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**JANE
AUSTEN**

Jane Austen

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To Jane Austen

O thou who to romance's sleights
Didst come as dawn to elves and sprites,
Replacing spectre-haunted nights
With daylight's genial reign;
Shrewd exorcist--who couldst so well
Romance's goblin bands expel,
Yet keep thine own unrivalled spell,
Incomparable Jane!

How doth thy bodkin's slender steel
Men's frailties and raults reveal!
To thee Achilles is all heel,
Thou lash of Folly's train!

Thou scourgest tomboy, cynic, grig,
The man whose diction is all wig,
The snob, the autocrat, the prig,
Inimitable Jane!

Thou seekest truth, and when 'tis found
Thou dost its sportive whims confound;
The shafts, the stables, and the pound
Shall now its pranks restrain;
It dreads thy logic's bristling fence,
Thy files of serried evidence,
Thy panoplied, embattled sense,
Irrefragable Jane!

I know thy passion's cautious throes,
Its timed and tactful overflows,
Its firmly regulated glows,
Its exemplary pain;
Oh, if a tense could court a mood,
Or axioms propositions wooed,

Their raptures were not more subdued,
Inestimable Jane!

O little world so trim and flat,
Where Fate must straighten his cravat,
And Death himself must use the mat,
Ere they could entrance gain!

Thine earth a box of mignonette,
A bird-cage in a window set,
A shelved and shapely cabinet,
Inviolable Jane!

Was e'er a keen, satiric bent
So quaintly, comically belent
With smug and purring self-content,
And homiletic strain?

A Puck in cassock or a nun
In motley--art thou both or one?

O frolic lore, O surpliced fun,
In explicable Jane!

What pen could draw thee, line by line,
With art ironic and benign,
And truth unflawed; what pen but thine
O woman sage and sane?

I would this gladdened world might see
Another Jane to laugh at thee,
Rare target for rare archery,
Irrevocable Jane!

Lightly through time thy figure trips,
Skirt lifted where the highway dips
Thy brow now crinkled, now thy lips,
As mirth rules or disdain:

The barred and bolted centuries
Thou frontest with unerring keys,
The *Park*, the *Abbey*, *Emma*--these
Shall swift admission gain:

And if the porter claim a fee,
Fling *Pride* or *Sensibility*:

The flattered door shall ope for thee,
Imperishable Jane!

Part I: The Novelist

CHAPTER I: SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Sense and Sensibility belongs to a very old type of story--the story of brotherly (or sisterly) contrast. In Hebrew narrative it is as ancient as Cain and Abel, and receives the countenance of Jesus himself in the parable of the Prodigal Son and his brother. In classical and modern drama it lengthens chainwise and spreads fanwise in a long descent from Menander to Terence, from Terence to Molière, from Molière to Sheridan (with his griding Surfaces) down to a success not two years old in the commercialized drama of our American metropolis. On the sisterly side the theme reaches at least as far back as Martha and Mary in the New Testament, and comes down to yesterday in the *Marta y Maria* of Valdés and the Constance and Sophia of Amold Bennett in the *Old-Wives' Tale*. The Austen mark is pleasantly conspicuous in the fact that the two sisters contrasted in this novel are both virtuous and affectionate women; they differ only in the degree in which they permit judgment to control feeling.

The conduct of the novel is careful and successful, though far from blameless. Two sisters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, expecting offers of marriage from two young men, are forsaken by their lovers without declaration or explanation in the first half of the book. The retirement of the two cavaliers induces a languor or slackness in the middle of the narrative comparable to the effect of the

departure of the masculine element on a social assembly. For this shrinkage of interest the redress offered by the conclusion is imperfect.

But the stories claim amore complete analysis. Elinor Dashwood learns that Edward Ferrars, who has made tacit love to her, is bound by an early and secret engagement to a young woman of inferior breeding called Lucy Steele. The secret is divulged; the young man is promptly disinherited by his vindictive and grasping mother; and he prepares by marrying the girl to try how far the fulfilment of duty can console its victim for a blighted love and a vanished income. Extrication comes from a novel quarter; the brother who has stripped him of his inheritance unexpectedly relieves him of his bride. The supplanter is decoyed into a secret marriage, and the release of Edward Ferrars is followed by his betrothal to Elinor and the reluctant forgiveness of the thwarted mother. The average novelist would call this material interesting, and the author of *Vanity Fair* would have lingered and luxuriated in the story of the arts by which the young girl substituted the rich brother for the poor one. Not so Miss Austen. She dislikes, or merely tolerates, this material. She is as slow in getting up to it and as quick in getting away from it as the decencies of the situation will permit. Two-thirds of the book is over before the divulging of the engagement which would start the interest for the average reader is accomplished, and the decisive events are narrated at second-hand in the briefest summary in the impatient conclusion of a somewhat leisurely and ambling tale. The haste was probably due in part to Miss Austen's discontent with the makeshift expedient by which she cleared the path of Elinor and Edward to their deferred and improbable happiness. She was also not indisposed to evade the direct treatment of crises, as her management of the Lydia--Wickham affair in *Pride and Prejudice* clearly shows.

The conduct of the other story is subject to equal, if different, strictures. John Willoughby Leaves Marianne Dashwood without making the offer to which his whole behavior has served as prelude and promise. Marianne follows him to London. Her disillusion is then effected by a series of incidents which are not uninteresting, but are at once so obvious and so meagre as to retard the speed and contract the volume of the narrative. Another suitor has been provided for Marianne in the person of an amiable and melancholy Colonel, twice her age and the object, at his first introduction, of her untiring and unsparing raillery. The renovation of Colonel Brandon in the esteem of Marianne might have seemed a seductive theme to a novelist who in *Pride and Prejudice* was to lavish time and pains on the rehabilitation of the rejected and discredited Darcy. But in *Sense and Sensibility* Miss Austen has stayed her hand. The embellishment of the Colonel is incidental and perfunctory; it consists chiefly in his bestowal of a rectory upon Edward Ferrars--a point of only indirect concern to Marianne--and his fetching of Mrs. Dashwood to her daughter's sick-bed. The courtship is unhesitatingly shirked; Miss Austen, for all her implacable worldly sense, may have been woman enough to shrink from detailing a process by which a young girl was induced to marry a middle-aged gentleman who is the domicile--I had almost said the sepulchre--of all the virtues.

Sickness is a classic expedient for reviving our interest in heroines who are slipping into insignificance, and Miss Austen likes sickness for its own sake she delights in its respectability. Accordingly Marianne, who seems likely to fall into abeyance in the last third of the story, is saved from this calamity by taking to her bed. It is only fair to this illness to note that it disappears with the most obliging celerity as soon as it has accomplished the rather trifling errand for which its presence was invoked. That Marianne should be sick in a house not her own whence the whole

family, with the exception of a grandmother who is half a guest, have fled at the mere pronouncement of the name "typhus," appears forced in an author so studious of the normal as Miss Austen. The change of domicile is intended chiefly to provide an excuse for a penitential visit on the part of the mercurial and dashing Willoughby. He makes an explanation to the placable Elinor which he has the impudence, and Miss Austen the courage, to present as a defense of his behavior.

The two stories, as the outline shows, are essentially distinct; they are bound together after a fashion, however, by the intimacy of the two sisters who scarcely leave each other's sides, and there are one or two secondary ligatures. Colonel Brandon, for instance, who is Marianne's suitor, is destined for Elinor by the prevalent opinion of the circle in which they move. As we have seen, it is Colonel Brandon who provides the rectory for Edward Ferrars. The interval between the two plots is lessened, or at least blurred, by the likeness of the two situations and the identical moral which is deduced from the contrasted behavior of the two sisters. I may remark here that the difference between Elinor and Marianne, whether in conduct or fortune, is probably not so wide as Miss Austen in the zeal of tutorship intended that it should be. Marianne's palpable indiscretions, the private excursions and the letters to Willoughby, are productive of no palpable misfortune. Her real error consists in the surrender of her heart without guarantees, and the guarded and provident Elinor has made the same mistake. A few months of anguish is the sum total of Marianne's penalty, and the endurance of a very little less is all the reward that Elinor reaps for the persevering exercise of the whole troop of circumspect and heedful virtues. It may be said in Miss Austen's defense that the support her narrative gives to the virtues is no more uncertain or unequal than the support they commonly

receive from that lukewarm and hesitating moralist that we call life.

To return to the handling of the story. The volume of the two plots is small, and the reader who recoils the plethora of minor incident, the incessant meetings and partings, the fuss and bustle, which mark the London section of the novel will be puzzled to relate this superAux of exertion to this shortage of Accomplishment. The truth is that Miss Austen's main end is the exhibition of life and character forl their own sake, and her specialty is not the great scene--hardly even the deciding or impelling scene--but the normal social occasion. The multiplying of these occasions without too rigid a scrutiny of their actual contribution to the outcome has resulted in a feebler story and a better novel. It is notable that side by side with this slackness in the pursuit of relevance there is an extreme, almost an extravagant, interest in the development of minor trains of consequence. Here is a little catena. First, John Dashwood meets his sister Elinor in a jeweler's shop. Second, he calls on her the next day. Third, he asks Elinor to take him to the Middletons. Fourth, he recommends his wife to call on the Middletons. Fifth, his wife complies. Sixth, friendliness results. Seventh, the Dashwoods invite Lady Middleton to their home, where Mrs. Ferrars is staying. Eighth, the Misses Steele, who have been invited to stay with Lady Middleton, hasten their acceptance. Ninth, they are included in the Dashwood invitation. Tenth, Lucy Steele meets Mrs. Ferrars. Miss Austen revels in this sort of generalship; her own temper has points of contact with that of the satirized Mrs. Jennings. On the other hand, Colonel Brandon's supposed courtship of Elinor has almost no bearing on the outcome of the story. Willoughby's seduction of Colonel Brandon's ward is material only in the clearer revelation it affords of the infamies of that young wastrel's character. The utility of the Palmers appears to be confined to the provision of a house in which Marianne can be sick,

the Colonel assiduous, and Willoughby histrionic. If Miss Austen had been a man, she would have enjoyed the vocation of a courier. To see people from place to place, to provide for their entrances and exits, and to get as much out of them as an adroit use of these opportunities permits would have given point and vivacity to life.

Miss Austen is unable or unwilling to dispense with the friendly offices of coincidence. Coincidence had not in her day fallen into that sere and yellow leaf to which the frost of latter-day criticism has reduced the green of its abundant foliage. In this novel Mr. Robert Ferrars is seen by chance in a jeweler's shop. Mr. John Dashwood is seen, equally by chance, in the same place. Edward and Lucy call on Elinor by chance at the same time. The encounter of the man-servant with Lucy Ferrars at Exeter is one of those alms of destiny to which the poverty of novelists is perennially grateful. I may add that the servant's mistake as to the identity of the bridegroom is one of those borrowings from farce which a novelist of Miss Austen's calibre in our own time would find incompatible with selfrespect. Far worse is the misunderstanding between Mrs. Jennings and Elinor in Chapter XL, where Elinor is talking about the gift of a rectory and Mrs. Jennings about an offer of marriage. Here the stale devices which realists contemptuously allow to farce prolong through a conference of appreciable length a misconception to which the bluntness of actuality would have put an end in sixty seconds.

I pass to an estimate of the characters. Elinor Dashwood is the personification of good sense and right feeling, and the instructress by precept and example of her impetuous and incautious mother and sister. The hardships of such a position are manifest, and nothing less than Miss Austen's wit and vitality could have extricated Elinor from the straits into which she is thrown by Miss Austen's irrepressible didacticism. "He really is not disgusting," said Gwendolen

Harleth of Grandcourt, and insisted that the praise was generous for a man. The critic is half disposed to say of Elinor Dashwood: "She really is not disagreeable," and to say that for a paragon of discretion the praise is munificent. Our liking passes through crises at every turn, and its final safety is a form of miracle. The reader is aided by the fact that under Miss Austen's convoy he takes up his abode in the mind of Elinor, and a well-bred person feels a difficulty in quarreling with his hostess. Elinor, moreover, has strong affections and even keen sensibilities, though, like captive princesses, the most they can do is to flutter a signal or drop a rose through the gratings of the tower in which her judgment has confined them. Possibly another help is her practical helplessness in many cases. Her temper is less rigid than her ideal, or what we may venture to call her own version of her temper. She seems, at first sight, a bureau, an official headquarters, to which all questions are automatically referred for instant and final adjudication. But, however rigid, her judgment, her conduct abounds in compliances.

Elinor accompanies Marianne to London against her judgment. She is diplomatic in her treatment of her brother, of Fanny Dashwood, of the gadfly Lucy and of the buzz-fly Miss Steele. She does not openly protest against Marianne's letters to Willoughby. She accepts the hospitality of the Palmers in opposition to her initial prejudice. She hears Willoughby after her indignant refusal to hear him, and, by one of the subtlest touches in the book, allows herself to be swayed in his favor by the romantic charm of his person and manners. Miss Austen is after all so much wiser than her superflux of wisdom would suggest. The truth is that the novelist is as intensely social as she is conscientious, and if the essence of conscience is inflexibility, the essence of society is compromise. The rational woman is provisionally rational and ultimately woman.

Elinor is much better than her ungrateful rôle; Marianne is not quite so good as her vocation. She is imagined strongly, but thinly and brokenly as it were. She suffers from that glaze of formality which in Miss Austen's work overlays the really formal and the really informal characters alike. The twentieth century hardly knows what to do with a young woman to whom apostrophes of this type are feasible:

And you, ye well-known trees--but you will continue the same.--No leaf will decay because we are removed, nor any branch become motionless although we can observe you no longer.

In lines like these the satirized Mrs. Radcliffe is vindicated--or avenged. Even where the heart is stirred, the creaking of the eighteenth-century stays in which its throbbings are confined is distinctly audible.

"Nor I," answered Marianne with energy; "our situations then are alike. We have neither of us anything to tell; you, because you communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing."

The pitiless Taine remarked of Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard* that Abelard would have cried out "Bravo" at certain passages, and on reaching the end would have reversed the letter to see if "For press" were not added to the superscription. If Marianne wrote as she talks, one could almost forgive a similar levity in Willoughby.

Deep passion is not Miss Austen's strong point, and Marianne's suffering has the vague though real impressiveness of a house of mourning which the spectator views from the remoteness of the pavement. As her business is largely to suffer, the resulting exclusion is considerable. The need of keeping her imprudences within strictly respectable limits has shortened the span of the character, and, as I have already intimated, her speedy recovery does not conduce to the energy of the thesis.

The first effect of Willoughby, as he comes dashing into the story with spurs jingling and bridle-bells tinkling, like a youthful chevalier, is distinct and promising. But with this first sharpness of impression Miss Austen's proficiency ceases. Her knowledge of a bad man was decorously limited. George Eliot in *Tito or Grandcourt* would spell you out a bad man, word for word and letter for letter; Miss Austen keeps warily aloof from the lip of the crater. She knows Willoughby's manners and that part of his temperament to which manners are the clew. She is not withheld by any visible squeamishness. Her account of Willoughby's worst offense is handled with a frankness and a discretion and an absence of any consciousness of either frankness or discretion which, in relation to her sex and epoch, is notable and laudable. The awe, the mystery, which encircle sex are entirely absent; her disapproval is emphatic, but her coolness is immovable. Willoughby is a trumpety character. The curvettings and bridlings with which he dashes upon the stage in the outset of the story arouse a distrust which is rather confirmed than lessened by the final caracole of his repentance. Miss Austen leaves us at last with the impression that his desertion of Marianne and his betrayal of Eliza are criminal at best, and that, in an unpolished or unhandsome man, they would have been totally unforgivable.

Edward Ferrars is placed in direct contrast to Willoughby. Willoughby is gloss without substance; Edward is substance without gloss. The difficulty with Edward is that the absence of plumage is so much more demonstrable than the presence of marrow. Edward has the ill luck to be compelled always to carry a shyness which needs no nursing into situations which supply it with the most liberal encouragement. He is inactive and largely invisible; and when he is dragged upon the stage by the inexorable Miss Austen, his chief aim is to conceal his mind from the friends to whom he has been obliged to expose his person. His

adhesion to the pestiferous Lucy seems a dismal if not a truckling type of virtue, and the American reader is not propitiated by his naïve view of the ministry as a steppingstone to a living in the double sense of a rectory and a livelihood. It is quite true that in this view of the church as a refectory he has the cordial support of his patroness, Miss Austen.

Colonel Brandon is the last of the three men in the story to whom the office of lover and suitor is committed. He is hampered in this function by an accumulation of years which exposes him to the contempt of romantic young women of eighteen. Colonel Brandon is thirty-five, and the touch of rheumatism from which he suffers is confessed by the novelist with a candor which may be classed with the heroisms--not to say the heroics--of conscientious realistic treatment. That touch of rheumatism is felt in Colonel Brandon's gait throughout the story. He is a very good, indeed a very eacient, man, if the only sound test, the test of deeds, be a applied to his character, but we feel always that he is bandaged. He is the most recurrent, yet the most unobtrusive, of characters, and the reader starts at the perception of his arrival as he might at the discovery of the nearness of some quiet person who had entered the room on tiptoe. Even at the very end of the tale he can hardly be said to have laid aside his muffler; we know the facts, but we do not know the man. It is natural that he should be drawn to Marianne rather than to Elinor, between whom and himself is the obvious bond and the impalpable barrier of a precise conformity of tastes and principles. It is not so easy to understand his final conquest of Marianne even with the aid of a proviso that Marianne accepts him in the first instance on the unromantic basis of grateful friendship and esteem. Discretion that is to be made amiable to indiscretion might surely assume a livelier and courtlier shape than it wears in the sedate--almost the lugubrious--Colonel.