

**SENSE AND SENSIBILITY REWRITTEN:  
REVISING LOVE AND MARRIAGE  
IN JANE AUSTEN AND JOANNA TROLLOPE'S SEQUEL**

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**Abstract:** While most discussions of marriage in Jane Austen primarily dwell on *Pride and Prejudice* and its treatment, marriage is also central in *Sense and Sensibility*, which illustrates the penury that may befall young, single women with limited financial means. This essay analyzes *Sense & Sensibility*, a rewriting of *Sense and Sensibility* by Joanna Trollope (2013), which is set in twenty-first century England, paying close attention to how Trollope approaches love and marriage (its desirability or the obligation to get married), especially under the light of changing social mores in the twenty-first century and taking into account Austen's own views on both issues as presented in *Sense and Sensibility*.

**Keywords:** Jane Austen, Joanna Trollope, marriage, *Sense and Sensibility*, sequels, young women

## **1. Introduction**

Maybe attempting to compensate for the paucity of Jane Austen's literary production, novels inspired by her works abound, from continuations after the happy ending (*Elinor and Marianne* by Emma Tennant in regards to *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pemberley* and *An Unequal Marriage* by the same author, both prolonging *Pride and Prejudice*) to rewriting the novels in other contexts (*Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld moves *Pride and Prejudice* to American TV shows), parodies mocking Austen, loose rewritings (*Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* by Helen Fielding off *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* respectively) and derivative works (including fan fiction). For clarity's sake, to simplify terminology, any Austen-inspired work will be called "sequel" in this article. Generally, sequels obey a writer's decision to continue a beloved work; the "Jane Austen Reimagined" initiative (also known as the Austen project), was rather unusual in that six contemporary American and British writers were commissioned by the publisher Borough Press to rewrite Austen's six novels. The first four sequels in the project, *Sense & Sensibility* (2013) by Joanna Trollope, *Northanger Abbey* (2014) by Val McDermid, *Emma* (2015) by Alexander McCall Smith and *Eligible* (2016) by Curtis Sittenfeld received a lukewarm reception. This, along with very discreet sales (for example, in the U.S.A, *Sense & Sensibility* just sold 5,100 copies (Alter 2016: n.p.)), caused the publication of the sequels for *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* to be canceled.

This essay analyzes *Sense & Sensibility*, set in twenty-first century England, paying close attention to Trollope's approaches to love and marriage (its desirability or as an obligation), especially under the light of changing social mores in the twenty-first century. Additionally, Austen's views on both issues as presented in *Sense and Sensibility* are also examined.

## 2. Sequel writing and changes in Trollope

In sharp contrast to the readers' uncertainty when reading a novel for the first time, turning to a sequel involves previous expectations. Already knowing the ending, readers want to discover how their beloved characters behave in a different situation. Most sequels can be classified into one of two groups – novels that continue the original plot after the ending; or novels that transport the characters into another setting (usually, the twentieth or twenty-first centuries). *Sense & Sensibility* falls into the latter.

In Trollope's *Sense & Sensibility* (written with an ampersand to tell it apart from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*), the action takes place in the twenty-first-century, beginning with Isabella "Belle" Dashwood and her three daughters, Ellie, M., and Mags, inheriting 200,000 pounds after the death of the girls' father (Trollope 2013: 18). Ellie, who wears Converse boots, will qualify as an architect in a year (idem: 19), M. plays the guitar and is a big fan of Taylor Swift and Mags is often fiddling with her iPod, her Nintendo DS and her laptop, the typical bratty teen.

Ellie acutely feels the burden of making ends meet, given their mother's inability or reluctance to face matters – "for four women with laughable earning power, one of whom is still at school, one is unused to work, and one is both physically unfit and as yet unqualified to work. Which leaves me! Me, Elinor Dashwood, who has been living in the cloud cuckoo land of Norland and idiotic, impractical dreams of architecture" (idem: 67). Still, instead of resigning herself to this role, she grows tired of it, showing a reluctance that Elinor did not voice – "I can't always be the one who does all the bits of life you don't want to be bothered with" (idem: 278).

As in the twenty-first century women are not prone to fainting like in the past, in order to mark M. as a delicate woman, the author makes her suffer from asthma, "which made Marianne so dramatically, alarmingly fragile" (idem: 5). Still, because asthma is rarely fatal nowadays and easily treatable, it often gives the impression that this fragility is a pose. M. shares with their father their asthma and a "propensity for depression" (idem: 57), which explains the depths of her despair when Willoughby disappears.

The Dashwood women, or at least Belle and M., seem to have a flair for the dramatic to the extent that Ellie "sometimes wondered how much time and energy the whole Dashwood family had wasted in crying" (6). In contrast, Ellie is well aware of her own lack of romantic inklings: "she supposed, a little sadly, that her temperament just wasn't designed to believe that nothing mattered in the world besides romantic love" (129). This causes that "sometimes over the years she had looked at Marianne and envied her ability to abandon herself ecstatically to music, or place, or literature or ... to love" (129) whereas M. seems "to react to every single thing that happened as if you were obliged to respond on behalf of the whole feeling world" (7).

The differences between the sisters have much to do with their vision of love, as Ellie remarks: “M, I don’t believe in a one and only love, like you do” (265). Additionally, Ellie advocates for women’s action instead of women’s passivity when waiting for men to declare their love – “I’m just trying to make you see that your future happiness depends upon what you do for yourself and not on what some guy you hardly know” (184).

To update the novel, some nods to technological advances are made – Mags’ fondness for her gadgets, Belle snooping on M.’s phone (113) or technology moving the plot forward. Because of technological advances, Ed’s silence is more deafening: Ellie is shattered because Ed has not been in touch – “not a text or a call or an email. Nothing” (130). Instead of relying on hearsay or local gossip, Facebook lets the Dashwood girls know what their beloved are up to, and so does Twitter, where Lucy Steele’s tweets mislead them to believe it was Ed she married (319) and not Robert. M.’s public humiliation at having been duped by Wills is much more public than in the original, as her jealous scene and asthma attack after being rejected by Wills at a wedding go viral (202).

Given the Dashwoods’ economic difficulties, Sir John “Jonno” Middleton comes to their rescue, as he made a fortune manufacturing sportswear. His neighbour and close friend is Colonel William “Bill” Brandon, who, after serving in the military in Bosnia, runs Delaford, a center for drug addicts and alcoholics. A single man, he was in love with Eliza, a girl he compares to M., and who eventually married his brother, an alcoholic. Her story is as tragic as in Austen, but it is doubly related to addiction – first her husband’s alcoholism and then her own drug addiction. She is the mother of another Eliza, by her first dealer, who was put into foster care (212-213).

Other changes involve the two elder Dashwood sisters’ love interests. John “Wills” Willoughby, “a perfectly strange and godlike young man” (91) appears in an Aston Martin to fulfill M.’s romantic desires, but he hides a secret – he introduced the younger Eliza to drugs, who has had “one crisis after another” as well as an abortion (214-215). Edward Ferrars, as portrayed by Austen, was scarcely appealing, and readers, like Marianne, failed to see his charm. In his initial characterization, he “appears not to conform with any standard of gentlemanliness or even eighteenth-century masculinity” (Toma 2020: 30). However, some of his less attractive traits for contemporary readers, were more appealing to nineteenth-century readers. For instance, his shyness and inarticulateness owe much to the notions about Englishmen at the time. The idea of English masculinity in the eighteenth century was closely related to the need to create it in opposition to a French identity and

French visitors found the Englishmen to be, not only silent, but also blunt and unwilling to please others in conversation. The necessity then to base the nature of conversation and politeness upon the French and women caused a tension in the creation of an English masculinity, since women and the French embodied the femininity and effeminacy men sought to separate themselves from. To solve this problem, Englishmen had to establish their own manliness ... by embracing their taciturnity and blunt sincerity. ... Therefore, ... it became manly to be sincere rather than pleasing in conversation. The bluntness and taciturnity became critical traits for English gentlemanliness. (Landin 2017: 3-4)

Edward certainly lacks the gentlemanliness or the attractive conversation of Willoughby. To make him more attractive to contemporary readers, Trollope has “Ed” as a sensible man who was “thrown out of Eton” (Trollope 2013: 22) and has now decided that “I want to do community work” (idem: 23), despite his mother’s ambitions. While Edward considered becoming a parish priest, nowadays, as religion no longer occupies a dominant position in society, Ed is considering social work. The core characteristics of the priesthood and social work are rather similar – caring for others, low pay... Yet, it is not a completely positive portrayal – Ed, instead of being a man torn between a secret engagement and his true love, is presented as “a classic two-timer” (idem: 176).

Despite his noble intentions, Ed has been turned down by Amnesty International and Oxfam (33), which results in his being unemployed at the moment and with poor career prospects. This is an echo of Austen, as “apart from marriage, no Jane Austen heroine has a career at all, or ever wants to. It is less often noticed that the same is largely true of the men. Until *Persuasion*, no hero chooses his vocation in life voluntarily or practices it ambitiously” (Clausen 1999: 92). Ed, apart from applying to two charities, does not do much to promote his career and Wills apparently has no employment history. When it comes to women, Ellie, who drops out of college to get a job, does not seem to be very career-driven either and neither are her mother or M., who have no intention of working. Thus, “except for Elinor, the female characters are portrayed as rather helpless and seem to be unable to take care of themselves” (Svensson 2017: 51). Ed’s fiancée, Lucy Steele, has a career as a reflexology therapist but “I don’t make enough money to support both of us” (Trollope 2013: 171).

There are other similarities between Austen’s and Trollope’s characterization of men. In Austen’s novels, to assess the behaviour of a perfect gentleman, “the active life of service to others should be most valued” (Margolis, 2003: 22). Trollope’s novel, up to a certain extent, conforms to this expectation, as Bill runs a center treating addicts and Ed aspires to a career in social work. As portrayed by Austen, Colonel Brandon, Edward, and Willoughby, all fail to conform to the social expectations of a well-established man – to be economically independent and the head of a family. While money is not an issue for Colonel Brandon, his single status mars his social standing. Even worse, he is unable to prevent the calamities that befall both Elizas, as he is an absent paternal figure (Seeber 1999: 227). Also single, Edward and Willoughby are financially dependent on female relatives. In *Sense & Sensibility*, the same patterns are followed – Bill, despite running a center for addicts, has been unsuccessful in helping both Elizas, while Ed and Wills depend on female relatives. All in all, the *Sense and Sensibility* male characters are no paragon of masculinity (ibid), and neither are their twenty-first-century counterparts.

None of the male protagonists of *Sense and Sensibility* are virtuous men, but readers, like Marianne and her mother, are dazzled by the more obvious and appealing physical characteristics of Willoughby and are “too inclined to ignore Jane Austen’s specific descriptions of Colonel Brandon’s competence and worth” (Sutherland 1996, qtd. in Landin 2017: 15). They also overlook the fact that Willoughby lacks a key masculine trait, namely “self-control and the restraint of reckless impulses” (Mosse 1996, qtd. in idem: 16). “Austen was also perfectly capable of creating

heroes whose attractive qualities are spiritual and intellectual rather than physical: Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon” (Perry 2003: 226), but Willoughby’s dashing good looks blind M.

### 3. Marriage in Trollope and Austen

Austen was painfully aware of women’s acute need to get married in Regency England. Marriage decisively defined women’s status and their social standing. Since their lives were mostly restricted to the domestic sphere, marriage had a more profound impact on women than on men: “while the future happiness of a young man may rest with the outcome of the marital stakes, his economy and status will probably abide as it is” (Dabundo 2011: 42). Austen and her sister Cassandra were perfect examples of single women’s dependence on male relatives. At the time, “the only sources of income ordinarily available to a gentlewoman were marriage portions, inheritance, and the estate of her husband” (Bentley 2016: 231). Women’s prospects of getting an education or finding employment were severely restricted and Austen acknowledged that “single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor — which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony” (qtd in Bailey 2015: n.p.). But, desirable as marriage was, women with limited economic means and without prestigious family connections saw their marriage chances dwindle.

Austen is careful to show that, apart from the financial impact of Mr. Dashwood’s death, Mrs. Dashwood genuinely grieves for her husband’s death. In Austen’s times, “people started to think about the loss of a spouse more as an emotional than an economical issue” (Wiesner-Hanks 2008, qtd in Chalupová 2012: 19). Remarriage was not always a pleasant prospect for widows: “wealthy or comfortable widows may have seen no advantage in remarrying, for this would put them under the legal control of a man again, and poor widows ... found it difficult to find marriage partners” (ibid.). Despite the novel’s focus on marriages and the proximity in age between Mrs. Dashwood and Colonel Brandon (“a man five years younger than herself” (Austen 2013, chapter VIII, n.p.)), he is not presented as a potential suitor.

For Trollope’s Belle, the loss of her (common-law) husband is as crushing as for Mrs. Dashwood. Not only does it cause their financial ruin, but Belle feels lost without his guidance. Nevertheless, given the social changes about remarriage, at the end of the novel, Belle is open to embarking on a new relationship (Trollope 2013: 276). The characterization of Mrs. Dashwood follows the fact that “Austen, while giving her heroines family lives, rarely provides them with a good supportive mother” (Sturrock 2008), which Trollope continues in that Belle cannot prevent her daughter’s relationship with Wills. Still, Belle is a more worldly person and claims that “I just have this little nag inside me that she’s riding for a fall, and she’s going to get hurt” (Trollope 2013: 113).

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the companionate marriage emerged – young people (instead of their parents) chose their future spouse, replacing marriages made mostly for financial concerns (Dobošiová 2006: 8). Additionally, the marriage age and the number of people who remained single throughout their lives



both increased (idem: 10). Still, despite this greater laxity and freedom in choosing one's life partner, financial concerns were crucial. Not only were incomes factored in, but also inheritances (or the prospects of inheriting). The centrality of money when discussing marriage in Austen is evident: "it is a truth universally acknowledged that in Jane Austen's novels it may be wrong to marry for money, but it is silly to marry without it. We are consistently made aware of the financial status of her heroes, and it is always an issue, to a greater or lesser degree, in the heroines' choice of them" (Hopkins 1994: 76). The difference with *Sense & Sensibility* is that the novel does not end with the protagonists getting married, but just in a romantic relationship. Consequently, money does not feature so largely in the relationships between Bill and M. and Ed and Ellie, respectively (although money reasons prevented Ed and Lucy from getting married on her salary (Trollope 2013: 171)).

In Regency England, women could inherit property and entails may be placed on women, but women were often passed over in inheritances out of fear that they might fall prey to fortune-hunters (Redmond 1989: n.p.). Austen does not cite this as the reason why their beloved uncle's inheritance bypasses the Dashwood sisters, though:

The whole was tied up for the benefit of this child, who, in occasional visits with his father and mother at Norland, had so far gained on the affections of his uncle, by such attractions as are by no means unusual in children of two or three years old; an imperfect articulation, an earnest desire of having his own way, many cunning tricks, and a great deal of noise, as to outweigh all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters. (Austen 2013 n.p.)

As a result, the Dashwood sisters' financial situation drives them to seek a good marriage, but also hinders a good match.

In Trollope's novel, the idea of ancestral estates being inherited by the male child persists, as John receives the lion's share, Norland, which will become "an upmarket bed and breakfast" (Trollope 2013: 17). This anachronistic division is because Mr. Dashwood had failed to arrange his inheritance: "was it an adventure not to leave a responsible will that would secure the future of the person you'd had three daughters with – or was it feckless?" (idem: 11). That the late Mr. Dashwood abandoned his first wife (John's mother) for his common-law wife, Belle, helps explain John's animosity for his sisters (7). It is unclear whether the girls were discriminated against because of their parents' unwed status or on the grounds of gender (11). Thus, "the decision to let the male heir inherit the estate is portrayed as an act of will rather than a social restriction" (Svensson 2017: 51). According to Svensson (ibid.), this is to criticize how men are unfairly and rather randomly privileged over women, but this unequal inheritance, along with other details, makes *Sense & Sensibility* feel anachronistic.

Finances perform a key role in the relationships Austen's characters embark on; "Austen's novels suggest an understanding of the world in terms of people's connections with each other. Most if not all of those connections are regulated by determining economic factors" (Margolis 2003: 35). Financial matters were a decisive factor when wanting to get married in the nineteenth century; for instance,

Edward's lack of an income prevented his starting a family. These economic factors are also very important in Trollope in that they affect the Dashwood women's daily life, but money matters do not weigh so heavily when considering a relationship. As Ellie points out, "Ma, ... this isn't 1810, for God's sake. Money doesn't dictate relationships" (Trollope 2013: 135). Mrs. J. is similarly accused of being "like those nineteenth-century novels where marriage is the only career option for a middle-class girl" (idem: 356). Actually, the most marked departure from the original is that the sequel does not force the sisters' to get married in order to provide financially for their family.

Money issues as well as family connections were very valued assets in the marriage market; not less was a woman's reputation. In Austen's times, "pre-marital sex was a risky activity for women in Regency England" (Bailey 2015: n.p.). It sullied a young woman's reputation and ended her opportunities in the marriage market, even worse if she had a baby out of wedlock. The two Elizas' stories may be read as a cautionary tale for young women who are easily influenced by undeserving people. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Brandon's "account of Eliza 1's short life ... is a hackneyed tale of an orphaned heiress forced into a cruel, loveless marriage that led to every conceivable bad end: adultery, divorce, prostitution, destitution, an illegitimate birth, illness, and death" (Nelson 2012: 164). Because premarital sex or having children out of wedlock is no longer frowned upon in Britain, in Trollope the two Elizas' problem is drug addiction. The story of the second Eliza serves the purpose of revealing "that Marianne's idealized first love is actually a heartless seducer. In eighteenth-century fiction, the discovery that a gentleman has seduced and abandoned a young woman is usually enough to eliminate him from a romantic plot" (Nelson 2012: 168-169). In *Sense & Sensibility*, he is revealed to be the person who first introduced the younger Eliza to drugs (Trollope 2013: 214), a fact only revealed after M. discovers that Wills is already in a relationship with a Greek heiress.

For Trollope, an online reputation can damage a person's social standing as much as nineteenth-century unwed motherhood. While Elinor and Marianne had to "navigate their romantic hopes within the stridently classist, gossip-saturated climate of British society" (Cote 2019: n.p.), now it is even perilous because humiliations can go viral in minutes. Nonetheless, the great importance Trollope attributes to a viral video strains credibility because it is hard to believe that a young woman M.'s age would not live it down. Also, compared to the explicitly sexual content of some viral videos, her video is tame and scarcely scandalous.

#### 4. The ending

For Nelson (2012: 174), "the surprise is that although Marianne feels 'no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship' for Brandon, she marries him. She repudiates her former romantic opinions. Even though we are told she marries voluntarily, this marriage does not seem to be entirely her own decision or solely for her own good". Austen is careful to assure us that his love will make a success of this marriage: "Colonel Brandon was now as happy, as all those who best loved him, believed he deserved to be; - in Marianne he was consoled for every

past affliction; - her regard and her society restored his mind to animation, and his spirits to cheerfulness; and that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend" (Austen 2013: n.p.). Still, many are still doubtful that her husband's devotion is enough to ensure Marianne's future happiness – "what, innumerable critics have asked, if Marianne never brought herself to love Colonel Brandon?" (Butler 1975, qtd in Nelson 2012: 176). *Sense & Sensibility* diminishes the readers' negative reaction to the ending – Bill and M. are starting a relationship, not getting married.

Romance is central in both Austen's works and their sequels, but the way that the protagonists approach them is certainly different. In Austen, romance reflects "the heroine's inexperience. Prudence as a loss of youthful illusions is the end, regardless of whether it is rewarded with happy marriage and prosperity or with resignation and, often, death" (Vranjes 2014: 197). M. is still young enough to fall for Wills' wiles on account of her innocence, but her mistakes in associating with him are punished with no more than short-lived viral shame on the Internet. Contrary to *Sense and Sensibility*, we see M. successfully move on and get over Wills and start a new relationship (Trollope 2013: 323-324, 362).

Ed and Ellie do not get married at the end either although they get engaged (Trollope 2013: 332). In *Sense and Sensibility*, "because the resolution comes about in a way that has very little to do with Edward's heroic qualities or Elinor's worth, their story comes across . . . as . . . a story accidentally ending in marriage for reasons that have little to do with either of its ostensible protagonists. . . . Their experience suggests, in fact, that relationships can depend as much on chance as on love" (Shaffer 1994, qtd in Wheelwright 2015: 14). Similarly, in *Sense & Sensibility*, Ed and Ellie's reunion is a matter of chance as a result of Lucy Steele and Robert Ferrars' marriage.

## 5. Conclusion

Austen indicted an excess of sensibility. For a young woman to openly display her feelings not only opened her to potential heartbreak but also from possible social ostracism. Wearing one's heart in one's sleeve, in particular for women, could make them social pariahs and no longer eligible in the marriage market. In *Sense & Sensibility*, an excess of sensibility does not have such serious repercussions. The only consequence of M. 's creating a stir is a viral video. Public humiliation might be bitter, but this does not have long-lasting consequences for M. Also, her excessive sensibility is not strongly criticized by Trollope, as Ellie envies the strength of her sister's feelings and wishes she could feel as much.

Austen's world was one ruled by strict social rules where failing to observe such social conventions and proprieties meant lifelong social ostracism. Moreover, an individual's behavior had a severe impact on the whole family. The two Elizas represent what happens to a woman whose reputation is completely ruined. In general, because in the twenty-first century social rules are not so strictly followed, the force of the characters' wrong decisions do not carry the same force as in Austen's day. Young M.'s public shame on YouTube would be forgotten as the next viral video



hits, scarcely having an impact on her sisters' marriage prospects or her family's reputation.

In Trollope's version, M. and Bill do not get married at the end but are very close to each other (Trollope 2013: 362), which takes into account her young age and may also follow the fact that "love in Austen is a form of friendship" (Deresiewicz 1997: 531). Just like "the final pages of every Austen novel celebrate the very best kind of union, based on compatibility, affection, and respect" (Jones 2009, qtd. in Wheelwright 2015: 3), here we have the same for M. and Bill. The lack of a wedding may help redress the perceived "wrongness" of the original's ending. Many have found fault with the ending of *Sense and Sensibility*, in that impulsive, young Marianne marries a man many years her senior and who does not seem to have much in common with her. Trollope seems to atone for it.

Sequel writers walk a tightrope, concerning the faithfulness of their works to the original novel. If the rewriting is too close to the original, they run the risk of being accused of lack of originality and repetitiveness. If they go too far, they may be blamed for departing too much from the original for recognition. They must create a new literary work, but bearing in mind the situations and characters created by another author (Gomez-Galisteo 2018: 3). However, Trollope, in her excessive adherence to an Austenian situation, stretches credibility, as young women nowadays are more likely to have a career of their own rather than depend on their husbands' financial standing. Despite the use of mobile phones, social media, and some update in morals and greater awareness about women's position in society, which Mags questions, "there is not much adjustment to the contemporary audience" (Svensson 2017: 51). All in all, *Sense & Sensibility*, because of its close adherence to the original, ends up disappointing in failing to acknowledge that social mores have greatly changed from Austen's times.

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