The Narrator's Voice and the Sense of *Sense and Sensibility*

MARCIA McCLINTOCK FOLSOM

Marcia McClintock Folsom is Professor of Literature at Wheelock College. She edited *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Pride and Prejudice* and *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Emma* and, with John Wiltshire, has co-edited *Approaches to Teaching Austen's Mansfield Park* (forthcoming). Longtime JASNA member, she has contributed to *Persuasions* and *Persuasions On-Line*.

Austen readers have agreed for a long time that seeing *Sense and Sensibility* as a didactic novel that prescribes to young women readers Elinor's "sense" and warns against Marianne's "sensibility" does not do justice to its complexity. Of course, the two eldest Dashwood sisters demonstrate contrasting modes of dealing with their lives and feelings, and clearly, Marianne's refusal to conceal her feelings of passion, boredom, despair, or agony nearly leads both sisters to ruin. But the novel does not simply endorse Elinor's self-command and hidden suffering or condemn Marianne's expressiveness. As Claudia Johnson pointed out long ago, "*Sense and Sensibility* is not, as it is often assumed to be, a dramatized conduct book patly favoring female prudence over female impetuosity" (*Jane Austen* 50).

One way to sort out why *Sense and Sensibility* is *not* a "dramatized conduct book" is to identify aspects of the narrative voice of *Sense and Sensibility* and the plotting that correspond to the observations and feelings of *both* young women. The language of this book is strangely contentious, as though the narrator herself is angry at the mediocrity of some of her characters or at the exhausting triviality of social life. The tone of Austen's prose often sides with the sensibilities of *both* Dashwood sisters as they struggle to work out their contrasting ways of dealing with inexplicable suitors and demanding social obligations.

The hostility in the narrator's language sometimes seems quite gratuitous. For example, when Elinor and Marianne see Robert Ferrars laboriously

ordering a gold, ivory, and pearl-encrusted toothpick case before they even know who he is, the narrator says that Elinor imprints on her memory a face of "strong, natural, sterling insignificance" (251). The word "insignificance" registers a kind of narrative impatience with Robert Ferrars reflected also in the plot device of introducing him in the process of selecting a decorated toothpick case.

Such bald pronouncements occur quite often. The Steele sisters' flattery of Lady Middleton is, according to the narrator, perfectly acceptable to her: "Fortunately for those who pay their court through such foibles, a fond mother, though, in pursuit of praise for her children, the most rapacious of human beings, is likewise the most credulous; her demands are exorbitant; but she will swallow any thing" (139). The narrator's language—"most rapacious," "most credulous," "exorbitant," "she will swallow any thing"—seems to rise above the presentation of characters and stand independent of the plot as a stark statement of the narrator's own impatient anger at doting mothers and the "impertinent encroachments and mischievous tricks" of their children (139).

For another example of verbal extremism, consider the narrator's musing after the first encounter between two privileged women the narrator intensely dislikes—Lady Middleton and Fanny Dashwood. The narrator exclaims that Mrs. John Dashwood finds Lady Middleton "one of the most charming women in the world!" She adds that, "Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of cold hearted selfishness on both sides, which mutually attracted them; and they sympathised with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanour, and a general want of understanding" (261). The ruthless selfishness of Fanny Dashwood, brilliantly dramatized in the novel's second chapter, is matched by Lady Middleton's undramatically presented self-absorption, and here the narrator rather than the sisters explicitly draws the analogy between them.

What is the source of this narrative hostility? In many instances, it seems directly to reflect the feelings and observations of the two heroines. The resemblance the narrator finds between Fanny Dashwood's and Lady Middleton's "insipid propriety," for example, reflects Marianne's dislike of meaningless conformity to social rules, and the narrator's judgment about those ladies' "general want of understanding," echoes the impatience of both sisters at ignorant talk.

Similarly, there is complete agreement between the narrator's appraisal of Lady Middleton's conversation and Elinor's appraisal of it. The narrator introduces Lady Middleton in Chapter 6 by commenting that "though perfectly well-bred, she was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself beyond

the most common-place inquiry or remark" (36). This explicit condemnation resembles Elinor's unspoken resentment at the beginning of Volume II, at having to endure the empty talk at her Ladyship's dinner at Barton: "The insipidity of the meeting was exactly such as Elinor had expected; it produced not one novelty of thought or expression, and nothing could be less interesting than the whole of their discourse both in the dining parlour and drawing room" (164). Again, the language is categorical and absolute: "insipidity," "*not one* novelty of thought," and "*nothing could be less* interesting than the *whole* of their discourse." The sentence seems to depart from merely naming Elinor's expectation to join the narrator's own denunciation with Elinor's.

Considering how high the stakes are in Marianne's persistent and ideologically sanctioned determination to indulge and even augment her feelings, it is perhaps surprising that the narrator's prose should at times exhibit similar exaggeration and excess. The reader senses that Marianne's unkind description of Colonel Brandon is excessive even before he becomes better known: "'he has neither genius, taste, nor spirit.'" She adds that "'his understanding has no brilliancy, his feelings no ardour, and his voice no expression'" (61). But the narrator's own language in a long passage characterizing the dinner party at the John Dashwoods' is similarly absolute:

> The dinner was a grand one, the servants were numerous, and every thing bespoke the Mistress's inclination for shew, and the Master's ability to support it. . . . [N]o poverty of any kind, except of conversation, appeared—but there, the deficiency was considerable. John Dashwood had not much to say for himself that was worth hearing, and his wife had still less. But there was no peculiar disgrace in this, for it was very much the case with the chief of their visitors, who almost all laboured under one or other of these disqualifications for being agreeable—Want of sense, either natural or improved—want of elegance—want of spirits—or want of temper. (265–66)

The narrator's angry prose corroborates the feelings of both Dashwood sisters as they endure this elegant, vapid dinner party.

The narrator's brief description of Mrs. Ferrars, given without making it either Elinor's or Marianne's perception, is devastating: "Mrs. Ferrars was a little, thin woman, upright, even to formality, in her figure, and serious, even to sourness, in her aspect. Her complexion was sallow; and her features small, without beauty, and naturally without expression; but a lucky contraction of the brow had rescued her countenance from the disgrace of insipidity, by giving

it the strong characters of pride and ill nature" (264–65). The narrator's hostility is perfectly echoed in Elinor's silent response. Elinor observes Mrs. Ferrars's and Fanny Dashwood's graciousness to Lucy Steele in pointed contrast to their slighting of herself, the "studied attentions" of the two Misses Steele to both mother and daughter, and she could not watch them "without thoroughly despising them all four" (265).

Marianne equally, though more openly, despises them all, too. The narrator captures succinctly Fanny Dashwood's strategic wavering between embarrassment at her mother's rudeness to Elinor and a fear of being herself "too civil, too encouraging," as she turns from admiring Elinor's painting to praise of Miss Morton's. Marianne's indignant outburst at them both reflects the narrator's own distaste for their rudeness: "'This is admiration of a very particular kind!—what is Miss Morton to us?—who knows, or who cares, for her?—it is Elinor of whom *we* think and speak'" (268). The comic bustle that follows Marianne's breach of the scene's social hypocrisy begins with Mrs. Ferrars's ridiculous retort, which the narrator sarcastically calls a "bitter phillippic": "'Miss Morton is Lord Morton's daughter'" (269). The effect of the narrator's condemnations of women like Lady Middleton, Fanny Dashwood, and Mrs. Ferrars is to endorse the perceptions and feelings of both Dashwood sisters.

Thus, built into the novel's very language is a persistent valuation of both sisters' distinctive intellectual qualities, perceptions, and resistance to commonplace conversation, and an implied attachment between them, despite their disagreement about concealing or exposing feeling. The narrator's approval of the sisters' intelligence comes through particularly clearly in her comment on Lady Middleton's view of them both: "Though nothing could be more polite than Lady Middleton's behaviour to Elinor and Marianne, she did not really like them at all. Because they neither flattered herself nor her children, she could not believe them good-natured; and because they were fond of reading, she fancied them satirical; perhaps without exactly knowing what it was to be satirical; but *that* did not signify" (279–80). Here, when the narrator uncovers Lady Middleton's dislike of the Dashwood sisters behind her perfunctory politeness, it endorses their perception of her hostility to them. Even more, the narrator reveals that Lady Middleton interprets their failure to flatter her and her children as meaning that they are not "good-natured," and that Lady Middleton mentally uses the word "satirical" to explain their fondness for books, while pointedly noting that her Ladyship does not know exactly what the word "satirical" means.

In such passages as this, the narrator's voice makes clear that many of

the people the two sisters must deal with, and to some extent, the very world they live in, is unequivocally petty, selfish, ordinary, and boring. Marianne and Elinor are alike in that they face the same contemptible social world; they differ in their ways of confronting it. Because the narrator's attitude corresponds to the sisters' feelings, in effect, the prose of the novel binds the sisters together. In scenes at Barton and London, Austen dramatizes the effects of their two ways of responding to the shoddiness of the world—one by staying true to her own feelings, the other by diplomacy. The events of the plot provide numerous occasions to examine the relative usefulness of their contrasting ways of dealing with such hateful and even malicious characters. But the challenges ally them and determine the nature of the underlying "attachment" between them.

Even in their early exchanges, when Elinor and Marianne debate how to behave in the social world, we feel their involvement with each other. The death of Mr. Henry Dashwood, their father, and the identification of Mrs. Dashwood with Marianne, mean that there is no responsible adult in the lives of either Marianne or Elinor. Because their mother shares Marianne's romantic unworldliness, Elinor is forced to take on the role of parent to her younger sister, attempting to protect Marianne from the consequences of her openness and disregard of propriety.

In scene after scene, what comes through in Elinor's attention is that she is looking out for Marianne, a sister who is younger, more vital, but in her very vibrancy, needing protection. Marianne claims that she is just "'open and sincere'" and that Elinor is instead trying to make her "'reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful'" (57). But for Elinor, what is at stake is not propriety but Marianne's safety. Her challenges to Marianne's unrestrained expressiveness demonstrate not only Elinor's love for Marianne but also her fear for her. Moreover, even in the scenes where Elinor is unsuccessful in trying to quell Marianne's restless agitation or in persuading Marianne to attain and show "'composure of mind'" (299), Marianne implicitly grasps how much Elinor cares for her and thinks about her (see Thompson).

Austen's commitment to the bond between the two sisters is especially vivid in the London scenes after Willoughby rejects Marianne at the party and sends his insulting letter. Repeatedly, Elinor pays Marianne "every quiet and unobtrusive attention in her power" (205), offers "earnest, though gentle persuasion" (224); her tact and concern, though not appreciated by Marianne at the time, compose the fabric of their continuing attachment throughout the second volume of the novel.

But the crucial first, seventh, and tenth chapters of the third volume work out the process both of resolving their disagreement about expressing emotion, and of bringing the two sisters to an understanding of their own connection. In the memorable passages of Elinor's vigil by the bedside of her beloved sister for long days and nights during Marianne's grave illness at Cleveland, the novel offers its most painful demonstration of Elinor's patience and solicitude. In these agonizing scenes, Elinor's habitual tenderness and concern for Marianne are intensified into a protracted demonstration of deep sisterly love. "Hour after hour passed away in sleepless pain and delirium on Marianne's side, and in the most cruel anxiety on Elinor's" (353). Because the narrator so convincingly traces the progress of Marianne's illness, the immense relief of Marianne's recovery leads to a paragraph that equally convincingly conveys Elinor's intense inner rejoicing. "Elinor could not be cheerful. Her joy was of different kind, and led to anything rather than to gaiety. Marianne restored to life, health, friends, and to her doating mother, was an idea to fill her heart with sensations of exquisite comfort, and expand it in fervent gratitude;—but it led to no outward demonstrations of joy, no words, no smiles. All within Elinor's breast was satisfaction, silent and strong" (356). In striking contrast to the tone of the prose in the London social scenes, here the narrative voice conveys powerful approval of the silent, strong thanksgiving in Elinor's heart.

The most moving scenes of reconciliation in *Sense and Sensibility* begin in the first chapter of Volume III, when Elinor finally breaks her silence about Edward's engagement to Lucy. Here the narrator retreats completely from the conversation, and leaves all emotion to the drama of the dialogue. Elinor refutes Marianne's unkind surmise that Elinor's self-command means that she had never felt deeply for Edward by describing in a long and uncharacteristically passionate speech her four months of lonely grief, inner exertion to achieve composure of mind, and constant provocation from "'the very person'" who "'ruined all my prospects'" (298). Declaring that she has "'suffered the punishment of an attachment, without enjoying its advantages'" (299), Elinor finally convinces Marianne that despite her long silence and apparent composure, she has been "'*very* unhappy.'" Marianne at last grasps the reality of Elinor's suffering and declares, "'[Y]ou have made me hate myself for ever. —How barbarous have I been to you!'" (299).

Most important, in the tenth chapter, after her illness, Marianne is able fully to acknowledge the injustice of her treatment of every one, but especially of Elinor. Marianne's self-reproach and contrition in this scene of reviewing

the past are more fully dramatized than any romantic declaration among the lovers in the novel. In this conversation, Marianne fully and even extravagantly acknowledges her guilt in regard to her sister and surrenders her argument for full expression of feeling. She generously tells Elinor that she compares her own conduct "'with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours'" (391). She acknowledges that in her total acting out of her feelings, she injured everybody she knew: she treated Mrs. Jennings with "'ungrateful contempt,'" and failed to show common civility or consideration to anyone she disliked; on the contrary, her behavior was "'insolent and unjust'" (392).

But what Marianne dwells on most in her long speech is her treatment of Elinor. She admits,

> "Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction. . . . Had I died,—in what peculiar misery should I have left you, my nurse, my friend, my sister! . . . How should I have lived in *your* remembrance! . . . But you,—you above all, above my mother, had been wronged by me. I, and only I, knew your heart and its sorrows; yet, to what did it influence me?—not to any compassion that could benefit you or myself.—Your example was before me: but to what avail?—Was I more considerate of you and your comfort? . . . No;—not less when I knew you to be unhappy, than when I had believed you at ease, did I turn away from every exertion of duty or friendship; . . . regretting only *that* heart which had deserted and wronged me, and leaving you, for whom I professed an unbounded affection, to be miserable for my sake." (391–92)

Rather than giving a narrative description of Marianne's contrition, Austen gives Marianne ample space to declare her feelings, to remember and to review the past, and to acknowledge aloud the magnitude of her injustice to her sister.

Here, as Marianne rescinds her argument about the unfettered expression of all feelings, she promises to "'practise the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness, and forbearance'" (393). While Marianne's speech resolves the sisters' disagreement about self-command, it also demonstrates what the prose of the novel has been declaring throughout—the centrality of the love between the two sisters. The words "you" and "your" are repeated again and again in Marianne's long speech: "you," "your remembrance," "your heart," "your example," "your comfort." The last paragraph of the novel confirms the immense importance of the love between the two sisters "living almost within sight of each other," rather than affirming their married happiness with devoted husbands (431).

However, although the novel itself seems most interested in examining the relationship between the two sisters, the two sisters themselves are most preoccupied about their relationships with their putative lovers. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen ponders the question of first and second romantic attachments with surprising complexity. As Austen's first readers would have understood, the supposed primacy of a first love was a commonly debated issue in the novels and discourse of the early nineteenth century. Claudia Johnson observes that the "romantic notion that the sensitive soul in general, and the sensitive woman in particular, loves truly only once had much currency at this time" (*SS* 37 n. 3). In her edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, Johnson prints an excerpt from Chapter 19 of Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* that contains a debate on the topic of first attachments. Mr. Percival argues vehemently against it: "I scarcely know an idea more dangerous to domestic happiness than this belief in the unextinguishable nature of a first flame. . . . Pernicious doctrine! false as it is pernicious!" (307).

In his oddly urgent questions to Elinor Dashwood in the eleventh chapter of Volume I, Colonel Brandon tries to ascertain Marianne's view on "'second attachments,'" surmising that she would not approve of them. "'No,'" Elinor replies, "'her opinions are all romantic'" (66). Her answer implies that such opinions are based on an inadequate understanding of the complexity of human life. She predicts that Marianne's opinions will change in a "'few years . . . on the reasonable basis of common sense and observation.'" The narrator disappears almost completely from this conversation, only introducing Elinor's observation of Brandon at the beginning of it, and speculating on what Marianne would have said in it at the end. Brandon's next questions protest against what he assumes is Marianne's sweeping disapproval of all second attachments: "'is it equally criminal in every body?'" he asks. "'Are those who have been disappointed in their first choice, whether from the inconstancy of its object, or the perverseness of circumstances, to be equally indifferent during the rest of their lives?'" (67). He uses the word "'criminal'" to protest the mad ideal of a single love for an entire lifetime, using the first meaning in Johnson's *Dictionary*, of "faulty; contrary to right; contrary to duty."

But surprisingly, in his next comments, he takes the opposite tack: he says that Marianne should retain her "'romantic'" objection to second attachments, and that for her to give up her belief in the primacy of first attachments would be tragic. He vigorously disagrees with Elinor's prediction and hope that Marianne will outgrow her romantic views. This strange conversation echoes throughout *Sense and Sensibility*, and Brandon's questions have relevance to

the first and second romantic "attachments" of both men and women—for Edward, Willoughby, and Lucy Steele, as well as for Brandon, Elinor, and Marianne.

In the novel's final chapters, Austen returns to the debate about the "pernicious doctrine" of the primacy of a "first flame" as she weighs the relevance or irrelevance of a first attachment to married happiness. The relief and joy to Elinor in being able to marry Edward, her first love, are treated with quotidian comedy: Mrs. Jennings finds in Elinor and Edward, "one of the happiest couple in the world. They had in fact nothing to wish for, but the marriage of Colonel Brandon and Marianne, and rather better pasturage for their cows" (425). Normal domestic preoccupations replace premarital suffering.

The possible irrelevance of passionate love to married happiness appears in Elinor's careful analysis of Marianne's probable married life with Willoughby. She reasons that Willoughby would never have been able to renounce his extravagance, that Marianne's attempts at frugality would "'abridge *his* enjoyments,'" and that he would grow to "'regret the connection which had involved him such difficulties'" (397). What Willoughby regrets now, she says, is

> "only that he has married a woman of a less amiable temper than yourself. But does it thence follow that had he married you, he would have been happy?—The inconveniencies would have been different. He would then have suffered under the pecuniary distresses which, because they are removed, he now reckons as nothing. He would have had a wife of whose temper he could make no complaint, but he would have been always necessitous—always poor; and probably would soon have learnt to rank the innumerable comforts of a clear estate and good income as of far more importance, even to domestic happiness, than the mere temper of a wife." (398)

When Willoughby himself explains to Elinor his flawed intentions with Marianne, his regrets about her, and yet his determination to marry Sophia Grey, he confesses, "'In honest words, her money was necessary to me'" (372). The narrator's realistic final comments about his marriage suggest that his choice was quite satisfactory to him: "He lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humour, nor his home always uncomfortable; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity" (430). In fact, the narrator, both realistic and a little amused, implies that Willoughby's marriage grants him the limited and typical satisfactions of a privileged married gentleman just as Elinor had guessed it would.

In reviewing the "extraordinary fate" of Marianne in marrying Colonel Brandon, the narrator picks up and revises the language of first and second attachments: "Instead of falling a sacrifice to an irresistible passion, as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting, . . . she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" (429–30). These are pleasures appropriate to adult life, and being able to "submit to new attachments" indicates Marianne's health in outgrowing the "pernicious doctrine" about one's "first flame." But since Brandon loves Marianne almost as a reincarnation of his first love, perhaps in essence he remains true to his first attachment.

The narrator's last sentence, even in enumerating "the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne," still does not give way to complete optimism. She ends by saying, "that though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands" (430). In saying that the four major characters live without "disagreement" or "coolness," the narrator, I think, intends a happy ending, but with qualification—only as happy as it could possibly be in the world of this novel.

In conclusion, it is interesting to ponder why it was important to Jane Austen that *Sense and Sensibility* be the first of her novels published. The first drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* were both rewritten in the late 1790s and again after July 1809. The new versions of both novels may have been almost ready for publication in 1811. Why did Austen want *Sense and Sensibility* to be published first? One possibility is that because *Sense and Sensibility* had originally been completed later than *Pride and Prejudice*, it may therefore have needed less revision. Jan Fergus suggests another possible reason: perhaps the affinity of *Sense and Sensibility* with late eighteenth-century novels made Austen think that it might appeal to more readers than *Pride and Prejudice*. Fergus remarks that, despite *Sense and Sensibility*'s "unconventional focus upon a community of women, its emphasis upon the importance as well as the costs of self-command made it her most orthodox novel both aesthetically and morally" (129). For that reason, Fergus thinks it may have seemed to Austen that *Sense and Sensibility* was a "safer choice" for her first publication than *Pride and Prejudice* because of that novel's unorthodox heroine, Elizabeth Bennet (130).

But perhaps the experience of two sisters, who both feel the immense pressure of what Marianne calls practicing "'the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness, and forbearance'" (393), as Jane and Cassandra certainly must have, may have made Austen feel a special bond with this novel. Perhaps even the angry toughness of the narrator mattered to Austen. This toughness persists almost to the end of the book, in the narrator's stark account of Mrs. Ferrars's "annihilation" of first one and then the other of her two sons and her unchanged ungraciousness and ill-will (423), and in the narrator's cynical description of the courtship of Lucy and Robert (426–28). The narrative voice expresses a hostility to the social world that makes this novel anything but "safe."

Perhaps when Austen reread this book after it was published, she decided to "lop and crop" her next novel to tone down that hostility. Or perhaps the success of her first published novel contributed to the joy and playfulness of *Pride and Prejudice* that is so unlike the often contentious and aggrieved spirit of the narrative voice of *Sense and Sensibility*.

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