



## Fun and Speculation: *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* as Revisions

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CLAIRE TOMALIN BRISKLY DESCRIBES my task: “talking about [Austen’s] revisions” of the first versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, “Elinor and Marianne” and “First Impressions,” is “almost entirely guesswork. You can have fun speculating . . . but proving anything is like trying to carve a solid shape out of jell[*o*]” (154). Of course, Tomalin is absolutely right, but any of Austen’s readers knows that speculation is an entertaining card game played by characters in Austen’s *The Watsons* and *Mansfield Park*. And speculating about the epistolary origins of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* can afford both entertaining and useful readings of the finished works.

I should begin by noting that in this analysis, I take for granted Brian Southam’s assumption that both works existed first as collections of letters.<sup>1</sup> Most critics accept on its face the family anecdote about “Elinor and Marianne” as an epistolary work, of course, though the evidence is less clear for “First Impressions.” But, like Southam, I find it suggestive, for example, that when the Rev. George Austen sent “First Impressions” to the publisher Cadell, he compared his daughter’s work with Frances Burney’s epistolary *Evelina*, rather than with Burney’s omnisciently narrated *Cecilia*—her most popular novel—or *Camilla*—her most recent novel (Southam, 58).<sup>2</sup>

The importance of letters in the finished novels helps us to imagine the elusive sources. Of course, all of Austen’s work creates drama with the sending or receiving of letters. But, more so than in Austen’s later novels, *Sense*

and *Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* emphasize such scenes. Southam points out that *Sense and Sensibility* contains twenty-one actual or summarized letters, and *Pride and Prejudice*, forty-four, a preponderance of letters unmatched in any of the other novels (62). Letters as physical objects serve as props, and characters speculate endlessly about their contents.

Epistolary fiction is notoriously voyeuristic—half the thrill of a novel by Richardson, for example, is the titillating prospect of reading someone else's mail. The predatory Mr. B. often seems as rapacious toward Pamela's letters as toward the heroine herself, and Austen learned a lot from her predecessor. Even in Austen's later narratives, like *Emma*, letters are seldom completely private. Were it not resisted, Mrs. Elton's officious intrusion on Mrs. Bates's domestic arrangements—she insists on sending her own servant to fetch the family's letters from the post—would bring to light Jane Fairfax's correspondence with Frank Churchill, and necessarily their secret engagement as well.

Letters are even more public property in these first two novels. In *Sense and Sensibility*, instead of asking Marianne a direct question about her relationship with Willoughby, Elinor and her mother conjecture about their correspondence. The optimistic Mrs. Dashwood construes Willoughby's *failure* to write to Marianne as *proof* of their engagement: because Sir John Middleton often brings the family post, the *absence* of letters must conceal a secret engagement (80; 84). Elinor remains paralyzed with silent doubt about the understanding between her sister and Willoughby until the action of the novel moves to London. The evening of their arrival, Elinor sees Marianne handing an envelope with "a large W in the direction" to the footman for the two-penny post (161). The opposite of her mother on so many occasions, here Elinor takes a physical letter, arguably better evidence than no letter at all, as proof that her mother has always been right: a definite engagement must indeed exist. Ironically, of course, both sorts of evidence lead to an inaccurate conclusion, despite even the prudent Colonel Brandon's making a similar judgment when he too happens to see one of Marianne's notes to Willoughby (173).

In this claustrophobic society, Mrs. Jennings manages to find material for days of speculation after watching Colonel Brandon read a letter at breakfast (70-71) and she can evoke fresh floods of tears in Marianne merely by commenting, as she holds out a letter to her miserable guest, "Now, my dear, I bring you something that I am sure will do you good"—because the letter is not from Marianne's jilting suitor, but merely from her mother (202). Of course, having one's letters served up with breakfast is how Willoughby's relationship with Marianne is discovered by his fiancée Miss Grey (328).

In both novels, the narrative frequently summarizes letters from the epistolary sources. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, Austen characterizes in detail Sir John Middleton's letter inviting his cousin to take Barton Cottage on easy terms:

The letter was . . . written in the true spirit of friendly accommodation. He understood that she was in need of a dwelling, and though the house he now offered her was merely a cottage, he assured her that everything should be done to it which she might think necessary, if the situation pleased her. He earnestly pressed her, after giving the particulars of the house and garden, to come with her daughters to Barton Park, the place of his own residence. . . . He seemed really anxious to accommodate them, and the whole of his letter was written in so friendly a style as could not fail of giving pleasure to his cousin. . . . (23)

When revising "Elinor and Marianne," Austen must have wanted to retain this letter's illustration of Sir John's generous spirit, but in summarizing, she seems almost to transcribe. A. Walton Litz points out that "[s]ome of the long speeches [in *Sense and Sensibility*] suggest an imperfect assimilation of the original letters, and the contrasts in style between adjacent passages are quite striking" (Litz, 73). Such "imperfect assimilation" is also striking in summaries like this one. I shall give just one more of many apparent summaries of pre-existing letters in *Sense and Sensibility*. After Mrs. Dashwood learns by letter of Willoughby's betrayal of Marianne's affection, Austen tells us,

To give the feelings or the language of Mrs. Dashwood on receiving and answering Elinor's letter, would be only to give a repetition of what her daughters had already felt and said. . . . Long letters from her, quickly succeeding each other, arrived to tell all that she suffered and thought; to express her anxious solicitude for Marianne, and entreat she would bear up with fortitude under this misfortune. (212-13)

Consider Austen's decisions about letters and epistolary summaries in the early chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*. While the verbatim transcript of Caroline Bingley's insinuating invitation to dinner serves to illustrate her characteristic archness, which here takes the form of snide antifeminism ("a whole day's tête à tête between two women can never end without a quarrel" [30]), there seems no reason to follow up with the full text of Jane's letter announcing her cold (31): the second letter could easily have been summarized. At times, the narrative reads almost as a list of the letters that formed the earlier version of the novel. While Jane remains ill at Netherfield, for

example, we are told that Elizabeth “requested to have a note sent to Longbourn, desiring her mother to visit Jane. . . . The note was immediately dispatched” (41). Two days later, still during this Netherfield visit, two more letters are summarized (59).

In the letters that survive in both texts, spelling, grammar, style, and even handwriting reveal character, of course. Speaking of Austen’s own correspondence, Mary Favret writes, “We find . . . frequent references to the length, penmanship and general presentation of letters. We might infer that the letter-writer revealed as much in the appearance as in the content of a missive—and perhaps more” (135). Long after the novelist’s death, Austen’s niece fondly remembered—and envied—her aunt’s precision in folding and sealing her letters (Austen, Caroline 7). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Darcy’s careful writing, whether to his sister in a routine letter or to Elizabeth Bennet in his elaborate self-justification, is an indication of the steadiness of his character (48; 196). Elizabeth’s failure to interpret this sign correctly is characteristic of her judgment at these points in the novel: she rather applauds the slapdash epistolary style Mr. Bingley confesses to (47-48).

Style is substance. Marianne’s flowing script in her imprudent London notes to Willoughby is as significant as the texts themselves. Lydia Bennet’s letters to her sister Kitty remain mysterious—more negative evidence—because they are “much too full of lines under the words to be made public” (238). Lucy Steele, who shrewdly exploits her fiancé’s letter as physical evidence to prove to Elinor her engagement to Edward, gets a kind of epistolary comeuppance at the novel’s end, when the reader can enjoy the banality of her triumphant letter announcing to Edward that she has eloped with his brother. Even the reticent Edward is brought to unusual dryness of humor, as he and Elinor contemplate Lucy’s numerous solecisms, including her comprehensive valediction, “Your sincere well-wisher, friend, and sister, Lucy Ferrars”: “this is the only letter I have ever received from her, of which the substance made me any amends for the defect of the style” (365). One wonders whether Lucy could have taken in even the vulnerable Edward, had he seen a sample of her writing before their engagement. Elizabeth Bennet of course pre-judges Mr. Collins by his first letter—“There is something very pompous in his stile. . . . Can he be a sensible man?”—and for once her “first impression” is accurate—she could never marry a man who would write such a letter.

When we consider Austen’s revision process, we naturally tend to assume improvements—the opportunities offered by free-indirect discourse and narrative commentary seem immeasurably to enrich a novel’s tonal subtlety, for example. But much of the finished novels’ comedy and even irony

may have been just as effective in earlier, epistolary versions. An epistolary rendition of the selfish minuet between the competing avarice of the John Dashwoods that nearly opens *Sense and Sensibility* can easily be imagined. John Dashwood writes to his wife from Norland, reporting not only his father's demise but also the dying Mr. Dashwood's "recommendation" of the interest of his widow and three daughters, and Mr. John Dashwood's own consideration of "how much there might prudently be in his power to do for them" (5). An exchange of several letters would afford Mrs. John Dashwood free range for her hyperbolic phrases, warning her husband against "impoverishing" his "dear little boy," "rob[bing] his child," and "ruin[ing] himself and their poor little Harry by giving away all his money to his half sisters," an exaggeration belied by her later urging her husband not to "give away half your fortune from your own child"—with the words "all" and "half" exchanging places (8). The narrative voice tells us that "Mrs. John Dashwood was a strong caricature of [her husband];—more narrow-minded and selfish" (5). But no commentary is necessary if this connubial negotiation of charity appears in letters. Mrs. John Dashwood's own letters would even prove that her compliment to her husband is, comparatively speaking, justified, when she says, "But you have such a generous spirit!" before embarking on an actuarial inquiry into Mrs. Dashwood's life-expectancy (10-11).

But other comical letters are lost to us. When Elizabeth writes to ask for the family carriage to collect her and Jane from Netherfield, Austen summarizes, "Mrs. Bennet sent them word that they could not possibly have the carriage before Tuesday; and in her postscript it was added, that if Mr. Bingley and his sister pressed them to stay longer, she could spare them very well" (59). Since the last thing Caroline Bingley wishes is to extend Elizabeth's stay at Netherfield, Mrs. Bennet's letter, with its especially inappropriate postscript, must have been funnier in its verbatim version. And we can only regret Austen's decision to summarize Lady Catherine de Bourgh's letter to Darcy on the subject of his engagement: "she sent him language so very abusive, especially of Elizabeth, that for some time all intercourse was at an end" (388). This letter would have been one of the last in the novel and certainly a rousing coda. Instead, we have two other amusing epistolary curtain calls—Lydia's combined wedding felicitations and application for a place at court for Wickham ("any place would do, of about three or four hundred a year" [386]) and the following letter from Mr. Bennet to Mr. Collins:

"Dear Sir,

"I must trouble you once more for congratulations. Elizabeth will soon be the wife of Mr. Darcy. Console Lady Catherine

as well as you can. But, if I were you, I would stand by the nephew.

He has more to give.” (383)

Mr. Bennet finally and neatly skewers Mr. Collins’s self-serving obsequiousness and it is worth noting that this is the sole verbatim letter from the learned patriarch that survives in *Pride and Prejudice*. “Much as I abominate writing, I would not give up Mr. Collins’s correspondence for any consideration,” Mr. Bennet remarks (364); the enjoyment of writing this last letter must repay all his previous efforts.

But letters are also serious business. From her models Richardson and Burney, Austen learned how to use letters to engage the reader with characters’ psychology as well as to reveal (or conceal) plot.<sup>3</sup> The first versions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* must have exploited all the advantages of the epistolary form, even as their author was changing her mind about that form. Whenever we come across a verbatim letter in these two novels, we can be permitted to assume that it must be one of the best that survived the first draft.

What the substance of those drafts comprised is open to educated guesswork, with the finished novels—all six of them—as our teachers. For example, between whom did the letters pass in the primary correspondence of each novel? William Galperin concludes bluntly that “the letters that undoubtedly passed between ‘Elinor and Marianne’ (in the epistolary text originally so titled) required a geographical separation of the two sisters that is largely collapsed in the final version of that novel,” while *Pride and Prejudice* “maintains that separation [between sisters] and even preserves a number of Jane’s letters to her sister from which the yield of the epistolary version may be inferred” (135). But I disagree on both counts. How could Elinor have mocked Marianne’s excessive sensibility—her care to ““admir[e] Pope no more than is proper,” for example—in a letter to her sister? A. Walton Litz surmises, “The original epistolary version of *Sense and Sensibility* must have contained a broad satire on excessive sensibility” (77); there must have been a logical correspondent to collude with Elinor in that satire. And to whom could Elinor have vented her strictures on the mismatched pastimes of Sir John and Lady Middleton or on the Miss Steeles’ sycophancy? Elinor would hardly have shared these observations with Marianne, whose judgments of others she strived to soften. Elizabeth Bennet, too, would never have shared with the kindly Jane all her rude observations about the society of Lucas Lodge, Netherfield Park, Longbourn House, Hunsford Parsonage, and Rosings Park, even when the sisters were separated.

I suggest that in both novels there was a mentor-figure for the heroine.<sup>4</sup> In the case of *Sense and Sensibility*, this confidante has been edited out of the final version of the novel. She survives solely in a curious reference to the change in Elinor's life once she moves to Devonshire. In contrast with Marianne, who delights in the society of Willoughby,

Elinor's happiness was not so great. Her heart was not so much at ease, nor her satisfaction in their amusements so pure. They afforded her no companion that could make amends for what she had left behind, nor that could teach her to think of Norland with less regret than ever. Neither Lady Middleton nor Mrs. Jennings could supply to her the conversation she missed; although the latter was an everlasting talker. . . . (54)

Unless the "conversation she missed" was with her late father (and there is some evidence that, if Marianne is her mother's favorite child ["the resemblance between (them) was strikingly great" (6)], Elinor may have had more in common with her father), then the "conversation" must have been with another woman. Brian Southam notes that

"The conversation she missed" was not that of her mother and sisters, certainly not that of Mr. and Mrs. John Dashwood. Nothing inside the novel explains this reference. Probably it survives from the original correspondence scheme, where such a confidante would be required. (56)

Southam assumes that Elinor's confidante must be "a friend of her own age at Norland" (55), but I am inclined to disagree. Evidence from other novels, notably *Persuasion*, shows that an Austen heroine, often lacking a sensible mother—or any mother at all—looks to a woman her mother's age, a friend of her late mother's, for example, or a god-mother, for guidance. *Persuasion's* Lady Russell, whose advice Anne Elliott takes even when she disagrees with it, is the obvious example. And in "First Impressions," close to "Elinor and Marianne" in composition, we have another example: Mrs. Gardiner. It is to her aunt Gardiner that I think Elizabeth writes the bulk of the correspondence in "First Impressions." Mrs. Gardiner and the vanished mentor of "Elinor and Marianne" would have been "active confidants" in the terminology Janet Gurkin Altman has developed to analyze epistolary fiction—specifically "independent agents": confidants "who not only listen to, comment upon, and relate part of the hero[ine]'s story, but actually influence it. The counselor whose advice is taken . . . would figure in this category" (51-52). If we turn to an exchange in *Pride and Prejudice*, we find an echo of Altman's

words, even though Austen is not among Altman's many subjects in her wide-ranging study. Mrs. Gardiner warns Elizabeth against a preference for Mr. Wickham, "You are too sensible a girl, Lizzy, to fall in love merely because you are warned against it; . . . Seriously, I would have you be on your guard . . ." (144). Austen calls this conversation "a wonderful instance of advice being given on such a point, without being resented" (145), a tribute to Mrs. Gardiner's value as her niece's confidante.<sup>5</sup>

The verbatim letters to the mentor-figures in both books have in large measure been subsumed into dialogue, omniscient narration, or free-indirect discourse. But *Pride and Prejudice* alludes to letters between Mrs. Gardiner and both the eldest Bennet sisters: when she arrives to condole with Mrs. Bennet on the recent failure of both Jane and Elizabeth to get husbands, Austen points out that "the chief of this news had been given before" to Mrs. Gardiner, "in the course of Jane and Elizabeth's correspondence with her" (140). Southam calls "the communications of Elizabeth and Jane with Mrs. Gardiner, a very credible system of letters to carry much of the story in an epistolary version" of the novel (62). A dual correspondence with their aunt (like the contrasting letters Elinor and Marianne must send to Barton Cottage from Mrs. Jennings's town house) would have illustrated each sister's characteristic habit of mind as she related and judged (or withheld judgment on) her "first impressions" of characters and situations. Galperin surmises that "the epistolary version of *Pride and Prejudice*—to the degree that it might be extrapolated from the final version—was likely more didactic in explicitly measuring the liabilities of the character who became Elizabeth Bennet against the virtues of her forbearing sister Jane," but, as Richardson's fiction shows us, narrative is enriched by comparing any two characters' versions of the same events, and the effect need not have been as schematic as Galperin assumes (125).

Mrs. Gardiner remains an important character in *Pride and Prejudice*: the Gardiners chaperone the reunion of Darcy and Elizabeth at Pemberley, promote Darcy's arrangements for Lydia's marriage, and retain pride of place in the novel's last paragraph as the Darcys' closest friends (388). But when Austen revised "Elinor and Marianne," she completely excised Elinor's confidante. Elinor not only misses her former "conversation," but in the society of Barton Park, conversation becomes all but impossible:

Though they met at least every other evening either at the park or cottage, and chiefly at the former, they could not be supposed to meet for the sake of conversation. Such a thought would never enter either Sir John or Lady Middleton's head, and therefore very

little leisure was ever given for general chat, and none at all for particular discourse. They met for the sake of eating, drinking, and laughing together, playing at cards, or consequences, or any other game that was particularly noisy. (143)

When the good-natured, ignorant Sir John procures the companionship of the Miss Steeles for the Dashwood sisters, he little realizes the pain he inflicts. Lucy loses no time in demonstrating her claim on Edward's affection, and Elinor is reduced to scheming to spend time with her rival to prove that she is not jealous. Elinor's "address" in securing some private conversation with Lucy, while Marianne is "giving them the powerful protection of a very magnificent concerto" is one of her most heroically self-sacrificing moments (149), and must originally have been described in a letter to her confidante. In the finished novel, Elinor is so alone that Favret refers to her as Austen's "anti-epistolary heroine": "the inner world of her thoughts and feelings finds no direct expression in the novel, although her point of view controls the story. She is bound both by a promise of secrecy and a sense of integrity and self-protection" that would be completely at odds with the transmission of her thoughts and fears to a correspondent (145).<sup>6</sup> The novel's revision makes more absolute the heroine's isolation.

Although in the final version of *Sense and Sensibility*, the silent Elinor can seldom find consolation, it seems as if others constantly make use of her as a confidante. Lucy's territorial warning about her engagement to Edward is one such unsought confidence, Brandon's disclosure about the two Elizas, another. The more we reread this latter conversation, the more improbable it seems. In his rambling story, the ordinarily reserved, middle-aged Colonel reveals personal, scandalous details about his own family, and makes inappropriate comparisons between two fallen women, his sister-in-law and his ward, and Elinor's sister Marianne. Here is how he begins:

"My object—my wish—my sole wish in desiring it [to find Elinor alone]—I hope, I believe it is—is to be a means of giving comfort;—no, I must not say comfort—not present comfort—but conviction, lasting conviction to your sister's mind. My regard for her, for yourself, for your mother—will you allow me to prove it, by relating some circumstances, which nothing but a *very* sincere regard—nothing but an earnest desire of being useful—I think I am justified—though where so many hours have been spent in convincing myself that I am right, is there not some reason to fear I may be wrong?" He stopped. (204; italics in original.)

One of the most remarkable things about this incomprehensible preamble is

Elinor's response: "I understand you," said Elinor, "You have something to tell me of Mr. Willoughby, that will open his character farther. . . ." If Brandon's speech is awkward, Elinor's clairvoyant response is inconceivable.

If we reread this halting narrative, imagining it as a letter (with no punctuating sentences from Elinor required), that Brandon would tell such a story seems more plausible. While strong feeling would still imbue the narrative, some clarity of explanation could make the letter resemble Mr. Darcy's epistolary account of Mr. Wickham's designs on his sister. In a discussion of Wentworth's proposal letter in *Persuasion*, Favret uses language that would apply to the letter I imagine Brandon writing at this point in "Elinor and Marianne." In Wentworth's letter, Favret writes, "Austen unleashes a potential in the epistolary form . . . [t]he power of discomposure, of confusion; the ability to disrupt time and place; the chance to create an incomplete, inarticulate but effective language, and to communicate beyond formal constraints: the letter scene generates this unsettling energy" (166). Favret refers to Wentworth's letter as "a silent explosion" with its "starts and stops, . . . questions and . . . candid vulnerability" (171)—terms that may well remind us of Brandon's halting story.

Brandon's family history has other marks of the written, rather than the spoken word. He punctuates his narrative with self-conscious references, including an inaccurate promise to "be brief": "you will find me a very awkward narrator, Miss Dashwood; I hardly know where to begin. . . . But how blindly I relate! I have never told you how this was brought on! . . . But to what does all this lead? . . . I *will* be more collected—more concise" (204; 206; 208; italics in original). (A letter from Brandon to Elinor seems to me hardly a violation of the decorums about correspondence between young, unmarried couples. Brandon's conversations with Elinor about his hopeless attachment to Marianne make his relationship to Elinor much more like a brother's than a suitor's.)

When so many letters have been revised into dialogue or description, the interpolated letters in the final versions of the novel can stand out with stark significance. In *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, the most memorable—and notorious—letter is "Willoughby's" letter jilting Marianne. This note moves the plot in several ways: it sets off a flurry of letters to and from Barton Cottage; it occasions a series of visits from the Steele sisters, Colonel Brandon, and others; and, in cooperation with the weather at Cleveland, it eventually induces in Marianne a psychosomatic, morbid "putrid fever." Most important, of course, it apparently confirms Willoughby's dastardly

character. The even-tempered Elinor sees at once that the letter “proclaimed its writer to be deep in hardened villany” (sic; 184). And of course Austen here exploits the effective epistolary device of the forged letter, because this letter is indeed composed by one of the novel’s villains: the heiress Miss Grey has dictated it to her fiancé. The impact of this outrageous letter is so great that Austen can count on her reader recalling it almost verbatim when its true authorship is revealed more than 130 pages later, when Elinor charges Willoughby, “But the letter, Mr. Willoughby, your own letter; have you anything to say about that?” When he ascribes the letter to his wife (“what do you think of my wife’s style of letter-writing?—delicate—tender—truly feminine—was it not?”), the skeptical Elinor cross-examines him, “The letter was in your own hand-writing,” with the persistence of a forensic detective.

If readers think, with me, that Jane Austen indulges Willoughby unduly, permitting him this big confessional scene with Elinor while Marianne has been lying so recently near death upstairs, we can take comfort in contemplating his punishment at the hand (if not the hand-writing) of Miss Grey, now Mrs. Willoughby, for many years to come. In fact, Tara Ghoshal Wallace blames Austen for making Miss Grey, not Willoughby, the author of the offending letter. Her reading of *Sense and Sensibility* as a novel subverting female authority by putting monstrous, controlling women in charge of helpless men, an interpretation I do not share, prompts her to exclaim sarcastically: “Poor Willoughby! So reduced, so unmanned by a shrewish woman that even the capacity to write his own story is taken away. Sophia Grey’s ‘passion—her malice— . . . must be appeased’ (328), and appeased by Willoughby’s complete capitulation to her will; she will write a character for him, will be like a novelist creating a villain” (156). And yet, if, as I believe, Willoughby’s justification of his behavior comes in a letter to Elinor, rather than in a personal interview, Willoughby, the self-described “fine hardened villain” (326), damns himself in his own language—and his own handwriting. Consider the improbability of the scene as we have it: Willoughby personally confronting Elinor with his fond hope that “Were I even by any blessed chance at liberty again”—that his rich wife will die and leave him her fortune to marry Marianne (332). Willoughby could easily work off such self-deception and supposed charm by post.<sup>7</sup> And the self-correction of his prose—“thunderbolts and daggers!”—seems overly literary for a personal interview. The interruptions in the narrative might remind us of Brandon’s Eliza story, except that they seem a bit too pat:

“When the first [note] of [Marianne]’s reached me, . . . what I felt

is—in the common phrase, not to be expressed; in a more simple one—perhaps too simple to raise any emotion—my feelings were very, very painful. Every line, every word was—in the hackneyed metaphor which their dear writer, were she here, would forbid—a dagger to my heart. To know that Marianne was in town was—in the same language—a thunderbolt.—Thunderbolts and daggers!—what a reproof would she have given me!—her taste, her opinions—I believe they are better known to me than my own,—and I am sure they are dearer.” (325)

The entire scene matches the hyperbole of this sample—it’s relatively common for young women to come to London for the season and even the Steele sisters can afford it, for example: can such news really amount to a “thunderbolt”? And the self-consciousness of the language (“in the common phrase”; “in the hackneyed metaphor”) seems out of keeping with emotional speech, but typical of a certain style of heightened writing. Certainly, this scene as it stands in *Sense and Sensibility* can be unsettling. I find it hard to believe that Elinor permits Willoughby to stay so long; her forbearance says much for his charm. As I imagine his letter, the smooth Willoughby would be less dangerously effective in defending his indefensible, selfish cruelty.

Another scene with Brandon gives us a laboratory demonstration of how “Elinor and Marianne” became *Sense and Sensibility*. In fact, here Austen even jokes about the challenge of revising her first drafts. When the news of Edward and Lucy’s engagement leads the autocratic Mrs. Ferrars to disinherit Edward, Colonel Brandon is uncomfortably reminded of his parents’ forcibly separating him from Eliza. In a rush of generous fellow feeling, he offers the destitute Edward the annual stipend of Delaford parish, but knows Edward so slightly that he entrusts Elinor to give Edward the news.<sup>8</sup> No doubt the offer comes in a letter—a logical sequel to the letter telling the story of Brandon’s thwarted elopement. And, having received this awkward commission, Elinor dutifully sits down to write to Edward, outlining the Colonel’s offer, however pained she is by anything that will forward Edward’s prompt marriage to Lucy. But Austen casts Elinor’s difficulty as one of epistolary composition:

How she should begin—how she should express herself in her note to Edward, was now all her concern. The particular circumstances between [Elinor and Edward] made a difficulty of that which to any other person would have been the easiest thing in the world; but she equally feared to say too much or too little, and sat

deliberating over her paper, with pen in hand, till broken in on by the entrance of Edward himself.

This arrival creates a comic shift of literary form:

Elinor had just been congratulating herself, in the midst of her perplexity, that however difficult it might be to express herself properly by letter, it was at least preferable to giving the information by word of mouth, when her visitor entered, to force her upon this greatest exertion of all. Her astonishment and confusion were great. . . . (287-88)

Elinor pulls herself together, of course: she can fall back on good breeding to manage any situation, and Edward is always the more awkward of the two of them in their most awkward predicament—of loving each other while one of them is engaged to another. And of course Jane Austen is mistress of any occasion and any fictional form. But this little vignette may also celebrate Austen's process of revising her first two real novels, a process that spanned over fifteen years.<sup>9</sup>

The speculative mode of this investigation—and no doubt my failure to have made a permanent shape out of jello—may yet tell us truths about Austen's fiction. As Mary Favret points out, “although Austen does explicitly abandon the form of the epistolary novel, she does not stop testing and reevaluating the personal letter. In every one of her finished novels it is there, playing a crucial, often decisive role, as if it were a character in its own right. . . . [Austen's] narrative authority depends on our learning to see and read the letters properly” (137), and I have tried to read between the lines, and letters as well, in these two first works.

#### NOTES

1. For the record, the belief that both texts existed first in epistolary form is hardly universal. In fact, the *Family Record* refers to “*First Impressions* (the prototype *Pride and Prejudice*)” as Austen's “first attempt at writing a full-length novel in a straightforward narrative form” (Austen-Leigh 93), taking for granted the epistolary origin of *Sense and Sensibility*. On the opposite side of the question is D. W. Harding's dismissal of “the story that *Sense and Sensibility* existed first in the form of letters” as “improbable; it derives solely from a note made at the age of 64 by a niece . . . [who] may have heard this said of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which an original letter form can much more plausibly be traced” (269). F. B. Pinion gives specific examples of episodes in *Sense and Sensibility* that must originally have been letters (84-85), but dismisses claims that internal evidence shows epistolary origins for *Pride and Prejudice* (94-95). Recent critics who take for granted epistolary origins for both books include Galperin, Johnson and Wolfson (xxix), and Fiona Stafford (xxiii-xxv).

2. In comparing “*First Impressions*” with *Evelina*, Austen's father is referring to the length of

the work, but the form may have been suggestive as well. Conversely, when Jane Austen invokes Burney as a model in her omnisciently narrated *Northanger Abbey*, she cites Burney's non-epistolary *Cecilia* and *Camilla* (NA 38).

3. Jocelyn Harris makes detailed comparisons between Austen and Richardson, specifically between *Sense and Sensibility* and *Clarissa* and *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, though these comparisons are based primarily on theme, character, and narrative detail, rather than on literary form (34-129).

4. Mary Lascelles suggests that in *Sense and Sensibility* each sister had a confidante (*Jane Austen and Her Art*. London and New York: Oxford UP, 1939. 157-58).

5. Much of what Altman has to say on the subject of confidant/es is relevant for the study of Austen's work. For example, in *Persuasion*, Anne's eventual decision to rely more on Mrs. Smith's than Lady Russell's advice illustrates Altman's point that "a change in confidant[e]s can often signal an important moment in the epistolary hero[ine]'s development" (Altman, 54).

6. Howard Babb notes that Jane Austen "abandons the epistolary convention because the convention traditionally required that the characters spell out their motives quite clearly from time to time"; the epistolary form thus interfered with novelist's preference to withhold information, for example, in *Emma* (37).

7. Mary Lascelles too notes that Willoughby's confession to Elinor "would be more plausible as a letter" ("Introduction," *Sense and Sensibility*. New York: J. M. Dent, 1962. x).

8. Galperin inaccurately refers to Brandon's self-effacing tone in making this offer as imposing a "condition" of celibacy on Edward (116), part of Galperin's "case against Brandon" (115). But Austen's context makes clear only that Brandon assumes that Edward and Lucy will postpone marriage until their income matches whatever Brandon imagines to be a "competence" (*S&S* 91).

9. Cassandra noted that "Elinor and Marianne" was begun in 1795 and "First Impressions" in 1796; the finished novels were published respectively in October, 1811 and January, 1813 (Austen-Leigh 83; 93; 167; 173).

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