



Playing with Genesis: Sonship, Liberty, and Primogeniture in *Sense and Sensibility*

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THE ISSUE OF PRIMOGENITURE in Jane Austen's novels is most often discussed in terms of its effect on women, especially daughters. Shifting the focus to sons, however, allows us to read Austen's narratives in light of the seventeenth-century debate about primogeniture and its effect on sons, in particular younger sons. The Genesis narrative, newly translated within the King James Version of the English Bible, became the flashpoint for both sides of the argument—a debate that ultimately led to a change in ideas about life, liberty, and property. Although each of Austen's novels features at least one younger son, echoes of the debate seem most prevalent within *Sense and Sensibility*. Austen's portrayal of sonship therein plays with both the Genesis narrative and the debate it fostered. Rather than taking sides, however, the novelist combines and synthesizes ideas in order to represent the complex effects of primogeniture—or power over property and wealth—on a young man's use or abuse of liberty.

Austen concerns herself with three types of liberty, one of her favorite themes: self-determination or the freedom to choose, self-realization or the freedom to act on one's choices, and self-perfection or the freedom to make moral choices.¹ Like the sons in Genesis, each elder and younger son in the novel faces to some degree the tension between his freedom to choose and act as he pleases and his responsibility to do so rightly. For Austen, a son's successful pursuit of manhood ultimately depends on his expression of liberty.

Property is at issue with primogeniture, and three methods of tenure, or the manner in which property in land is held, existed in England prior to Jane

Austen's time. Gavelkind, which allowed all of the sons to inherit equally, predated primogeniture and predominated up to the Norman conquest of 1066. Borough-English was a reversal of primogeniture, allowing the youngest rather than the eldest son to inherit. Primogeniture, a feudal practice, became popular after 1066 as a way to preserve the estate intact over generations. The Statute of Wills in 1540 gave landowners more liberty in the disposal of property; although it allowed the eldest son to be "entirely cut off from inheriting," it did not significantly reduce the practice of primogeniture in England.²

The primary challenge to primogeniture came during the contentious seventeenth century that challenged the monarchy itself. A fierce debate took place during this momentous period, with its civil wars, execution of the king, Interregnum with a ruling commonwealth, and restoration of the monarchy. More than a debate about the inheritance of property, the primogeniture debate of the seventeenth century was the public forum for a power struggle concerning the best kind of government for England: an absolute monarchy or a limited monarchy, a denial of individual "natural" liberty in the former case and an affirmation of it in the latter. According to Alister McGrath, this period was one in which "the Bible was seen as a social, economic, and political text" wherein both sides—for and against the English monarchy—sought support for their arguments. The English people saw the Bible as "the foundation of every aspect of English culture" (3). As such the King James Bible shaped everything from the public debate about primogeniture to the private imagination of a young novelist as she wrote about its effect on her characters.

FILMER AND LOCKE

As an avid reader and astute observer of her era's culture wars, Jane Austen undoubtedly knew this history well. First of all, she would have had access through her father's extensive library to the two major opposing voices in the debate: Sir Robert Filmer and John Locke. Moreover, the vagaries of primogeniture would likely have been a topic of conversation in her home, especially given the Austen family history. In *Becoming Jane Austen*, Jon Spence relates "the whole sorry story" (1) of her great-grandparents, Elizabeth and John Austen. When John, "the presumed heir to the Austen family fortune" (3), died of consumption in 1704, his father singled out the eldest grandson, Jack, to be the primary heir, virtually ignoring their other six children—five sons and one daughter. By requiring that Jack Austen be removed from the family home to receive a gentleman's education, the will's terms guaranteed that the eldest son would become a stranger who, according to Spence, "seems to have

been indifferent to the plight of his brothers and sister" (3). This controversial family background adds a bit of drama to a conversation in which the Austen family—like most informed and educated members of society—would have participated.

Finally, many commentators have noted especially her connection to Locke.³ Jocelyn Harris argues that "[i]t would be remarkable if Jane Austen knew nothing of Locke, whose *Essay [Concerning Human Understanding]* was the most influential book of the eighteenth century, except for the Bible" (2). Moreover, Filmer's *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings* was so pervasive that Locke devoted the entire first treatise of his *Two Treatises of Government* to detecting and overthrowing what he refers to on his title page as "The False Principles and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer and His Followers." Austen, intelligent and well read, would have been knowledgeable about both sides of this argument.

Filmer and Locke have in common what most English voices in this debate share: a reliance on the King James Version's Genesis narrative to validate their arguments for or against primogeniture. Both thinkers use Genesis in their arguments, analyzing and interpreting its narrative representation of sonship beginning with Adam, and both focus on younger sons in their discussion of primogeniture. Both also take for granted "that the narratives of the Bible are historically true, that they are internally consistent, and that they provide binding precedents for political action" (Austin 36). Filmer and Locke ground their arguments, however, on two completely opposite ideas about liberty.

Calling the idea of natural liberty "a vulgar opinion," Filmer argues in *Patriarcha* that "[such liberty] contradicts the doctrine and history of the Holy Scriptures, the constant practice of all ancient monarchies, and the very principles of the law of nature." In a close and literal reading of Genesis, Filmer uses the narrative representation of Adam, the first patriarch, as the foundation for his argument that (1) monarchy is the sole acceptable (and divinely approved) form of government, and (2) not liberty but subjection (first to one's father and then to one's king) is the natural state of man.

In a close reading of the same biblical narrative, Locke's *First Treatise* attempts to refute each of *Patriarcha's* points and begins by accusing it either of advocating slavery or of not being serious: "I should have taken Sr. Rt: Filmer's *Patriarcha* as any other Treatise, which would perswade all Men, that they are Slaves, and ought to be so, for such another exercise of Wit, . . . rather than for a serious Discourse meant in earnest" (141). In *The Idea of Freedom*, Mortimer J. Adler contends, however, that Locke's most incisive commentary about liberty

is in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*: “Freedom,’ Locke maintains, ‘is not what Sir Robert Filmer tells us: ‘A liberty for everyone to do what he lists, to live as he pleases, and not to be tied by laws.’ . . . ‘The end of law,’ Locke holds, is not to abolish or restrain but to preserve and enlarge freedom,’ and for all ‘being capable of laws, where there is no law, there is no freedom’” (247).

Using the same principle—his understanding of the role of law—Locke also refutes Filmer’s idea of primogeniture, but Neil Wood in *John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism* argues for a conservative refutation: “Far from demolishing primogeniture, Locke only maintained that it existed by the civil law of the land, not by the law of God or nature. In doing so he was opposing Filmer’s position that primogeniture existed by the command of God and nature and was the only legitimate means of transmitting political power and property beginning with Adam” (80). Accordingly, Locke ends the *First Treatise* with a chapter titled “Who Heir?” in which he uses the Genesis narrative to support the younger son’s claim to succession: “[T]he Ancient and Prime right of Lineal Succession to Paternal Government belongs to Younger Brothers as well as Elder, and may be Re-established in any Man living: For whatever Younger Brothers, by Ancient and Prime Right of Lineal Succession, may have as well as the Elder, that every Man living may have a right to, by Lineal Succession, and Sir Robert as well as any other” (259).

At issue for Locke is a system that inhibits a younger son’s—and by extension every man’s—life and liberty by its denial of his individual right to inherit property; for Filmer, a dangerous liberty that poses a threat to the God-given authority of heads of state and family (king and father), and consequently poses a threat to the stability of society. Austen’s portrayal of sons reflects Locke’s claim that without law, there is no freedom. But where reason, according to Locke, is the law that guides natural liberty, Austen concerns herself with another kind of law that guides a person from within—the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, the Beatitudes—and with the way in which these laws guide those who live in society rather than in the state of nature. Her narratives reflect Locke’s assertion that primogeniture is a civil rather than a divine law because she depicts the way in which it is subject to the whim of human will. Austen, however, also shares with Filmer a concern that natural liberty—without the inner law necessary for making moral choices—enacts a dangerous kind of lawlessness that undermines stability in relationships, families, and communities.

Although both sides—for and against primogeniture—used the Genesis narrative to support their views, its portrayal of sonship actually favors the younger over the elder son. Genesis features several narratives in which the elder son is overturned by the younger, making the argument for primogeniture an uphill battle. Michael Austin notes, “In [Genesis] alone, younger sons supplant their older brothers no fewer than seven times, beginning with Abel . . . and ending with Ephraim” (20). And Robert Alter, Austin points out, “remark[s] that . . . one of the most important narrative threads in Genesis is ‘the reversal of the iron law of primogeniture’ and ‘the election through some devious twist of destiny of a younger son to carry on the line’” (20).

Austen’s continuous reading and re-reading of biblical narratives—a habit among literate English citizens in her time—would have had a powerful effect on her imagination. With her penchant for irony, she would find especially appealing the “devious twist of destiny” that brings about a reversal of fortune for sons. While it is unlikely that Austen sat down to write her novel with direct parallels in mind between Jacob and Esau’s Genesis narrative and her novel, hers is a memory that combines and synthesizes ideas to imagine and create something new. As Jocelyn Harris notes, “Jane Austen takes elements from other books, grounds them in observation, and complicates them by repetition, variation, and full orchestration” (216). The novelist synthesizes elements from the Genesis narrative in order to represent varying views of sonship and primogeniture. Patterns that she observes become useful plot devices that enhance the complex development of her characters and the dialectical presentation of her themes. Applying the Jacob and Esau narrative to a reading of primogeniture in *Sense and Sensibility* brings to light telling interpretive possibilities of this kind of process.

JACOB AND ESAU

The Jacob and Esau narrative continues a pattern in Genesis of a younger son usurping the rights of an elder one. Isaac, father of Jacob and Esau, overturns the entitlement of his elder brother, Ishmael. When Isaac’s wife Rebekah is pregnant with their twin sons, she receives a divine oracle telling her that the elder son (Esau) will serve the younger (Jacob). To complicate matters, Esau carelessly sells his birthright to his younger brother in return for what amounts to a meal of bread and lentils. Later, when Isaac is old and blind, he calls on Esau to receive the blessing that the elder son is entitled to. Rebekah, however, hatches a plan so that Jacob, her favorite son, can receive

the blessing in Esau's place. The plan works, but while Jacob gains a blessing, he loses a home because he must leave in order to save himself from Esau's wrath. It is the first in a series of reversals for Jacob.

Away from his over-protective mother, Jacob finds that rather than being entitled to the property of others, he may be denied what he labors for and earns through his own hard work. He becomes the victim of a deception by his mother's brother Laban, a deception that causes him to suffer a seven-year delay in gaining Rachel, Laban's younger daughter, the wife whom he contracted to marry. Laban also changes the amount of his wages, in effect cheating him of what he has earned.

The climax in the narrative comes when Jacob must face Esau, who has come looking for him with a retinue of four hundred men. Jacob's fear provokes a crisis, and he experiences a transformation as he wrestles with an angel and prevails, earning a name change to represent the change within. When he meets his brother, whom he has attempted to placate with gifts, Jacob discovers to his amazement that Esau has forgiven him, which suggests that Esau, too, has changed and grown although his transformation is not represented in the narrative. Both brothers, then, err, suffer, change, and experience redemption, gaining thereby a more spiritual birthright—one that cannot be bought or sold, lost or stolen.

The theme of liberty plays an important role in the Jacob/Esau narrative as characters make choices to achieve the results they seek. Esau's selling of his birthright to Jacob represents the most striking choice because of its rarity. Hebrew Bible scholar Reuben Ahroni finds it to be "utterly incongruous with Biblical laws and customs which relate to primogeniture . . . and [seemingly] the only recorded case of this nature" (323). Esau's flagrant disregard for law seems puzzling, and to explain his "enigmatic behavior," Ahroni points to liberty. Although Esau is fated to "serve the younger" Jacob—as his mother learns from God before her sons are born—"the Biblical doctrine with regard to human freedom seems to hinge upon a dialectical tension. . . . God's foreknowledge does not preclude human freedom: man is endowed with the power of self-determination and he is possessed of the ability to choose between conflicting courses of action. Hence his spiritual autonomy and moral responsibility" (325–26).

In his exposition of this Genesis narrative, Walter Russell Bowie also focuses on Esau's freedom to choose—and its consequences: "Esau had despised his birthright at one critical moment of choice, and he himself had made possible the success of Jacob's plot. . . . So moral causes—what a man does or fails to

do—go on to their implacable conclusions” (684). Austen also concerns herself with this tension between self-determination, the natural freedom to choose, and self-perfection, the moral freedom to choose rightly—acquired internally by a process that includes adhering to the laws mentioned above, suffering consequences, examining oneself, and undergoing transformation. Just as readers may observe this process of acquiring moral freedom in Jacob’s narrative, so Austen suggests it with her portrayal of Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars.

Primogeniture also affects another kind of freedom—self-realization—which may, in turn, impact the other two kinds of liberty. Self-realization is a freedom that depends on circumstances; without the economic circumstances afforded by his inheritance, the choices a son determines will be difficult to enact. For example, Edward Ferrars is financially unable to marry with only the living provided by Colonel Brandon. He must have monetary support from his mother—a legacy from the inheritance that should have been his—in order to live a reasonably comfortable married life with Elinor. Yet Edward’s refusal to break his engagement with Lucy Steele despite the threat of disinheritance also indicates that economic circumstances may make the moral choice more difficult but cannot prevent it.

Like the Genesis narrative, *Sense and Sensibility* represents the effects of primogeniture on sons as they react or respond to the circumstances surrounding this practice. Both elder and younger sons bear the effects of the unpredictable and often unjust choices made by those who control—or who wish to control—the family inheritance. Given the conflicting choices presented by his expression of liberty, a son faces a crucial test in pursuit of manhood.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

The opening episode in *Sense and Sensibility* turns on the issue of inheritance for Henry Dashwood, a nephew in the role of a son to his uncle, who owns an estate that Henry will inherit. Although the Norland estate seems bound by the terms of primogeniture, its owner has liberty to dispose of it otherwise, as indicated by the fact that he “was neither so unjust, nor so ungrateful, as to leave his estate from his nephew;—but he left it to him on such terms as destroyed half the value of the bequest” (4). The “devious twist of destiny” suggests itself from the fact that the “whole [estate] was tied up for the benefit of” Henry Dashwood’s grandson, “little Harry,” whose occasional visits and baby tricks “outweigh[ed] all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters” (4). With this opening passage,

Austen shows her readers that the institution of primogeniture cannot protect its beneficiary, Henry Dashwood, from the vagaries of human nature, which may unintentionally negate the benefits of primogeniture. This instance is the first example of a theme that recurs in the Jacob/Esau narrative and *Sense and Sensibility*: an emotional attachment or favoritism that leads to the transfer of inheritance, property, or right from someone who justly deserves it to someone who does not. Younger sons Jacob and Robert Ferrars, favored by their mothers, exemplify this theme.

Henry Dashwood dies before he can gain financially from his inheritance, leaving his wife and daughters with very little economic security, and Austen uses this circumstance to introduce the elder half—Edward Ferrars—of her first younger/elder son pairing. Of the novel's two such pairings, only this one—with Edward and Robert Ferrars—includes both sons in the actual narrative. From Colonel Brandon, the other younger son, readers learn the history of his elder brother, who dies before the narrative begins. The timing of this disclosure, however, makes it quite dramatic. We do not hear it until the latter half of the novel, and for most of the novel, the evidence suggests that Colonel Brandon is not a younger but an elder son. He is the “rich” (36), thirty-five-year-old owner of Delaford, and although we receive snippets of gossip and “hints of past injuries and disappointments” (50) from various characters, readers do not know his family history. By withholding this information until he relates the story to Elinor, Austen allows her readers to make assumptions about Colonel Brandon that may not be correct. His revelation allows them to re-read his life and character from the viewpoint of the younger son debate.

Does Colonel Brandon fit the seventeenth-century stereotype of the wretched younger son? When we first meet him, Brandon is “silent and grave” (34), with “serious” but “mild” manners and a “reserve [that] appeared rather the result of some oppression of spirits, than of any natural gloominess of temper” (50). Based on their conversations, Elinor rightly attributes this oppression to “disappointed love” (55). Later, Colonel Brandon's story confirms that the loss of his beloved Eliza (not the loss of an inheritance) causes his wretchedness. Both Brandon and Eliza are victims of primogeniture in ways that both reflect and refute customary patterns.

A customary pattern suggests itself with Eliza, who like many young heiresses (Willoughby's Miss Grey, for example), falls prey to desperate heirs. As guardian to Eliza and her fortune, Colonel Brandon's father concerns himself less with caring for her welfare than with marrying her off to his elder son in order to preserve the financially imperiled Delaford estate. Although aware

of his younger son's attachment to Eliza, he separates them (after a foiled elopement) and isolates her, pressuring her until she agrees to marry his heir. By marrying the woman who loves his brother, the elder son usurps the younger son's rightful claim to her heart. Brandon suffers a graver injustice than the Genesis narrative's Jacob: Jacob's marriage to his beloved Rachel is delayed seven years, but it does eventually happen; Brandon's hope for a marriage to Eliza is utterly destroyed.

Given this family history of injustice, Brandon might have become the stereotypical angry and resentful younger son who haunts the family home with his presence. But like Jacob, Brandon is exiled from home. After the attempted elopement, Brandon's father banishes him to live with a distant relative. Later, Brandon chooses to exile himself, joining the army and leaving England for India. He wants to give his elder brother's ill-conceived marriage a chance, hoping that distance and time will lessen his and Eliza's memory of the attachment that threatens it. Despite the wrong committed against him, Brandon, the usurped *younger* son, behaves honorably.

When Colonel Brandon returns home too late to save Eliza, he suffers a loss far greater than that of an estate, which, ironically, he gains five years later when his brother's death leaves him in "possession of the family property" (208). The family property, however, is not the inheritance he feels most responsible for. His promise to a dying Eliza to care for her illegitimate daughter, also named Eliza, becomes his most important trust—even more important than Delaford. As he explains to Elinor, the child "was a valued, a precious trust to me" (208). Ironically, both responsibilities come to him, not because of his own but because of others' choices and actions.

With the Brandon narrative, Austen seems more interested in portraying the failings of the elder son (and father) than the failings of primogeniture. Both men treat young heiress Eliza as a means to their economic ends, abusing their liberty by choosing and acting irresponsibly towards her and towards Brandon, the younger son. Colonel Brandon, on the other hand, exemplifies the highest kind of liberty for Austen—self-perfecting liberty, acquired through the habit of making moral choices that require sacrifice and suffering. Austen ultimately redeems that suffering and sacrifice with a happy marriage to his second love, Marianne.

Unlike Colonel Brandon, Robert Ferrars, the other younger son in the novel, fits the Genesis pattern wherein younger sons supplant the elder ones. As John Dashwood notes, "Can any thing be more galling to the spirit of a man, . . . than to see his younger brother in possession of an estate which

might have been his own? Poor Edward! I feel for him sincerely” (269). However, with her representation of Robert, Austen also plays with the stereotype mentioned above. Rather than being angry and resentful, Robert Ferrars is a gay and silly but cleverly self-interested coxcomb, and he is perceived as such by the novel’s most reliable character, Elinor: “He addressed her with easy civility, and twisted his head into a bow which assured her as plainly as words could have done, that he was exactly the coxcomb she had heard him described to be by Lucy” (250). Unlike the stereotypical younger son, Robert cannot hang around his brother’s home because Edward has not inherited any property; however, he does hang around his mother, subtly reinforcing Mrs. Ferrars’s concerns about her elder son’s ways with negative commentary about him—commentary that he repeats to Elinor, “talking of his brother, and lamenting the extreme *gaucherie* which he really believed kept him from mixing in proper society.” Robert comments, “I often tell my mother, when she is grieving about it, . . . “If you had only sent [Edward] to Westminster . . . instead of sending him to Mr. Pratt’s, all this would have been prevented,” . . . and my mother is perfectly convinced of her error” (250–51).

Robert Ferrars’s relentless self-promotion also plays on his mother’s natural favoritism—favoritism mirrored by Jacob’s mother Rebekah as well. Unlike Jacob, whose struggle for redemption is one of the main teachings of his Genesis narrative, Robert seems irredeemable. No wrestling with angels for Robert; rather than support his brother, he chooses to fan the flames of his mother’s growing disaffection with her elder son and reap the economic blessings that should be Edward’s.

Robert is contemptible not because he is a victimized younger son but because he is a far less virtuous, less noble, and less worthy son than Edward, the elder son he displaces. Without the slightest pang of conscience or concern—indeed, he seems incapable of feeling as he ought toward Edward—Robert agrees to accept his brother’s inheritance. From John Dashwood we also learn that Mrs. Ferrars expects Robert to accept as well her choice of the Honorable Miss Morton, only daughter of Lord Morton (with a dowry of 30,000 pounds) to be his wife: “Certainly, there can be no difference [to Miss Morton]; for Robert will now to all intents and purposes be considered as the eldest son;—and as to any thing else, they are both very agreeable young men, I do not know that one is superior to the other” (297).

But Austen has up her sleeve another ironic “devious twist of destiny.” Robert Ferrars, having usurped his elder brother’s claim to the inheritance, proceeds to overturn his mother’s plans for a marriage to Miss Morton by

supplanting Edward in the heart of his fiancée, Lucy Steele, whose secret engagement causes Edward to lose his inheritance in the first place. It's a double devious twist: Lucy Steele, the single-mindedly self-interested schemer, orchestrates the entire affair so as not to lose the fortune that is, no doubt, what made Edward so attractive. She embodies the very attitude that John Dashwood attributes to Miss Morton—that, but for the inheritance, which Robert now has gained, the two sons are, in effect, interchangeable. Like John Dashwood, Lucy believes “there can be no difference”—other than the money, that is. The devious twist of fate that releases Edward from his unfortunate engagement to Lucy represents a kind of poetic justice: it allows the two most undeserving characters—Lucy and Robert—to marry each other as well as the two most deserving—Elinor and Edward.

Edward, however, must earn his happiness, for he becomes the deserving older son by suffering and wrestling with his own private angels—or demons. With Austen's depiction of Edward, she offers a glimpse of something we miss in the Genesis narrative: the elder son's transformation. In Genesis, readers understand that Esau has changed because he forgives Jacob, but we do not know how or why this transformation occurs. Both Esau and Edward manifest a kind of recklessness regarding a choice that both the Genesis narrative's author and Austen consider to be very important: whom to marry. Moreover, the theme of deception in matters of marriage is also important in both texts.

Like Esau, whose marriage to Hittite women “causes a grief of mind unto Isaac and Rebekah” (Gen. 26:35), Edward expresses natural liberty by choosing a woman that his mother deems unsuitable. One commentator even suggests that Esau's loss of his blessing is connected to his marriage and that his parents actually conspire to give Jacob the inheritance—that Rebekah's plan is not one that deceives her husband but one that he approves—because of Esau's marital choices (Zucker 47–48). This commentator's reading offers yet another parallel between the two narratives, for Edward also loses his blessing—or inheritance—when his mother disinherits him for his refusal to end the engagement with Lucy.

But the theme of deception regarding marriage, although portrayed differently in each narrative, seems to preoccupy both authors. Laban tricks Jacob into marrying Le'ah, his elder daughter, because, he says, “It must not be done so in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn” (Gen. 29:26), an irony that makes itself quite plain to readers who recall Jacob's collusion with his mother in tricking Esau out of his blessing. The deceiver becomes the deceived; the perpetrator, the victim. Jacob, who has labored seven years for Rachel, must labor another seven in order to marry her.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, as in her other novels, Austen seems preoccupied with any secrecy or deception by which a son abuses his liberty regarding marriage. *Sense and Sensibility* features multiple examples: Brandon's elopement with Eliza; Willoughby's secret seduction and subsequent deception of Eliza's illegitimate teen-aged daughter, also named Eliza; Willoughby's deception of Marianne in publicly behaving as though he and Marianne are secretly engaged but then discarding her for Miss Grey and her fortune; Edward's secret engagement to Lucy Steele; Robert's elopement with Lucy Steele. Although differing in severity, each choice enacts an abuse of liberty, breaking a law that requires honesty and transparency in matters touching upon the institution of marriage. In each case, an impulsive choice made at a decisive moment potentially affects not only the son's future prospects but also—and more importantly—his character. In the case of two sons, Willoughby and Robert Ferrars, the damage to character seems irreversible. Brandon and Edward, however, redeem themselves with future choices—but not without first suffering the consequences of previous ones. We have already considered Brandon's redemption. But Edward's choice to keep his promise to Lucy, despite her inadequacies and despite his mother's bribery and threats, manifests the virtue that ultimately redeems him and makes him worthy of the superior Elinor. When faced with conflicting choices—between keeping his promise and keeping his inheritance, between marrying for duty and marrying for love—Edward makes the difficult decision. Although Austen uses the younger brother's deceitful trick to save Edward from the consequences of his choice, his willingness to make it, despite the high cost to himself, expresses the right kind of liberty. Edward earns thereby Elinor's love and respect.

But Jane Austen the realist never allows her readers to forget that another important kind of liberty—self-realization—depends on economic circumstances and, at least partly, on luck. Throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, characters discuss the importance of a sufficient income, a conversation that recurs in all subsequent novels. Although Marianne and Elinor disagree on their definitions of “wealth” and “competence,” the income sufficient for a comfortable married life (91), their conversation enacts a truth for Austen: within the realm of her novels, the liberty afforded by this income is essential to happiness. Love alone is never enough for happiness in an Austen novel, but neither is the wealth afforded by the inheritance of an elder son. She presents Marianne's plan for happiness—“[a] proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters” (91)—with a gentle irony.

With younger sons, Austen portrays a pattern of practices springing

from the debate about primogeniture. This pattern includes the need for a profession, the possible marriage to an heiress, the tendency, especially if the father has patronage, to choose the clerical profession, and the utility of the military service for removing younger sons from the home. She places all the sons in her novels in trying circumstances—social, economic, and moral—to test their use of liberty as they aim for manhood. Both the Jacob/Esau narrative and *Sense and Sensibility* suggest that to pursue manhood successfully, a son must be willing to struggle with difficult circumstances, to learn from failure, and to acquire the inner liberty necessary for making responsible and moral choices. Both Colonel Brandon and Edward Ferrars fit the profile for this pursuit while Brandon's elder brother and Edward's younger one do not.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Jane Austen is an equal-opportunity author, giving her readers both an elder and a younger son to admire and one of each to condemn. The novel reflects Austen's awareness of the debate regarding primogeniture's effect on sonship and of the King James Genesis narrative that defined it. More interested in playing with the debate than resolving it, her purpose is, nevertheless, a serious one: to illustrate that despite the constraints that primogeniture may place upon sons, they nevertheless possess the liberty to make choices—ethical choices that may cause them to suffer, or selfish choices that may cause others to do so.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of these types of liberty, see Mortimer J. Adler's *The Idea of Freedom*.
2. See the *Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia's* entries for "Gavelkind," "Borough-English," and "Primogeniture."
3. See for example, D. D. Devlin's *Jane Austen and Education*, Irene Collins's *Jane Austen and the Clergy*, and Tony Tanner's *Jane Austen*.

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