Universidad Zaragoza
1542

Undergraduate Dissertation
Trabajo Fin de Grado

Ladies and Solidarity: A Study of Feminism in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*

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2019-2020

Abstract

The times of British author Jane Austen were still marked by a steep difference between genders; if born to a certain social class and status, men enjoyed freedom and saw their will mostly untouched by the sense of propriety of their era, whereas women were expected to meet the highest standards and to conform to the norm. Austen's insight gives readers not only her own opinion on the matter through her particular use of irony, but also a vast handful of ladies that do not follow the rules blindly, that are opinionated, and that are much more than just someone's wives, mothers or daughters.

The philosophical current of feminism, in its basic form, defends that very notion, that of women being individuals and having the same rights as men. Through academic research and with one of Jane Austen's most famous and beloved heroines as an example, this undergraduate dissertation intends to point out the unintentional feminism in *Sense and Sensibility*'s Elinor Dashwood. The reason for the division in the *corpus* is the want to dive into Elinor's most active facets: as a sensible daughter, sister, confidante, and love interest.

Resumen

Los tiempos de la autora británica Jane Austen todavía estaban marcados por una profunda diferencia entre los géneros; si nacían en una determinada clase social y con un cierto estatus, los hombres gozaban de libertad y veían su voluntad intacta a pesar del sentido de la propiedad de su época, mientras que de las mujeres se esperaba que cumplieran con unos altísimos objetivos y se conformaran con la norma. La visión de Austen da a sus lectores no sólo su opinión acerca del tema a través de su único uso de la ironía, sino un amplio abanico de mujeres que no siguen ciegamente las reglas, que tienen ideas propias, que son mucho más que las mujeres, madres o hijas de alguien.

La corriente filosófica del feminismo defiende, en su forma básica, exactamente la misma idea, la de las mujeres siendo individuos y teniendo los mismos derechos que los hombres. A través de la investigación académica y con una de las más famosas y queridas heroínas de Jane Austen como ejemplo, este trabajo pretende señalar el feminismo

involuntario en Elinor Dashwood, protagonista de *Sentido y Sensibilidad*. La razón de la división del cuerpo del trabajo es el deseo de explorar las principales facetas de Elinor en la novela: como hija, hermana, confidente e interés amoroso.

Ladies & Solidarity

A Study of Feminism in Jane Austen's *Sense & Sensibility*

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1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that feminism is but a contemporary invention, used to disturb the known order of society, cause arguments at family gatherings between members belonging to different generations and, all in all, be the source of tension among the sexes for over a hundred years. However, when asked exactly what it is, few can answer with only facts and not opinion.

The Collins English Dictionary defines feminism as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights, power, and opportunities as men". While as a definition it is quite correct, it does not tackle the political changes, studies and overall social movement that feminism conveys. Indeed, there are many branches coming from the same tree, a tree whose roots grow deeper and are older than it is believed. The demand for equality between the sexes existed in Ancient Greece, as Plato states in *The Republic* that women and men should receive the same education, the same opportunities in the eyes of the Estate and even be able to work in the same positions, with the exception of those that required greater physical strength. History beats with names that thought of a world of cooperation, instead of subjugation, in every era: Rome (with Gaius Musonius Rufus and his Discourse "That Women Too Should Study Philosophy"), medieval Europe (Eleanor of Aquitaine, Christine de Pizan) and the Islamic world (Ibn Rushd), the Renaissance (Catherine of Aragon, Isotta Nogarola, Mary Bassett, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz), the Enlightenment (Olympe de Gouges). It is in the late eighteenth century when one of the first studies and works is unarguably labelled as feminist, an *opus* that would open the door to a whole new philosophy.

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792, and, even over two hundred years later, it is still quoted and referenced as one of the pillars on which feminism as it is commonly understood stands. Her creed was a banner under which many women took refuge during the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, the first meeting ever about the rights of women held in the United States, an inspiration for this movement and for other women around the world to find their way and their own voice. *A Vindication...* was quoted during the first of the four waves of western feminism, upon which major political and social changes happened: the suffragist movement, women's claim for economical and personal

independence as well as their right to vote. Granted, Wollstonecraft falls under the 'white, liberal feminist' category according to today's standards, but her influence in the minds of her fellow women and contemporaries cannot be denied. Such a woman is the 'rebel writer' herself, Jane Austen, born in 1775.

In a society that reserved women for house duty if they were accommodated and for hard labour if they were not, Austen wished to be more than someone's wife, mother, or a spinster, which seemed to be the only available roles for her. She wished to be a writer, to have her work acknowledged, published, and make a living from it (Fergus, 1997) In fact, in a letter to her brother Frank, Austen writes: "You will be glad to hear that every copy of Sense & Sensibility is sold & that it has brought me £140 besides the Copyright, if that should ever be of any value. I have now therefore written myself into £250, which only makes me long for more." These words from the author are nothing if not evidence of the pride she took in her novels and her determination to earn her own money.

Miss Austen was very much aware of gender inequality in her time period, and while she did not write essay upon essay denouncing the issue, she did reflect it in her novels. Questions of class and money and the acute difference of how men and women deal with this are evident in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, etc. Not only that, but she picked at the declared psychological differences between the sexes through her broadly known irony and sarcasm in the texts:

"The Mr. Musgroves had their game to guard, and to destroy, their horses, dogs, and newspapers to engage them; and the females were fully occupied in all the other common subjects of housekeeping, neighbours, dress, dancing, and music."
Austen, *Persuasion*, p. 35.

And openly in some of her most famous quotes:

"Give a girl an education and introduce her properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without further expense to anybody."
Austen, *Mansfield Park*, p. 3.

Incidentally, this quote reflects very well Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas about women needing and wanting to be educated rather than just married off.

Austen's female protagonists were, in many aspects, as unique as she was. Opinionated, wanting more than just marriage or motherhood throughout their lives. This approach, not being as proactive as other characters and plots, has been disregarded as feminist, with the argument that, in the end, these heroines do find love and get married, not challenging the role expected of them as other novels have their women do (e.g.: Arya Stark or Asha Greyjoy, both from *A Song of Ice And Fire,* by American author George R. R. Martin). Nevertheless, Austen's characters did the best they could in the circumstances they found themselves in. They fought for their own happiness and their right to choose, even when their choices were 'traditional'. As Brown argues, "linking Jane Austen with the feminist tradition of revolt in the eighteenth century we need not begin with the assumption that we must establish complete parallels with all facets of the twentieth-century feminists' revolt." This can also be applied to our present day. We need not mirror our present, fourth wave feminism and its ways of gaining presence to the ones back in Austen's time.

It has been argued that *A Vindication…* did have an impact on the way in which Austen wrote her heroines, particularly Fanny Price from *Mansfield Park* (Reiff, 2016), depicting her personality and behaviour as one never seen before in her novels. It hardly comes as a surprise to read that not many people liked her in her time.

Fanny Price's actions and opinions are but a part of what feminism includes. To speak of another, one must travel back to 1811, the year in which *Sense and Sensibility* was published 'by a lady'. This particular novel offers not only Austen's critical and accurate depiction of the customs that surrounded her, as well as the psyche of a large group of women, but female solidarity. In the feminist philosophy, female solidarity is the manner in which women help each other no matter their social status, relationship, race or age. The establishment of female solidarity groups is an important component of the strategy to redefine the position of women (Croll, 1978.) Author Elaine Showalter states in her book *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) that "women novelists' awareness of each other and of their

female audience showed a kind of covert solidarity that sometimes amounted to a genteel conspiracy" (p. 15.) According to Showalter, Austen was too docile, perhaps too enclosed in the world of the gentry to be actually revolutionary (hence why she does not call her a feminist, but rather "feminine"), and yet, her influence is not denied. The impact Austen's novels had on women from the past and still have today invite critical thinking and, if nothing else, are a window to a delightfully ironic portrayal of her time and society.

Having defined the theory, this undergraduate dissertation will attempt to illustrate the examples of feminism and, more specifically, female solidarity in *Sense and Sensibility* by analysing the thoughts and vision of one of its two main heroines, Miss Elinor Dashwood.

2. Meeting the Dashwood Ladies

"Elinor, this eldest daughter, whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother, and enabled her frequently to counteract, to the advantage of them all, that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence. She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn; and which one of her sisters had resolved never to be taught."

(*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 4.)

Thus are the readers introduced to Elinor Dashwood, the firstborn daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood and the main heroine of *Sense and Sensibility*. She is one scale of the balance which represents the dichotomy in the novel between two eras, two movements: Neoclassicism and Romanticism. The title itself speaks of this clash of reason versus feeling, of thinking versus doing. By her description, Elinor is undoubtedly the sense, the voice of reason. She embodies the ideal Neoclassical lady, prudent, reserved, intelligent, witty. Even her physique favours this representation, for she is tall, slender, and has a very good posture, perhaps reminding those who meet her of a column of Ancient Greek inspiration.

From the moment she is presented, it is stated that her character is at odds with that of her mother and sisters. Her “strength of understanding” and “coolness of judgement” stand against the romantic tendencies of Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne (and even Margaret, although her follies are not as developed as her older sister’s), the secondary heroine of the story. With this conundrum at hand, it might be assumed that the ladies of the house criticise each other and argue without catching their breaths—however, throughout the novel it is made clear that what holds this family together, apart from Elinor’s good sense, is the unconditional love they have for one another.

“Marianne's abilities were, in many respects, quite equal to Elinor's. She was sensible and clever; but eager in everything: her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation. She was generous, amiable, interesting: she was everything but prudent. The resemblance between her and her mother was strikingly great.”
(*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 4.)

Marianne’s sensibility, Elinor’s ability to be prudent and calm, and their mother’s own self-control are put to the test from the very beginning of the novel, when their husband and father dies, and their comfort and status are dependant on the good will of their stepson and half-brother, John Dashwood. Austen describes this new Mr. Dashwood as a man of little to no amiable quality. He does love his wife dearly, but her selfishness and mean spirits are reflected in him, and thus, his sisters and Mrs. Dashwood have no choice but to fare for themselves as well they can, for they cannot inherit property nor make their own fortune. Robert Irvine comments in his *Jane Austen: A Sourcebook* that “Propertied women were, as we have seen, expected not to work”, and the film adaptation of 1995 by Ang Lee and screenplayed by Emma Thompson herself very well puts it:

ELINOR: Except that you will inherit your fortune. We cannot even earn ours.

EDWARD: Perhaps Margaret is right. Piracy is our only option.

Because the Dashwood women belong to a certain middle-upper class, the gentry, their only chance at regaining the commodities they grew up with at Norland Park is to marry well, as it was common among the ladies of a genteel position in Jane Austen's time period. Making their own money and purchasing their own property was unthinkable due to the dictatorship of propriety, and, unless the lady in question was an heiress (such a character amongst Austen's protagonists was Emma Woodhouse), choices were either marriage or spinsterhood, and the latter would always force one to depend on a relative. LeRoy W. Smith writes in *Jane Austen and the Drama of Women* as follows: "In patriarchy, concern for the disposition of property rules the making of marriages. In nineteenth-century England middle-and-upper-class women had little choice but to place themselves on the market in hope of attracting a bidder." (Smith, 1983, p. 14)

Understanding the importance of being well wed is another crucial difference between Elinor and Marianne. As she would, the former has a rather realistic perspective on the matter, while the latter does not conform to the expectations society has on the future of young women. She longs for love and not for a commercial exchange, which is why she is so quick to reject the idea of her forming an attachment to Colonel Brandon in the first place, due to the steep age difference. Nevertheless, Marianne also fantasizes with quite an income for her own comfort, not considering that perhaps love does not always come with a large fortune in hand.

"About eighteen hundred or two thousand a year; not more than *that*."

Elinor laughed. "*Two* thousand a year! *One* is my wealth! I guessed how it would end."
(*Sense and Sensibility*, p. 61, original emphasis.)

Indeed both in the novel and by scholars and authors, Marianne is heavily criticized while Elinor is put under a more favourable light. Her excess of emotion and the expression of it, her, at times, delusional behaviour, make readers sympathise less with her cause and more with her sister's. The fact that Austen tells the story through Elinor's perspective does not help Marianne. However, in more recent papers and articles, tables turn for both of them. Dorothy Reno goes to the lengths of calling Elinor a 'constipated' young woman and remarks

her loneliness in suffering, while praising Marianne's openness and in fact labelling it as a somewhat feminist behaviour, a protest against the norm imposed on females of the time, the rule that demanded they were composed and aspired to nothing but marriage (Reno, 2017). Clearly Marianne is consciously rebellious towards the always courteous façade she is supposed to maintain; she is transparent and frank in her fancies ("Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion.", [p.82]). Her dislikes and her taste are at points offensive but never ignorant or dull-minded. "And Marianne, who had the knack of finding her way in every house to the library, however it might be avoided by the family in general, soon procured herself a book." (p. 201). The language she uses is one of a cultivated person, her fine sarcasm is a mark of intelligence, when she cannot say anything pleasant she says nothing at all instead of lying (Bonin, 2015), and Austen remarks more than once that she is by no means less intelligent than her elder sister.

In any case, as the second miss Dashwood says, "it is Elinor of whom we think and speak" (p. 165.) Practical, calm, quiet, constant and yes, feeling Elinor, who does not rebel so evidently but, like everything, takes it all in and unfolds inside her mind. 'Happy' Elinor, who perhaps does not do so much for her individual freedom, but does a great deal for the women that surround her, be them family, neighbours, or enemies.

3. Elinor as the Pillar of her Family

Jane Austen is famous for depicting the life and problems of a part of society which had been thus far quite ignored by literature and art in general. Such problems would include, of course, those of economical nature; and in *Sense and Sensibility*, the misfortune that befalls the protagonists mirrors one that afflicted the whole of Great Britain, for through the summer of 1794 to 1795, the country faced a severe crisis that involved rich and poor alike—or at least, as much alike as it could be. Not only that, through all of Austen's writing period Britain was indebted and the financial crisis was heavily linked to military conflict. According to Sheryl Craig, rich landowners of the time were, by law, taxed in such a way that

they had to provide for the poor, yet the upcoming middle class that was getting wealthier by the minute had no such obligation unless they also owned land (Craig, 2011.) The crisis also invited individual generosity and charity.

This situation is then portrayed by Austen through the character of John Dashwood, who, upon his father's death at the very beginning of the novel, becomes a landowner himself and will be therefore taxed so as to help the less fortunate. He gives his word to his father that he will also provide for the female members of his family, and yet influenced by his wife and his own selfishness, it is not to be so. From the moment her father dies and it becomes clear that her brother has no intention of keeping the promise he made to the gentleman of helping his sisters and stepmother, it is Elinor who takes on the responsibility of acting prudently, which was all the not exceedingly rich gentry could do in such a time. And, really, in the words of Marianne herself, how would have they done without her?

Elinor is, at her nineteen years of age, the one who has to remind her own mother that, firstly, they owe John's wife at least civility if not affection, and secondly, they have nowhere to go, for Mrs. Dashwood, romantic as she is, would have abandoned Norland Park the moment Fanny Dashwood set foot in the house. In a process of mourning and incertitude, "she could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance." (p. 4)

She must also put her mother's wishes of a grand living under check, for now their fortune is considerably less and they need to economize, and when Mrs. Dashwood considers large houses in the vicinity of Norland, Elinor manages to dissuade her. The moment Sir John Middleton's letter arrives, offering them a cottage in Devonshire, the lack of opposition from Elinor is enough to encourage her mother to accept this new arrangement. This only proves how much Mrs. Dashwood relies and depends on her eldest daughter. Were they to hold John Dashwood to his word, they would have stayed guests forever in their former home, and any perception of independence would be non-existent.

Leaving Norland is no pleasant experience for Elinor, especially not after meeting Edward Ferrars, the unlikely hero. But if one should make a remark about a character trait that is not her prudent judgement, is that she always puts others before herself, more so when those others are her family. This is love, this is solidarity, preventing her mother from further poverty, wanting her and her sisters to be comfortable but safe. Evidence of this is how she acts as a guide and mentor to both Margaret and especially Marianne.

4. Elinor as the Big Sister

Sibling relationships have been a landmark in literature since the very beginning. Thinking about fairytales, a set of brothers or sisters is usually found competing amongst themselves, or perhaps the youngest is being abused or ridiculed, as is the case in "Cinderella" by Charles Perrault (1697) or "Beauty and the Beast" by Madame de Villeneuve (1740). In classic literature, there is always opposition, a sibling that is better than the other, prettier, smarter, more compassionate. Nineteenth century creations, particularly those written by women, take a turn and have siblings, sisters especially, support and love each other, as seen in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), or Jane Austen's own *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) or *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (Rueschmann, 1995). Even in our present days, how women of the same household interact with and support each other is a source of inspiration and a tool to depict the individuality of a person but also, their part in a family. It is a very special bond to explore.

Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are always listed as an example of unique sisterly love. True enough, until them, authors had hardly depicted sisters who confided in one another so much and whose affection was so profound and evident. Nevertheless, what makes them special and notable goes beyond two sisters sharing secrets. Elinor helps Marianne learn and Marianne helps Elinor feel. Even so, since *Sense and Sensibility* relies more on Elinor's point of view and readers get a closer look on her journey and psique, it appears she gives more of herself to the relationship with Marianne than the latter.

Margaret, the youngest, also takes more than she gives. Perhaps she can be more easily forgiven, for she is only thirteen. Elinor contributes to her education by practising, in a

smaller scale, the same attempts she does on Marianne: she advises Margaret to be cautious in her fantasies, not to proclaim what she believes to be true as such in public, and whenever her youngest sister does run her mouth, it is indeed Marianne, and not Elinor, who gives more credit to her mistakes by chastising her instead of trying to laugh it off. Some examples of this are Margaret's certainty of Marianne's secret engagement to Mr. Willoughby, or the moment she gives away part of Elinor's heart to the Middletons.

'Oh, Elinor!' [Margaret] cried, 'I have such a secret to tell you about Marianne. I am sure she will be married to Mr. Willoughby very soon.'

'You have said so,' replied Elinor, 'almost every day since they first met on High-church Down; and they had not known each other a week, I believe, before you were certain that Marianne wore his picture round her neck; but it turned out to be only the miniature of our great uncle.'
(p. 39.)

Through a bit of sense of humour, of which Elinor, despite her modesty, has a great deal (it is almost impossible to think of an 'Austenian' heroine who cannot use sarcasm and irony with elegance), the eldest Dashwood girl tries to drive her sister down a path similar to her own, one of having all the facts and being discreet before passing judgement. This small reprimand, were Margaret to heed Elinor's words, would save the former from both disappointment and ridicule in the future; however, Austen states that the third Dashwood sister is very similar to her mother and Marianne in her abundance of romanticism and lack of sense, and her almost nonexistent development prevents the readers from knowing whether she would grow into exertion or not. Elinor certainly makes an effort for it to happen. Marianne, in her own way, also wishes to set an example, albeit with an opposite result.

In any case, the relationship that has always taken the spotlight has been Elinor and Marianne's—their seemingly polar opposite personalities, their banter and their journey from a situation of adversity to happiness attracts even more attention than whatever their romantic interests have to offer. Not in vain the original title of their story was *Elinor and Marianne*. It is *their* tale, and they make their life. Even when they believe their possibilities of absolute

bliss are gone, both girls make a resolution to be as happy and content as they can, in their own terms. After learning from bitter disappointment, they do not resign but choose to make the best of their circumstances, as much as it is within their power.

Both sisters must learn and evolve the hard way. Marianne is scorned in love and faces a chance of death by a putrid fever (a very Romantic notion, this of severe illness), and Elinor "knows herself to be divided from Edward for ever" (p. 174), carries on her shoulders the weight of her distress, her sister's and the venomously imposed confidences of her love rival, and almost loses her dear Marianne.

Again, it should be stressed that feminism, per se, was not a goal of Austen's when she wrote her books, because it simply did not exist as such. Margaret Kirkham in her book, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (2000), says "the history of feminist ideas and relation to literature and politics before the late 19th century when women's suffrage became an active political issue, has yet to be written", which by all means does not invalidate the power and independence Austen protagonists have, or the fact that without female support and solidarity, *Sense and Sensibility* would have been more a tragedy than the novel we know today. Keeping with Kirkham's ideas, it is emphasized that Elinor, who is the main focus of this dissertation, wants herself and those closest to her to be better. She lends her helping hand and offers her comforting advice whenever she is able. Elinor is not only her sister's guardian, but her rock.

'Exert yourself, dear Marianne,' she cried, 'if you would not kill yourself and all who love you. Think of your mother; think of her misery while *you* suffer: for her sake you must exert yourself.'

'Do you call *me* happy, Marianne? [...]'
'Forgive me, forgive me,' [...]
'I can have no pleasure while I see you in this state.'
(p. 122, original emphasis.)

This lack of selfishness, thinking of the pain it would cause their mother if she knew how much Marianne suffers, assuring Marianne that neither she nor Mrs. Dashwood could bear to see her in that state, rejecting the idea of their immediate going away for they owe their hostess, Mrs. Jennings, a great deal of civility, when she could do with a getaway herself, demonstrates how much Elinor cares. It is she who stays by Marianne's side when she gets her heart broken and takes ill (and Colonel Brandon doing everything he is able to do). It is she who is concerned enough about her sister's well being and reputation, wanting to protect her as best she can. Elinor values her sister as a whole, however. She values her opinions, she wants Marianne to trust her, and when she does not, as the following quote shows, Elinor is wounded.

'You are expecting a letter, then?' said Elinor, unable to be longer silent.
'Yes, a little—not much.'
After a short pause. 'You have no confidence in me, Marianne.'
'Nay, Elinor, this reproach from *you*—you who have confidence in no one!'
(p. 112, original emphasis.)

Surely Elinor would rather have her sister's confidence on her side instead of Lucy Steele's, imposed on her and making her unable to shake it off nor talk about how it makes her feel to anybody, not even Marianne, no matter how much she wants to—she is honour-bound: "—*then*, if I had not been bound to silence, perhaps nothing could have kept me entirely—not even what I owed to my dearest friends—from openly shewing that I was *very* unhappy." (p. 174, original emphasis.) Yet Elinor's complexity as a character goes beyond her having to cope with her rival's chatter about how very much the man she loves is in love with *her*. Lucy Steele's confessions are a tool for understanding.

5. Elinor as the Confidante

A novel by Jane Austen would not be such a thing if there were not a few obstacles on the way to find the happiness of true love. For Elinor Dashwood, who takes the time to actually get to know her love interest and is quite sure he returns her feelings, this obstacle has a first and last name: Lucy Steele. Miss Steele is the youngest of two sisters who happened to meet Edward Ferrars four years before the Dashwood ladies did. This is how he, near the end of the novel, explains his infatuation: "It was a foolish, idle inclination on my side," said he, "the consequence of ignorance of the world—and want of employment. [...] Lucy appeared everything that was amiable and obliging. She was pretty too—at least I thought so *then*; and I had seen so little of other women, that I could make no comparisons, and see no defects." (p. 240-241, original emphasis.)

Of course, because of the novel's point of view and her own actions, Lucy is depicted as one of the main antagonists. However, it should be noted that, even if in the story some of her traits are considered defects, she has good qualities as well. She is very clever (though not cultivated) and ambitious, she knows how to charm people, and perhaps one thing is thoroughly forgotten: she wants not marital bliss, but security and stability. Lucy is sensible in her own self-interested way (Uttama, 2016). Elinor herself, despite her pain and mortification, credits her rival with shrewdness. It is possible not to like somebody and yet think they have some positive aspects to themselves, as Elinor proves.

In the past, perhaps, when women were expected to be pious, meek and good, having material goals was a fatal flaw—but since Elinor understands what it is like to be poor and needing more than what one has, her censure of Lucy is because of her heart, not so much her motives. Besides, once she is certain of Edward's love for her, no matter what Lucy says, she deals with the situation as calmly as she is able. She both pities and praises Edward because he is honourable enough not to give up his previous engagement, all while she knows he cannot really be happy with such a woman: "if her case were pitiable, his was hopeless. His impudence had made her miserable for a while; but it seemed to have deprived himself of all chance of ever being otherwise. She might in time regain tranquillity; but *he*, what had he to look forward to?" (p. 92, original emphasis.)

It should be made clear that Lucy, as Austen's novel suggests, is not a good person. She might get what she was after all along by marrying Robert Ferrars, Edward's younger brother, but Austen still 'punishes' her by making her marriage devoid of love and companionship. Granted that is not what she was looking for in the first place, but still—living one's life with someone one is not fond of is, at the very least, regrettable.

Lucy confides in Elinor not because she is in desperate need of a friend, but because she knows of Edward's feelings towards Miss Dashwood. She acts out of jealousy, to prevent Elinor from believing she has a chance, and to get her new "close friend" to help her win over her fiancé's family; this, however unpleasant, is what Lucy believes must do in order to keep her security in place. As Lynda Hall says, "Austen might be revealing that Lucy's unscrupulous speculation is necessary in the marriage market, but she clearly does not celebrate its existence" (Hall, 2011.)

Elinor finds herself in a situation of helplessness. Saying anything about this secret engagement would taint Edward's prospects and Lucy's reputation. Undoubtedly, her rival is not the first person in Elinor's mind when she promises to keep the confession silent. She thinks mostly of Edward and wants to spare herself of her mother and Marianne's pity, as well as save them a great deal of disappointment, since they love Edward sincerely. Her solidarity might not be directed towards Lucy, but it is towards her family, again. "The necessity of concealing from her mother and Marianne [...], was no aggravation of Elinor's distress. On the contrary it was a relief to her, to be spared the communication of what would give such affliction to them, and to be saved likewise from hearing that condemnation of Edward, which would probably flow from the excess of their partial affection for herself, and which was more than she felt equal to support." (p. 92-93.)

While the youngest Miss Steele goes on and on about her future felicity when she is in Elinor's company, the latter shows not rivalry or spite, but dignity:

"She had little difficulty in understanding thus much of her rival's intentions, and while she was firmly resolved to act by her as every principle of honour and honesty

directed,[...]; she could not deny herself the comfort of endeavouring to convince Lucy that her heart was unwounded" (p. 94.)

Elinor is determined not to be callous and resentful (which is one of the reasons why she keeps quiet.) She will respect Lucy as much as courtesy deems necessary, but she will still make it perfectly clear that she is not to be made feel inferior or show distress. Elinor is ever polite, and still knows her own value.

6. Elinor and Love

There is no question that a constant in Jane Austen's portrayal of true romantic relationships is equality. It may not be equality of background or fortune, as is the case of Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, but the couples regard each other as such. For Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars, this is as true as it is for the rest. Elinor and Edward are very much alike in thought, feeling and taste. They share a similar notion of quiet happiness, of not needing much to be comfortable. "Edward Ferrars was not recommended to their good opinion by any peculiar graces of person or address. [...]" (p. 18.) Elinor is the first of the Dashwoods to get closer to him, and thus, to discover the true nature of his personality.

As has been mentioned, though they fall in love with each other, Edward is unable to ask Elinor to marry him. Later in the novel she discovers why and cannot help but admire the honour of his ways even if it means that they will be forced to be separated, being his only fault having stayed so long at Norland when he realised he was developing a deeper feeling towards her (p. 92.) Elinor sees respect and honour as a cornerstone in marriage—she could have not been happy if Edward had just broken off his engagement to Lucy for her sake. This favours Lucy, to be sure, but also shines a light on Elinor's character: even if a lady is not to her liking, even if, indeed, said lady is the reason she (or someone dear to her) is unhappy, that woman does not deserve to be scorned. She makes a very clear statement to Mr. Willoughby while Marianne is still ill:

“Your wife has a claim to your politeness, to your respect, at least”.
(p. 219.)

Towards herself, naturally she would accept no less. Before Edward reaches all ideal points of freedom and maturity (Watson, 2011) to propose to her, she is content with the idea of knowing that, at least, none of them did anything dishonourable and that she would, in time, be able to find peace elsewhere.

As far as romance goes, even if she suffers greatly, Elinor is the one who ultimately suffers ‘less’ not because Austen wants to rise sense above sensibility, or the destiny of one sister above the other; it is because Elinor sticks to honour at all times and so does Edward. Since Marianne needs to evolve and learn, she first falls in love with a man of loose morals. However, later on “her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to [Colonel Brandon], as it had once been to Willoughby” (p. 253.)

Granted neither Elinor nor Edward get back into Mrs. Ferrars or Fanny’s good graces after they are married—but there is a certain civility that for them is enough. After all their trials and tribulations, they have each other, and Elinor’s family is happy. She has found herself in the most perfect circumstance she could be in.

7. Conclusion

After re-reading *Sense and Sensibility* and the undertaken research, Elinor’s behaviour towards her fellow females can hardly be put to question: she knows the world they live in and she knows that, no matter their nature or what they have done, they all at least deserve respect. Elinor Dashwood is a young woman who, in her own way, denounces that ladies enjoy less freedom to decide about their lives than men, as she “playfully” mentions to her brother John:

‘We think *now*,’—said Mr. Dashwood, after a short pause, ‘of *Robert’s* marrying Miss Morton.’
Elinor, smiling at the grave and decisive importance of her brother's tone, calmly replied,

‘The lady, I suppose, has no choice in the affair.’

(p.197, original emphasis.)

Elinor also tries to see good even in those who seem coarse: Mrs. Jennings, whom she thought a bit vulgar upon meeting her, ends up being a rather good friend in her books; her daughter Charlotte Palmer, even if she is air-headed, earns herself some praise from Elinor due to her disposition to be happy and pleasant. Even cold, distant lady Middleton is admired for her countenance and elegance, though she is lacking in conversation and is not one for pleasing, unlike her sister. Yes, Elinor makes judgement, but she is one of the very few characters in the novel who actually tries to be objective and rational.

In short, Elinor does fulfill the characteristics of a quiet but steady feminist, even before the concept could be applied to her. She respects women, she helps them, her main goal is not marriage but her family’s and her own happiness, no matter its form, all while having wonderful qualities of her own. Her education, wit and aspirations would, surely, have made Mary Wollstonecraft proud.

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