduction of Brandon’s ward, Eliza, and the duel exists for the reader only because its participants engage in a secondary discursive “duel” on the “site” of Elinor Dashwood, each confiding in her his grievance and his justification for his conduct.

While the duel is never revealed to us in its details directly or indirectly, it is significant as an emblem of the power relations informing the plot of *Sense and Sensibility*. I want to place the unconsidered duel within the framework of power relations in the work while at the same time undertaking to read the novel in light of the duel’s significance and determine the extent to which it alters or affirms our approach to the text. Claudia Johnson has argued persuasively that in *Sense and Sensibility* Austen critiques rather than affirms Marianne Dashwood’s “emotionality” because

of its “horrifying conformity to the social context she lives within” (69). After Marianne is jilted by Willoughby, her absorption with her own distress and the practically willed flirtation with death reinforce the socially approved dependence of a young woman on her first choice of a spouse. In effect, as Johnson argues, to die after being passed over is practically expected of a young woman in a society in which to embark on a second attachment hints at a disturbing female autonomy. Austen’s primary critique, in Johnson’s view, is of the defective patriarchal order, in particular the intersection of a privileged and indolent gentry with the system of marital arrangements (64-69). As a product of their leisured ennui, men like Willoughby, and to a lesser extent Edward Ferrars, casually engage the hopes of young women whom they have no intention of marrying. If the severity of Marianne’s self-willed illness is a product of the normal functioning of the social order where marriage is concerned, so too, Austen suggests, is the duel between Colonel Brandon and Willoughby a dangerous function of the process of transacting marriages and thus a critique of the social order. The silent critique of the duel is thus analogous to the equally unspoken but pointed critique of Marianne’s dangerously excessive sensibility.

The duel is alluded to only once in the momentous tête-à-tête between Elinor and Colonel Brandon in which Willoughby’s character is blackened by Brandon as “expensive, dissipated, and worse than both” (210).

“Have you,” she continued, after a short silence, “ever seen Mr. Willoughby since you left him at Barton?”

“Yes,” he replied gravely, “once I have. One meeting was unavoidable.”

Elinor, startled by his manner, looked at him anxiously saying, “What? have you met him to—”

“I could meet him in no other way. Eliza had confessed to me, though most reluctantly, the name of her lover; and when he returned to town, which was within a fortnight after myself, we met by appointment, he to defend, I to punish his conduct. We returned unwounded, and the meeting, therefore, never got abroad.”

Elinor sighed over the fancied necessity of this; but to a man and a soldier, she presumed not to censure it. (211)

For his part, and to represent himself to Elinor as much sinned against as sinning, Willoughby counters with a reply to Brandon’s version: “Remember,” cried Willoughby, “from whom you received the

account. Could it be an impartial one? I acknowledge her situation and her character ought to have been respected by me. I do not mean to justify myself, but at the same time cannot leave you to suppose that I have nothing to urge—that because she was injured she was irreproachable, and because *I* was a libertine, *she* must be a saint.” (322)

Of course Willoughby has every intention of justifying himself to the degree necessary for his vanity, but the more important issue is to observe the way Austen grants the two men a venue—Elinor—to continue a conflict unresolved by an affair of honor. That Austen allows Willoughby’s version to follow and supplement Colonel Brandon’s suggests, as I want to demonstrate, the conflicted and not entirely irreproachable motives of Brandon himself.

A humorously hypothetical account of the duel by Mary Hardenbrook, “Gunfight at the Combe Magna Corral,” does indirectly call attention to this peculiar unnarrated event. Angela Leighton has referred to the events surrounding the duel, the story of the two Elizas, as a “stagey subplot,” “unnecessary” and “unmemorable” (61). While readers will likely concur with Elinor’s view of the duel—that it is theatrical and melodramatic—the duel is essential to Austen’s work of exposing the instabilities brought about by seduction when male protectors inadequately fulfill their roles.

D. A. Miller has identified three categories of subject matter untreatable in the world of Austen’s fiction: the Napoleonic wars, female sexuality, and the economic life of the tenantry (68). While one might be tempted to add the category of physical violence to this list, in fact the presence of the duel in *Sense and Sensibility* upsets the tidiness of this characterization of Austen. The duel imports into the novel the violence associated with wars and does so via the sexual narrative of the two Elizas. More than anything else, the unseen duel between Colonel Brandon and Willoughby serves as a manifestation of the general power relations within Austenian society, those struggles over wealth (inheritance) and place (social prestige) held up to scathing critique in the novel.

The narrative circumstances surrounding the duel are curious. At the end of Chapter 12 of Volume I, the social party centered at Barton Park, including the Dashwoods, the Middletons, Willoughby, and Colonel Brandon, had formed a plan to visit “a very fine place about twelve miles from Barton, belonging to a brother-in-law of Colonel Brandon, without

whose interest it could not be seen" (62). The intended excursion fails: Colonel Brandon is discountenanced by a letter, and leaves abruptly, despite the tactless remonstrance of Sir John and Mrs. Jennings. Shortly thereafter, Willoughby too takes an unpremeditated leave that disturbs the company and devastates Marianne. Only much later in the novel are the absences explained by the two men, both in confessional interludes with Elinor. Marilyn Butler has rightly observed that the novel's method in part is to subject both sense and sensibility to similar experiences in order to gauge the different results (39). In this instance, both men are summoned away by a "discovery": the Colonel by the discovery of the whereabouts of his ward; Willoughby by Mrs. Smith's discovery of his disreputable connection with the Colonel's ward, young Eliza.

The contrast between the two male principals could not be greater. Colonel Brandon and Willoughby are social equals in the upper-middle class world of Austen's fiction, a milieu that may perhaps be described as baronets and below, but always above trade. The discovery of Eliza is a consequence of the search instituted by Colonel Brandon. Mrs. Smith's discovery occurs in spite of Willoughby's attempt to conceal his relations with Eliza from his wealthy benefactor. One discovery leads to action, the other to defense. The Colonel's departure is active; Willoughby's reactive. Likewise, the resulting encounter between the two men bears a comparable antithetical structure: "he to defend, I to punish." Tony Tanner has written at length on Austen's thematic and structural use of the prominent eighteenth-century motif of antithesis (76-77). The unseen duel between Col. Brandon and Willoughby replicates in its structure the governing trope of the novel, the duel between sense and sensibility. The Colonel presumably challenges Willoughby, probably in writing and through an intermediary as is done in duels. Willoughby responds, and accepts, also through an intermediary, or second, who in correspondence with Brandon's second negotiates time, place, weapons, number of shots, and the other practical features of the duel. They meet, and Willoughby is allowed choice of weapons, most likely pistols, as the man challenged; the Colonel takes the other pistol. The duelists pace off the specified distance; one fires, then the other: thesis, antithesis. Colonel Brandon's reserve, his prudence, his age and experience in the world forms the counterpoint to Willoughby's impulsiveness, passion, and worldliness. On this level the duel replicates the classical antithesis of the novel's basic form: Colonel Brandon, soldier, man of responsibility and duty, clashes with the Regency rake, the dis-

solute, profligate, and passionate Willoughby. The lack of clear resolution in their encounter—“we returned unwounded”—is precisely what propels the duel and its force into the Dashwood domestic sphere.

It was not unheard-of in duels for one, perhaps both of the combatants to fire into the air, or simply not fire at all. However, no such formality seems warranted by the narrative circumstances in the novel, only that neither man was wounded. One may speculate that Brandon, as the challenger and avenger of Eliza Williams’s wrongs—he that is to “punish”—would not hesitate to kill his man. Colonel Brandon’s narration to Elinor of Eliza’s story contains the three essentials of Willoughby’s “dishonourable usage”: “He had left the girl whose youth and innocence he had seduced, in a situation of the utmost distress, with no creditable home, no help, no friends, ignorant of his address!” (209). Here are the ingredients of the Colonel’s desire to punish: Willoughby seduced, impregnated, and abandoned Eliza. Or so Brandon believes. By the same token, one can imagine that Willoughby, the challenged, believing himself, as he explains to Elinor, wrongfully accused of ruining Eliza, and certainly bearing no love for the Colonel, would not fail to fire with deliberation.

The plot of *Sense and Sensibility* originates in a primal moment of patriarchal failure masked by the circumstances of the routine operation of primogeniture.<sup>2</sup> Jane Austen’s novels invariably ground the authorial perspective firmly in a consciousness of the needs, concerns, and desires of the central female characters. Standing behind the entire narrative structure of *Sense and Sensibility* is an unnamed Dashwood, heir and patriarch to the large estate of Norland Park. This conspicuously anonymous “old gentleman” sets in motion the chain of events in the novel by an act of inadvertent but poignant dispossession: he leaves the Norland estate to his nephew, Mr. Henry Dashwood, but secures it legally to *his* son, John, and “to his son’s son” (4). By this act is made possible Henry Dashwood’s patriarchal failure, his failure to provide for and protect his daughters from the world. At his death the Dashwood girls are left neither protected by his actual physical presence (the most basic masculine responsibility) nor by his income and property, the bulk of which along with the Norland estate descends to John Dashwood.

The absence of a male protector for Elinor and Marianne is in some sense the condition of possibility for the novel’s action. The “will” of the old gentleman, and the subsequent death of their father, precipitate the

Dashwood girls into the harsh economic uncertainty of the world and out of the security of their beloved Norland. It is fitting that Marianne feels most keenly the pain of this Edenic loss, for it is to Marianne that Austen assigns a symbolic fall, and Marianne is the Dashwood who is made to suffer most from the family's exile.

As Roger Sales has observed, the period of the composition of *Sense and Sensibility* coincides with the political crisis of royal succession during the Regency (57-58). The absence of a strong king and a strong figure at the head of the British nation during the long illness of George III forms a loose homology to the absence of strong male figures in the Dashwood family: there are no males who would provide the traditional support and security consistent with their roles as patriarchs. In deleting strong male characters from the lives of her heroines, Austen may be motivated primarily by narrative considerations, most notably the desire to create a tension that the symbolic and social solidity of "the Father" might dispel. The absence of strong, protective males from the original narrative moment of the novel establishes both a social and a sexual vacuum. Readers of Austen's fiction may then expect with utter certainty that suitable—more or less—men will be found to step into the breach, replacing non-existent brothers and fathers with something generally preferable because it looks to the future: husbands. Further, Austen's a priori removal of Dashwood men from the text as one feature in the construction of the narrative creates an urgency or desire that carries encoded within it an outline of the necessary satisfaction of that desire, the closure of marriage.

With the death of the "old Gentleman," Mr. Henry Dashwood dwindles into a mere conduit for the passage of property within the male line. Here the laws of primogeniture coincide with the caprice of an old man, the inept solicitude of a father, and the bad faith of a brother to render the Dashwood sisters vulnerable in their relative poverty, *seekers* of husbands and fortunes, not sought. Having neither wealth nor attentive and aggressive male benefactors to safeguard their status, both sisters find themselves exposed, though not helpless, to the machinations of rakish males. Austen never condones the predatory nature of a Willoughby or a Wickham, but they nevertheless fulfill a moral function in the narrative by personifying the risks that attend the lack of a fortune in a young girl.

Colonel Brandon recognizes the similarity in character between Marianne and the first Eliza, and there is a similarity in *condition* as well between Eliza's daughter and Marianne. Both lack close male relatives or

inherited fortunes to shield them from the penury and degradation always understood by the “female” consciousness of the novel as threateningly present on the horizon of any young woman inadequately provided for. The signal difference in this regard between Marianne and young Eliza is of course the unlooked-for presence of Colonel Brandon as “guardian” to Eliza, a role he ironically fulfills by standing ready to punish any transgressor of propriety. By failing to secure the financial interests of Elinor and Marianne in some more tangible form, Henry Dashwood leaves the welfare of his daughters to his son, who is only half-brother to Elinor and Marianne. The novel seems to suggest that precisely because John Dashwood is only “half,” he lacks the whole bonds of brotherly affection that would secure the material welfare of his sisters and form a natural “social” barrier to the improper attentions of Willoughby.

The duel, though a part of the “sub-plot” of the novel, sheds considerable light on the action of the whole by revealing an otherwise undisclosed depth of masculine rivalry over the possession of women. In light of the many critics—beginning with Marianne Dashwood—who lament the Colonel’s lack of sprezzatura, his participation in an affair as dashing as a duel is certainly ironic. Austen goes to great lengths to capture Willoughby’s sparkle, while Colonel Brandon comes off repeatedly as dull, cautious, even prematurely aged. Colonel Brandon suffers by contrast even with the considerably older retired military man General Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, who possesses vitality at least if not moral character. Mary Poovey sums up Brandon, along with Edward Ferrars, as “incapable of energetic gallantry” (89). At worst, for Tanner and others, Brandon stands as a constitutionally mute emblem of the world of forms, the equivalent for Marianne of the world of lies, but to which realm she is disturbingly consigned by the abrupt and ostensibly ill-conceived resolution of the novel (79–92).

The story of the two Elizas provides considerable insight into Colonel Brandon’s character and motives as pertaining to both duel and the primary marriage plot of *Sense and Sensibility*. The Colonel apologizes to Elinor, describing himself as “an awkward narrator” (204). Perhaps “preachy” is a better descriptive term than “awkward” for his narration. The original Eliza, a cousin of Colonel Brandon’s to whom he had been deeply attached since childhood, was as he tells us the ward of his father. Brandon and his older brother had been raised as siblings to Eliza, and the

Colonel's primal frustration occurs when his brother steps into his place and marries Eliza. Poovey reads the story of the two Elizas as revealing Colonel Brandon's unsettling and obsessive anxiety over female sexuality, and in part, I agree. What I find even more interesting is Brandon's palpable anxiety over his own sexuality and how that anxiety is both revealed and concealed. Eliza, deeply entwined in the bosom of the family, is married off, not to the brother she loves, but to the older brother for wholly financial reasons. Precisely to retain the inherited wealth Eliza brings, the Brandon patriarch suppresses feeling, decency, and usage by retaining Eliza in the family.

It is at this point that the Colonel's deep ambivalence concerning sexuality, the two Elizas, and Marianne comes to the fore. In a previous encounter with Elinor, Colonel Brandon compares Marianne to the first Eliza: "I once knew a lady who in temper and mind greatly resembled you sister, who thought and judged like her, but who from an enforced change—from a series of unfortunate circumstances—' Here he stopped suddenly" (57). Colonel Brandon pauses here, not overcome by emotion as he is in other places, but as if in fear "he had said too much" (57). What seems conspicuous in this dialogue is less male anxiety over female sexuality, as Poovey claims, but Austen's own powerful sense of the shame and degradation that threaten an improperly provided for and protected woman of passion and sensibility. Equally evident in this moment is Brandon's confusion as to the triangular similarities between Marianne and the two Elizas, for shortly after this conversation, the Colonel discovers the younger Eliza's indiscretions, transgressions that strike us as more evocative of Marianne than any recounted fact concerning Eliza's mother. The *younger* Eliza's fall (another reminder of Marianne), her elopement without marriage to Willoughby, is the moral danger threatening Marianne at Norland. Marianne's unchaperoned visit with Willoughby to Combe Magna suggests that her risk in this regard is quite real, that she is willing to take his love on credit—"it was every day implied"—and providing evidence that she might take the promise of marriage as good as the deed (186).

But it is not with the younger Eliza that the Colonel continues to draw comparisons: "If I am not deceived by the uncertainty, the partiality of tender recollection, there is a very strong resemblance between them. . . . This lady was one of my nearest relations" (205). The shift in tense—is, was—signifies the degree to which Brandon's own desire—but for



whom?—has destabilized his identity and self-possession. The younger Eliza was left to his care by her mother on her deathbed: “It was a valued, a precious trust to me; and gladly would I have discharged it in the strictest sense, by watching over her education myself . . . but I had no family, no home” (208). In other words, Colonel Brandon would have, had he been able, raised the young Eliza—the daughter of his brother’s wife, and his own foster sister—as what? As a niece, daughter (for after all, her mother should have been his wife), or as a potential wife for himself (shades of *Bleak House*)? One begins to fathom the depth of feeling, though by no means clearly understood or ever expressed, aroused in Colonel Brandon by Willoughby’s double sexual depredations on Eliza and Marianne.

By seducing Eliza, Willoughby violates the rules by which women of a certain class are given and taken in marriage. The class distinction is crucial, for had Eliza been assaulted by a highwayman, the matter would have been more appropriate for a hangman. Moreover, it is unlikely that Willoughby has broken any actual laws in this instance, Regency England having nothing similar to the American Mann Act. Where Willoughby has transgressed is in the realm of the largely unspoken understandings between men that govern proper conduct toward women. Such agreements are between men, for only a man can demand satisfaction from another in a court of law or on the dueling ground. However, these agreements often carry the weight of female approval, for when discussing the “circulation” of women in Austen’s world, it is very probable that one or more women are in fact organizing the actual alliance in question. What is more, the specific “circulation” of women in the upper-middle class strata of Austen’s novels, while it may benefit the property or dynastic interests of patriarchy, does not necessarily further the sexual or emotional interests of any male. One need only consider the bemused marital career of Edward Ferrars or Colonel Brandon’s pertinent misery in this regard.

Prior to the duel, Colonel Brandon had been observing for some time Willoughby’s greater romantic success with Marianne, new found object of the Colonel’s desire. For Colonel Brandon to discover that the seducer of his ward and niece (and possibly something more) is the same man who is presently besting him in the struggle for Marianne’s affections constitutes a state of affairs too excruciating for the Colonel to endure. I would argue that the duel between Brandon and Willoughby concerns only the interests and needs of the participants—and not the person on whose behalf the contest is actually fought. Bertram Wyatt-Brown in his study of

Southern honor asserts that the male protector's status is profoundly at risk in the promiscuity of his dependent women (53-54). Interestingly, because neither the duel nor Eliza's plight ever become public knowledge, one might conceivably conclude that Austen's characterization of Colonel Brandon is that of a man activated less by honor and shame than conscience and guilt. Wyatt-Brown characterizes the former as a primarily public form of social and self-valuation, while the latter is an internalized psychic mechanism, and largely, though not entirely, private (14). Thus, Colonel Brandon's motives are simultaneously personal—the inarticulate and violent expression of his desire—and also selfless, lacking in any regard for public opinion or appearances.

The silence surrounding the duel, a reticence kept by all of the participants, including Willoughby, is of considerable importance, both in terms of consequences for the characters in the novel, and how this peculiarly masculine silence signifies in the text. Angela Leighton has made much of silence in *Sense and Sensibility*, arguing that silences on Elinor's part indicate an inner reserve and integrity, whereas those emanating from Marianne suggest either nonconformity or emotional powerlessness (56). I would add that Marianne's inarticulateness at key moments constitutes a silence, or rather silencing, by which ideology and culture shapes the deviant and dreamer to its pattern. Colonel Brandon and Willoughby both keep their silence until their conflict over Marianne renews the violence of their rivalry.

The duel's silence is significant in that it offers an alternate perspective on Colonel Brandon's confused desire and outraged honor. The cost of maintaining silence on Willoughby's conduct and the duel is that it allows circulation of the pejorative rumor concerning the young Eliza, that she is, as Mrs. Jennings puts it, his "love child" (196). This silence becomes even more resonant when we think of Elinor's "sigh" at the "presumed necessity" of the duel. Elinor has failed to grasp that the struggle between Brandon and Willoughby is ongoing and has as much to do with Marianne as Eliza. The duel can do nothing to vindicate or defend Eliza's honor because it remains an intensely private affair between Brandon and Willoughby, a circumstance suggestive of the primary function of the subplot and its attendant conflict. In Austen's fiction, the competition for marriageable men by women always occupies the foreground of narrative, while the competition between men for women operates in a realm of secondary social intensity. The duel in *Sense and Sensibility* clandestinely ac-

knowledges both the reality of masculine competition as well as the violence that is often its adjunct. The account of the duel serves as a buried representation of a narrative event, one that powerfully signifies as a site of multiple conflicts and contests. But as a representation it must be displaced into the background of the narrative, precisely because it contains the force of a sexual competition between the Colonel and Willoughby over multiple women, an antagonism too dangerously destabilizing to be situated in the foreground of the novel.

In the end, the duel parallels Marianne's illness, and together this dyad of violence signifies the risks inherent in a social organization that harbors a body of idle gentry who act in varying degrees as predatory males on unprotected females. However, there is a signal difference between the idleness of Colonel Brandon (or Edward Ferrars) and Willoughby. Although Elinor Dashwood regards the duel as unnecessary, Austen makes clear that such violence is anything but frivolous given a class system that has nurtured a corps of gentlemen with little more to do than seduce and fight. Both the duel and Marianne's illness indicate the degree to which the social order accepts disorder when that disorder is a product of an ideology that puts a premium on the freedom from labor granted by capital. Indeed, the duel in the background of *Sense and Sensibility* is more exemplary than the illness in the foreground of the fierce scramble for wealth and power that erupts repeatedly in the novel. Whether we consider Mrs. John Dashwood's abrupt installation in Norland, Mrs. Ferrars' disinheriting some sons, the eviction of the Steeles, or Robert Ferrars' manipulation of his mother, the violence latent in the novel's jockeying for power has only its most explicit manifestation in the duel.

Edward Ferrars and Elinor Dashwood, however, constitute two important instances of those in Austen's world who refuse to play this game. Though he may have exercised weak judgment in undertaking a flirtation with Elinor, Edward Ferrars honorably continues his undesirable engagement with Lucy Steele, an obligation not only painful to him personally but one that would undoubtedly be disastrous for him financially were Mrs. Ferrars to learn of it. Elinor too acts contrary to her own self-interest in preserving Lucy Steele's confidence rather than using it for her own end of securing Edward in marriage. Such "opting out" of this game earns neither Edward nor Elinor much reward from the worldly sites of power, and although in the closing pages of the novel the happiness of vir-

tually all the novel's other inhabitants—save their own—is attested to, we may certainly conclude that their degree of felicity, like their income, “was as much, however, as was desired” (374).

#### NOTES

1. See Gay's discussion on the meaning of dueling in one especially active honor culture, Wilhelmine Germany, in *The Cultivation of Hatred* 3-33. V. G. Kiernan's richly insightful *The Duel in European History* traces the practice of dueling across many centuries and historical contexts. For a largely, but not exclusively, American perspective on honor violence, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown's *Southern Honor* (1982).

2. Claudia Johnson makes similar observations about the “old gentleman” in her chapter on the novel in *Jane Austen* (1988).

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