

Sources of Chapter Two of *Sense and Sensibility*

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At the start of chapter 2 of *Sense and Sensibility*, John Dashwood intends to give his three half-sisters one thousand pounds each, following a promise made to his late father, at his deathbed, to assist them as best he can. His wife, Fanny, “narrow-minded and selfish”¹ does not approve of this generosity. Her arguments, coupled with John’s own selfishness and coldheartedness, combine to reduce the sum proposed to five hundred pounds each; then to an annuity of one hundred pounds for their mother, Mrs. Dashwood, instead; then to “a present of fifty pounds, now and again” (p. 11). Financial aid is next discounted altogether; assistance will take the form of “looking out for a comfortable small house for them, helping them to move their things, and sending them presents of fish and game” (p. 12). Finally, John comes to feel that his sisters are in some ways better off than he is, and resolves on assisting them only by means of “such kind of neighbourly acts as his own wife pointed out” (p. 13).

Cecil Seronsy, discussing this example of Jane Austen’s dramatic method, considered that it showed “[S]ome interesting affinities with a famous scene in *King Lear*.”² In II.iv. Lear is told by Goneril that his hundred retainers must be reduced to fifty. Turning to Regan, he is told she wants the number cut to twenty-five. Lear is then asked why he needs ten, or five, or even one. Seronsy may be correct in thinking that Jane Austen had this scene in mind when writing *Sense and Sensibility*; certainly he makes a valid point when noting that the Dashwoods “represent another family, like Shakespeare’s, sharply divided along lines of character and fortune.”³ However, other sources can be found in two eighteenth-century novels that Jane Austen knew, Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison* and Charlotte Smith’s *Ethelinde*.

Chapter 2 may have been intended as a parody of an episode in *Sir Charles Grandison*. Letter 4 of Volume IV of Richardson’s novel concerns a visit made by Sir Charles to Sir Harry Beauchamp and his second wife.⁴ Sir Charles goes to negotiate on behalf of Sir Harry’s son, who has been forced to live abroad, without an allowance, because of his step-mother’s hostility. At the start of Sir Charles’s conversation with Lady Beauchamp, she is implacable. Gradually, however, stage by stage, Sir Charles coaxes and cajoles her into changing her position. She allows herself to be persuaded that Mr. Beauchamp can return to England, although she will not see him. Then she agrees that he may come to her house as a visitor. The financial provision for Mr. Beauchamp is set at two hundred pounds a year. Then it is raised to three hundred. Finally she allows Sir Harry to settle what he likes upon his son (this turns out to be six hundred a year) and to pay him his arrears. Chapter 2 of *Sense and Sensibility* can be traced as a comic inversion of this: step by step Fanny leads John Dashwood towards even greater

meanness, parodying how Sir Charles leads Lady Beauchamp towards ever greater generosity.

Charlotte Smith's novel *Ethelinde* is mentioned in Jane Austen's juvenile work "Catherine." In an article concentrating on the Juvenilia, A. D. McKillop noted in passing that "[W]hen Ethelinde's selfish brother argues to himself step by step that his sister needs no part of a newly acquired fortune, we are reminded of the John Dashwoods."⁵ This comment needs expansion. In *Ethelinde*, the heroine's brother, Harry Chesterville, marries the apparently penniless Victorine. The young couple, his father, and his sister suffer badly from poverty until Victorine's long-lost father, Harcourt, appears on the scene, anxious to share his wealth with his daughter and her husband, and his other relatives. Harcourt is also the half-brother of Mrs. Montgomery, the mother of the man Ethelinde loves. Chesterville does not wish to share Harcourt's wealth with his sister or anyone else, and justifies his attitude to himself in the following soliloquy:

What claim has Montgomery to any part of Harcourt's fortune? he is only the son of his half-sister, and certainly ought not to deprive my wife of any share of her inheritance. . . . As to his mother, what use has an old woman for money? If Harcourt gives her a little decent annuity, it is quite enough. As to Ethy indeed, I should be glad to be sure to have her properly provided for; and if Harcourt has a mind to make her a present of a thousand or fifteen hundred pounds it may not be amiss, but as she intends to mope away her life in that out of the way place with Montgomery's mother, I see no sort of use in her having more, and I cannot think it otherwise than an unjust robbery of my son, who has surely the best right to all his grandfather has, that I do not want: besides, I may have a large family, and 'twill be hard to have that money given to others which ought to be a provision for my younger children.⁶

Jane Austen seems to have drawn on this for some of the details in chapter 2. Like Chesterville, Fanny Dashwood has a low opinion of the claims of half-blood, "which she considered as no relationship at all" (p. 8). Common to both works are the ideas of a gift of a thousand pounds, the annuity for a mother, and the view that money paid to another may rob a child: "To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy, would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree" (p. 8). There is also the notion that money would be of use for a large family: "If he should have a numerous family, for instance, it would be a very convenient addition" (p. 9). It may be significant that John Dashwood's son is named Harry. Like Chesterville, Fanny envisages the possible recipients of bounty living retired from the world, and so not needing money: "They will keep no company, and can have no expenses of any kind!" (p. 12).

In the passage quoted above, Chesterville persuades "himself of the justice of what he desired" (III, p. 222), rather than succumbing to the arguments of another, as in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. But Jane Austen could have found a further model for the situation of the Dashwoods, and some details of their conversation, in another episode in *Ethelinde*. Colonel Chesterville, Ethelinde's father, has an elder brother, Lord Hawkhurst, who responds unsympathetically when asked for help. When he hears that the Colonel has died, he feels some remorse, which

alarms his wife, a "proud, selfish and unfeeling woman" (II, p. 189). Like John Dashwood, Hawkhurst is essentially a coldhearted man, but is nevertheless capable of some finer feelings. As his wife "dreaded the expense he might feel himself bound to engage in on behalf of the children of his brother" (II, p. 189)—Harcourt has not yet made his appearance—she tries to dissuade him from any generous impulses. When Lord Hawkhurst says, "He was of my own family," his wife replies, "You always treated him as such I am sure while it was in your power without hurting your own children; which certainly nobody could expect" (II, p. 190). When he thinks about helping Ethelinde and Harry, she says, "I suppose they will be taken care of. . . . You know, My Lord, that with such a family as you have of your own, you cannot in reason be expected to do more than assist any other friends they may have" (II, pp. 190-1). Like Fanny Dashwood, Lady Hawkhurst argues that charity begins and ends at home, and suggests only the vaguest non-pecuniary assistance. Although, like John Dashwood, Lord Hawkhurst has a conscience—indeed, probably a better one—he is too weak to oppose his selfish wife.

So, in writing *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen appears to have drawn on the language and details of Harry Chesterville's soliloquy and Lady Hawkhurst's arguments, and on the situation of the Hawkhursts, while using this material to parody an episode in *Sir Charles Grandison*. That there is also a parallel with Shakespeare demonstrates the capacity of Jane Austen's art to make multiple allusions.

NOTES

- ¹ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, ed. R. W. Chapman. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 5. Subsequent references are incorporated into the text.
- ² Cecil C. Seronsy, "Jane Austen's Technique," *Notes and Queries*, cci (1956), 303.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 305.
- ⁴ See Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (London, 1972), II, pp. 272-86. For an account of Jane Austen's use of Richardson in *Sense and Sensibility*, see Jocelyn Harris, *Jane Austen's Art of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 34-71.
- ⁵ A. D. McKillop, "Allusions to Prose Fiction in Jane Austen's *Volume the Third*," *Notes and Queries*, cxcvi (1951), 429.
- ⁶ Charlotte Smith, *Ethelinde*, 3 vols. (Dublin, 1790), III, p. 222. Subsequent references are incorporated into the text.