Courtship and Marriage in the Work of Jane Austen

Juan de Dios Liria Marrero

Supervisor: Laura Lojo Rodríguez
2012-2013
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# Table of Contents

Introduction 1

1. Jane Austen, Class Warfare, and the Marriage Market – A Historical Overview 4
   1.1 Jane Austen and the Long Eighteenth Century 4
   1.2 Social Status and the Landed Gentry 6
   1.3 Marriage as a Business: Consolidation of Land and Wealth Through Marriage and Inheritance 8
   1.4 The Gentry Strikes Back: Entailments, Marriage Acts and Conduct Books 9
   1.5 The Marriage Market and the Rise of the Novel 15

2. *Sense and Sensibility* and the Influence of the Marriage Market in Jane Austen’s Popular Fiction 20
   2.1 Preliminary Considerations 20
      2.1.1 Social Divisions 20
      2.1.2 Money and Wealth 25
   2.2 The Marriage Market as the Driving Force in Sense and Sensibility 34

Conclusions 39
Works Cited 42
Introduction

Jane Austen (16 December 1775 – 18 July 1817) is one of the most popular and highly acclaimed members of the pantheon of English letters. Her works are considered to be classics, and she is often as highly regarded by modern readers as she was by those of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, among whom feature writers and intellectuals of the highest ranks. Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland from 1850 to 1896, for example, often compared Austen to Shakespeare for her powers of drama and caricature (Lanski 6). Robert Louis Stevenson, the Scottish novelist best known for The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1886), is also among those who fell under Austen’s spell, and Marghanita Lanski, Late Vice Chairwoman of the Arts Council of Great Britain records that when Elizabeth Bennet — perhaps the most admired, and certainly most forthright, of Austen’s heroines — spoke, “he [Stevenson] wanted to go down on his knees” (86).

Despite her fame and immense popularity, Austen remains one of the most enigmatic and misunderstood figures in literary history. She was a very private person by most estimates, and information about her life and thoughts is scarce, most of it coming from family biographies as well as a greatly reduced number of highly censored letters she wrote to her sister Cassandra — just over five percent of the letters survive, the rest having been burned by Cassandra shortly after Austen’s death. This lack of information makes it difficult, if not altogether impossible, to attempt to understand Austen as she would have understood herself, and it is therefore up to the individual reader to glean what little is available from her novels and letters in order to formulate a picture of who Austen was and how she perceived the world in which she lived. This process, laborious even at the best of times, is particularly open to corruption by
contemporary opinion, and so, throughout the years, the image of Austen has shifted from that of a witty bastion of conservatism to that of a staunch feminist, according to whatever philosophy happened to be de rigeur at the time. Though we may never know exactly who Austen really was or how she really saw her world, of one thing we can be certain: she was, like most women of her age, and indeed a large portion of her society, greatly concerned with the topic of marriage — something for which she is sometimes criticized by modern readers with only a superficial understanding of the period in which Austen lived. It is precisely this form of unfounded criticism that inspired this essay, which seeks, among other things, to shed light on how Austen’s writing and her focus on marriage reflect the world in which she found herself.

The period spanning the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was one of great social change, and no institution was quite as affected as marriage. It had gone from rural simplicity to urban and judicial sophistication; from a contract based on mutual feeling, to a means of amassing and consolidating wealth. The battle for marriage became a battle for the soul of society, with women often coming out the losers on both ends of the spectrum, and Austen seems, as most people might have done, to have considered both sides of the issue equally. In a letter addressed to her niece Fanny Price in which she comments on the scandalous love affair of the same Miss Price with a certain Mr. J. Plumtree, Austen writes that “anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection […]” (qtd in Lanski 99), suggesting a support for the traditional idea that marriage should be founded on love, and yet, while reflecting on the same subject, she reminds her niece that “single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor — which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony […]” (qtd in Lanski 119), which makes evident, as much as any of
her novels do, Austen’s keen understanding of the precarious situation of women in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and the efficacy of marriage as a remedy for penury, regardless of the existence — or lack — of love.

The goal of this essay is to analyze Austen’s writing — concretely Sense and Sensibility (1811) — in order to present a broad analysis of the theme of courtship and marriage in Jane Austen’s popular fiction, with a specific focus on how her characters are affected by and respond to the pressures of the so-called “marriage market” that had developed prior to the publication of Austen’s novels and the ways in which her writing clearly reflects the predominant socio-domestic philosophy of late eighteenth century Britain. Part one of this paper (1.1-1.5) draws heavily from secondary sources, including the seminal works of J.A. Downie — “Who Says She’s a Bourgeois Writer? Reconsidering the Social and Political Context of Jane Austen’s Novels” —, Christopher Clay — “Marriage, Inheritance, and the Rise of Large Estates in England, 1660-1815” — and Ingrid Tague — “Love, Honor, and Obedience: Fashionable Women and the Discourse of Marriage in the Early Eighteenth Century” — to provide proper historical contextualization from which to formulate the aforementioned analysis. Part two focuses on the novel itself, and considers both the influence of social status and wealth on the major and minor characters (2.1) as well as the central role of the marriage market in forming and driving the plot (2.2).
1. Jane Austen, Class Warfare, and the Marriage Market
– A Historical Overview

1.1 Jane Austen and the Long Eighteenth Century

Before commencing with the examination of the principal topic of this paper — namely the “marriage market” and its impact on the theme of courtship and marriage in Jane Austen’s popular fiction — it is of the utmost benefit to establish a proper socio-historical context from which to analyze the said topic in order to avoid, as much as is possible, the contamination of any scholarly interpretation by contemporary notions concerning courtship, marriage, or romantic relationships in general with regard to literature. The establishment of what might be considered an appropriate context is also important in terms of gaining a proper understanding of the author herself, and how her work may be said to respond to the contemporary Zeitgeist.

Though Jane Austen is often considered a “nineteenth-century writer” — an appellation that usually carries implications of Victorian connections — she was born before the turn of the century, and was very much a subject and product of Georgian England (1714-1830), the England of the eighteenth century. Half of her novels (Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Mansfield Park) were published before the Battle of Waterloo (1815), the usual cut-off date for what historians call the “long eighteenth century”, and there is ample evidence that Austen had worked on early drafts of at least three major novels (Sense and Sensibility, Pride and Prejudice, Northanger Abbey) during the latter half of the 1790s, with Pride and Prejudice, initially titled First Impressions, becoming an “established favourite” (Le Faye 100, 114) early on and a version of Sense and Sensibility (previously Elinor and Marianne) being completed in
1795 (Austen-Leigh 1:ix). Furthermore, Austen’s earlier works, such as Lady Susan (1793-1795) were “told in letters” (Tomalin 83-84), having been written in the epistolary form which was commonly used by early eighteenth century novelists but which had fallen out of fashion by the time any of her major novels were published because of its natural limitations with regard to narration.

The notion of Jane Austen as a nineteenth-century writer is far from the only misconception surrounding the author. There has, historically, been a tendency to assign Austen’s novels, and with them their author, to the social stratum of “middle class”, a tendency that can most likely be traced to a misreading of Sir Walter Scott’s celebrated review of Emma in which he states that its author “confined herself chiefly to the middling classes of society” (Downie 79, 80). Modern readers tend to ascribe to Scott’s use of the phrase “middling classes” the sense of “bourgeois”, a term which originally referred to a “citizen or freeman of a city or burgh, as distinguished from a peasant on the one hand, and a gentleman on the other […]” (OED Online). There is, however, evidence that Scott was referring not to the often entrepreneurial freemen of English society (which would not properly be considered “middle class” in the modern sense until the mid-nineteenth century) but to “well-bred country gentlemen and ladies” (Downie 80). The use of the term “gentlemen” is important here, as the original sense of “bourgeois” excludes, by its very nature, such individuals.

In the eighteenth century, the middle class would have consisted of wealthy landowners of “middle” income. Though this idea may seem contradictory to the twenty-first century mind, it fits perfectly into the ordered, if somewhat complex, society that was Georgian England, a society in which the aristocracy was divided into the nobility proper (those who possessed titles granted to them by the monarch) and the
landed gentry (those who possessed no titles but who, by virtue of the wealth vested on them by their estates made up a sort of lesser elite). It is from the word “gentry” that the English language derives the adjective “genteel”, as well as the terms “gentleman”, and “gentle lady”, all of which originally signaled that the person being referred to belonged to or was “included among the gentry; of a rank above the commonalty” (OED Online). Jane Austen would certainly have counted herself among those described as “genteel”, being descended as she was from members of the titled nobility (Downie 81), as would many of her characters have done, given that they are, for the most part, the owners and benefactors of large country estates worth at least £2,000 per annum, which, by 1790, was the average yearly income of a Baronet (Downie 71).

1.2 Social Status and the Landed Gentry

Although the question of which social class one might belong to is usually of no consequence to the modern reader, it was supremely important to the extremely stratified society to which Austen belonged. According to Houston, eighteenth century Britain was a land of great economic prosperity centered primarily on highly productive agriculture and exponential population growth (441), and, in this world, the place of one’s birth, the identity of one’s parents, the prestige attached to one’s surname, and whether or not one owned land (and how much that land might be worth) all served to carve out niches amongst the well-to-do.

Though it was possible to purchase one’s way into the lesser gentry (and, at some points even the lesser nobility), the traditional ideal of the gentleman as a wealthy and therefore unemployed owner of large tracts of British soil persisted into the mid-nineteenth century, and the gentleman’s relation to money was one governed by inheritance (Segal 252). A true gentleman did not “make” money, his land made it for
him by way of rents and taxes, and the prestige of a member of the gentry was based, it might be argued, on how little he had to do to obtain his wealth. The laws governing the inheritance of property were strict, with all titles and most land wealth passing to the eldest direct male heir. Other children, though they might be handsomely provided for, would often be expected to make a living for themselves in one of the very few “genteel professions”, available, as the name suggests, almost exclusively to members of the gentry. These would have included the Law and the Church, two trades that require little to no manual labor and preserved an air of respectability that assuaged the shame associated with the idea of work. On the parochial level, the local elite was, apart from the landed gentry and established professional families (of whom more will be said), made up entirely of lawyers and parsons, who, more often than not, belonged to the same family that owned the land on which the parish sat (Downie 72).

Austen was herself a member of the “lesser gentry”, though, as has been mentioned above, her family was connected to the titled nobility. It is true that the Austen family had little in the way of money, and that Austen herself was forced to live rather unpretentiously, but, as Nicholas Pevsner reminds us, she was the “[d]aughter of a parson, grand-niece of a Master of Balliol, sister of a squire, sister of a parson and cousin of a parson, and sister of two admirals […]” (qtd. in Downie 75). In other words, she would have been ranked favorably among the minor elites of her society, and even more so once she became a public figure — even if notoriety was not originally her intention.
1.3 Marriage as a Business: Consolidation of Land and Wealth through Marriage and Inheritance

In *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century*, Professor G.E. Mingay not only affirms the fact that land ownership was the primary means of acquiring wealth and status in the eighteenth century, but also identifies the procurement of land through marriage and inheritance specifically as the most important factor in the rise of the greatest aristocratic families (qtd. in Clay 503). The practice of arranging marriages according to potential gains had been in use amongst Britain’s wealthiest families since at least the fourteenth century, and it was customary to judge a match solely on how it might increase the family’s holdings.

The effect of such a practice was the establishment of what can only be referred to as a “market” in which women were most often little more than unfortunate pawns. A wealthy landowner looking to increase the size of his own estate without spending a fortune to acquire more land would naturally seek to make an alliance with a family of similar or superior wealth through which such an increase might be gained automatically, and the best means of doing so was by marrying into such a family. If the bride-to-be happened to be the eldest daughter or, better yet, an only child — which was not altogether uncommon in an age with high infant mortality — her dowry would most certainly have included much or all of her father’s estate, and, as contemporary inheritance laws greatly limited the independence available to women (especially if they were wealthy), her fortune would pass automatically into her husband’s possession upon completion of the marriage ceremony. Such wealthy heiresses were considered the *crème de la crème* of the marriage market, and were jealously sought after by ambitious landowners for themselves and their own heirs.
Of course, as Habakkuk points out in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, wealthy heiresses were not as common as they had once been, especially after the consolidation of land had reached such a point as to greatly limit the possibility of membership in the gentry (qtd. in Clay 507). Far more common were women with what were called “money portions”, large dowries consisting entirely of wealth in the form of coin. These money portions, like landed wealth, became property of the bridegroom immediately following a wedding and remained his to dispose of ever after — even in cases of divorce — making them popular with aristocrats who had fallen into debt or whose long exhausted coffers, for whatever other reason, were greatly in need of fresh funds.

Bourgeois professionals, like their genteel brethren, also made fair use of the marriage market. Though the number of wealthy heiresses was limited, and their access to such ladies even more restricted both by social norms and stiff competition, marriage into the gentry was most definitely a realistic possibility for the wealthiest members of the entrepreneurial class, and their own newly-amassed fortunes were often looked upon by aristocrats as vital to the furtherance of ancient family lines.

### 1.4 The Gentry Strikes Back: Entailments, Marriage Acts and Conduct Books

By the time of Austen’s birth, the marriage market had reached such proportions that marriage itself, once seen as a holy institution ordained by none other than Divine Providence and lauded as essential for the continued stability of civilized society, had been reduced to little more than a business arrangement. Due to this shift, marriage devolved into an object of mockery for the fashionable classes, and this newfound contempt for what had once been an institution of the highest moral value was seen, in
that very Aristotelian fashion that was so much à la mode in the eighteenth century, as being directly responsible for the moral deterioration of youths:

To speak plainly, I am very sorry for the forlorn state of Matrimony, which is as much ridicul’d by our Young Ladys as it us’d to be by young fellows; in short, both Sexes have found the Inconveniencys of it, and the Apellation of Rake is as genteel in a Woman as a Man of Quality [...] (Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to the Countess of Mar, qtd. in Tague, 76)

Among the gentry, it was, ironically enough, the rejection of the rise of the very professional class that had so often saved them from abject poverty that inspired a set of measures of reform designed to both protect against what they saw as an invasion of the aristocracy by the commonalty and to stem the tide of moral erosion. Such measures were often disguised as “feminist”, in the sense that they supposedly sought to protect the daughters of the wealthy against suitors whose sole design was to increase their own wealth. Among these measures is that of the infamous “entailment”, which often plays a prominent role in setting up the plot of many contemporary novels, among them, those of Austen herself:

A landowner who found himself with only a daughter to succeed him might not relish the prospect of his ancestral estates becoming absorbed into those of his son-in-law, and he might want to save his own family name from extinction [...] In such a circumstance he could ensure that his own estates retained an independent existence by bequeathing them to some male relative instead of allowing his daughter and her husband to inherit them. (Clay 504)
The Clandestine Marriage Bill of 1753 was another legal measure that, like the entailment, was proposed as protective of both the children of wealthy gentlemen and the very wealth that they might one day inherit and which might serve to lure in unsavory suitors. When Sir Dudley Ryder, the then attorney general for England and Wales, presented the bill before the House of Commons, he specifically argued that it was “designed to prevent rich heirs and heiresses of good family from being seduced into clandestine or runaway marriages with their social or economic inferiors” (Bannet 233).

Prior to the passing of what became known simply as “The Marriage Act”, the institution of marriage was arguably a very different creature than that which has come down to us today. As Henry Stebbing, Archdeacon of Wilts and contemporary champion of Church of England orthodoxy, points out in his 1754 publication of An Inquiry into the Force and Operation of the annulling Clauses of a late Act for the better Preventing of Clandestine Marriages, marriage had historically been conceived as a state of contract constituted not by formal ceremony or judicial procedure, but by “that FAITH by which the Man and Woman bind themselves to each other to live as man and Wife” (qtd in Bannet 234). The conscious decision by both partners to live as man and wife and the promise on the part of both partners to do so was enough, by law, to create a binding state of matrimony, with all of the duties and benefits that such a state might carry with it. If the promise was spoken in the present tense, the effect (that is the binding) would be immediate, even without consummation or witnesses. If it was spoken in future tense, the marriage would be bound upon consummation.

In terms of inheritance, such a simple procedure for the creation of a marriage was a double-edged sword, but most especially for those possessed of a vast fortune,
grand estate, or noble title and who, as luck would have it, had produced only daughters or whose sons had died prematurely. The possibility of a handsome young rake coming along and seducing a wealthy heiress only to run off with her fortune the day after entering into a legally binding marriage was all too real, and the Marriage Act was set up as a means of avoiding just such a possibility. It stipulated that all weddings should be preceded by the publication of banns or the acquisition of a license and that a public ceremony should take place before witnesses and an authorized clergyman. It also required parental consent in the case of a minor and the recording of the wedding ceremony by an official of the court in a Marriage Register. The act also voided and made explicitly illegal all marriages that did not conform to the new format, for which it was harshly criticized at the time.

While the men of the gentry were busy setting up legal obstacles to the invasion of the professional class, women like the above quoted Lady Mary Wortley Montagu — those charged directly with the education of future generations — turned to the written word to stop the institution of marriage degenerating into a sordid business and to keep their daughters from falling prey to the loss of propriety and, consequently, face. Highly popular and influential contemporary periodicals like “The Spectator” (1711-1712), which was published daily by the English essayist, poet, and playwright Joseph Addison and the Irish writer and politician Sir Richard Steele, devoted several issues to what had begun to be called “mercenary marriages”, in which women — particularly genteel heiresses — were being bought and sold like cattle with little to no regard for their future happiness.

This was also the period of the resurgence of the conduct manual. Originating in medieval courtesy literature, the conduct manual is the direct ancestor of the modern
self-help book. It was written by the elite for the elite, and was designed to be read by the very women who might find themselves the objects of unscrupulous fortune hunters. Marriage, therefore, was more often than not the central topic of conduct manuals.

Conduct writers also stressed the importance of preserving traditional gender roles, which they believed to be essential in combating the philosophy of individualism and speculative financial practices that had led to the use of women as a means to personal gain. In *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) Gisborne, Cadell and Davies write that a woman’s responsibility consists solely of “contributing daily and hourly to the comfort of husbands, of parents, of brothers and sisters [...] in the intercourse of domestic life” (12). Other conduct writers, like Hester Chapone, pressed the notion of parental consent. In her *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind* (1772), originally written to her fifteen year old niece, Chapone states that a marriage carried out without parental approbation would “produce only misery and shame” (106).

The acceptance and approval of the prescriptions of the Marriage Act by conduct writers and their descriptions of ideal women as those whose correct place is the domestic sphere served as the catalyst for the creation of what would, by the time of Queen Victoria, come to be known as the Cult of Domesticity, also called, somewhat despairingly, the Cult of True Womanhood. The young women of eighteenth century society were bred by their elders to accept, from an early age, the idea that the duty of all good, civilized, patriotic, Christian women was to play the role of the calm and nurturing mother and the loving and faithful wife. She was meant, in all things, to be passive, delicate, and virtuous; or, at least, she was meant to project this image of propriety to the world, regardless of what she might actually be like indoors. To be a young woman in the late eighteenth century, therefore, is to be necessarily preoccupied
with marriage because, if a woman is not a woman at all unless she first becomes a wife and mother, to never be married is tantamount not only to go against your natural destiny, but also to having no identity, no sense of self. A woman who is not married, to the eighteenth-century mind, is like a flower that never blossoms and, because that same mind views the world as a perfectly ordered realm, a flower that does not blossom is \textit{anti natura} and, therefore, unthinkable. When such unthinkable cases did occur, they were usually looked upon with an awkward \textit{mélange} of pity and derision, as reflected in Austen’s own Miss Bates (\textit{Emma}) and the nature of her relationships with the novel’s principal characters — particularly the eponymous heroine.

In the fight against mercenary marriages, which usually had the acquisition of wealth as their chief aim, conduct writers resurrected an idea that had been popular up until the sixteenth century: marriage for love:

Faced with what they perceived as a crisis of marriage, conduct writers responded by insisting ever more strongly on the importance of a loving, companionate relationship between husband and wife. It was this relationship, they believed, that would shore up the morals of English society. (Tague, 80).

To be sure, this was not love as a modern reader might perceive it, which is more often than not of the passionate variety. Love in the eighteenth century was not an emotional state, but a civilized, ordering power — a moral virtue meant to be expressed through actions deemed to be socially meritorious. According to Tague (85), love of one’s husband was presented as both necessary to achieve a state of correct symmetry (i.e. to subordinate one’s will to the will of the beloved) and as the evidence for said state (i.e. one would know if they did in fact love their husband by their willingness to obey him). Love became, then, an essential ingredient for the preservation of traditional gender
roles within a marriage, and was highly sought after and prized by women of the marrying age. Conversely, a marriage without love was thought to quickly devolve into a tyrannical relationship in which a woman was either sure to suffer or would continually engage herself against her husband in an unnatural search for dominance.

1.5 The Marriage Market and the Rise of the Novel
The new eighteenth-century sensibility, with its emphasis on love and its deep rejection of the emerging philosophy of financial supremacy *super omnes* began to inspire a new type of literature, a semi-didactic genre born from the same need as the conduct manual and carrying within itself the seeds of both Romanticism and the Bildungsroman that Austen and other female writers would quickly adopt as their own. This new movement would come to be called, rather appropriately for our purposes, “Sentimentalism”, complete with its own preferred written format: the novel.

By the mid eighteenth century, the novel had become the most widespread and influential genre of literature, especially amongst the upper classes, as they had the most leisure time and could afford to both purchase books as they were printed and read them without foregoing another activity in the process which might have been more important to their livelihood. Novels were so popular, in fact, that conduct writers often warned upper class women against spending all of their time locked away reading them. As one would expect, part of the appeal of the novel came from the fact that, as a genre, it tended to focus on and reflect the social realities and preoccupations of the time, and, for the eighteenth century, these realities and preoccupations were centered on love, marriage, and relationships.

By the middle of the century, the *roman* par excellence was undoubtedly *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*. First published in 1740 by the writer and printer Samuel
Richardson, *Pamela* tells the story of fifteen year old maidservant Pamela Andrews, who is forced to suffer the unwanted and socially inappropriate advances of her new master, Mr. B, a man of noble birth. Because Mr. B’s love is unrequited, it soon becomes a sick infatuation, and the apparent impossibility of a marriage due to their obvious class differences leads him to take drastic measures. Mr. B abducts young Pamela in an attempt to possess her, locking her up in one of his estates and attempting, unsuccessfully, to force himself on her. As Mr. B’s twisted desire grows, Pamela begins to fall in love with him, though she is determined, throughout her period of captivity, to retain her sense of decorum. Eventually, Pamela’s moderate love lends a sense of temperance to B’s own, allowing him to finally see reason and propose to her. The two are married, and Pamela, ever virtuous, attempts to become a dutiful wife, living up to her husband’s title. The novel, with its triumph of love and sensibility over concerns of wealth and status, was lauded and quickly became a bestseller.

Richardson had similar success eight years later, with the publication of *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*, which takes a firm stance against the marriage market and serves as a cautionary tale by warning of the consequences of the attempted use of women to better the position of a family in polite society. The novel follows Clarissa Harlow, whose family, having only recently become wealthy, contrives strong machinations to ascend to the level of the aristocracy by marrying Clarissa off to Robert Lovelace, heir to an earldom. Due to the forceful intervention of Clarissa’s brother James, who seeks to marry his sister to Roger Solmes and, thereby, vastly increase his own wealth and speed his acquisition of a title, Lovelace tricks Clarissa into running away with him without the knowledge or approbation of her family. This elopement is the beginning of Clarissa’s downfall, as she effectively becomes
Lovelace’s prisoner, is forced to live in brothels and, unlike Pamela, suffers the loss of her virtue, all of which disgraces her and causes a sickness that eventually leads to her death. Lovelace’s feelings of extreme guilt eventually sow the seeds of his own demise, and the Harlow family is left to wallow in its misery at having participated in Clarissa’s unhappiness.

A novel writer herself, and an avid reader of novels, Austen would most certainly have been influenced not only by the work of Richardson, but also of his contemporaries, most of whom included the idea of mercenary marriages in at least one of their publications. These contemporaries would surely have included Daniel Defoe, whose eponymous character Moll Flanders experiences firsthand the contemporary state of courtship and marriage upon her arrival to London, even going so far as to call it, in no uncertain terms, a market:

This knowledge I soon learned by experience, viz. that the state of things was altered as to matrimony, and that I was not to expect at London what I had found in the country: that marriages were here the consequences of politic schemes for forming interests, and carrying on business, and that Love had no share, or but very little, in the matter.

That as my sister-in-law at Colchester had said, beauty, wit, manners, sense, good humour, good behaviour, education, virtue, piety, or any other qualification, whether of body or mind, had no power to recommend; that money only made a woman agreeable; that men chose mistresses indeed by the gust of their affection, and it was requisite to a whore to be handsome, well-shaped, have a good mien and a graceful behaviour; but that for a wife, no deformity would shock the fancy, no ill qualities the judgment; the money was the thing;
the portion was neither crooked nor monstrous, but the money was always agreeable, whatever the wife was.

On the other hand, as the market ran very unhappily on the men’s side, I found the women had lost the privilege of saying No; that it was a favour now for a woman to have the Question asked, and if any young lady had so much arrogance as to counterfeit a negative, she never had the opportunity given her of denying twice, much less of recovering that false step, and accepting what she had but seemed to decline. The men had such choice everywhere, that the case of the women was very unhappy; for they seemed to ply at every door, and if the man was by great chance refused at one house, he was sure to be received at the next. (Defoe 35) [emphasis mine]

Lest one should be left with the impression that criticism or even the mere mention of the marriage market was, during the eighteenth century, within the purview of male authors only, it behooves us now to recall Frances Burney, a female writer whose work would not only be ranked amongst the classics by later historians, but whose writing would have an obvious impact on Austen’s own novels, most obviously in the case, it might be argued, of Northanger Abbey, in which Burney’s writing is referred to explicitly and the plot of which follows Burney’s example almost to the letter.

Born in 1752, Burney — later Madame d’Arblay — was a prolific novelist, diarist, and playwright whose books revolve completely around young and privileged, but often socially ambiguous heroines who must learn to navigate the shark-infested waters of eighteenth-century polite society in order to find suitable husbands, usually while fighting off the attention of handsome, but unworthy suitors who, due to a series of misunderstandings, come to stand between the heroines and the objects of their
affection. *Evelina or the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World*, is just such a novel. Published in 1778, three years after Austen’s birth, it became highly successful, in large part due to its comedic critique of contemporary upper class society and the introduction of a heroine with notable character flaws which she must strive to overcome. Burney’s later novels, *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782), and *Camilla, or a Picture of Youth* (1796), cemented Burney’s status as one of the most, if not the most popular female writer of the late eighteenth century, and a notable influence on Austen, who most likely drew the title for *Pride and Prejudice* from a sentence in *Cecilia*, in which pride and prejudice are blamed for all of the miseries and misunderstandings of the principal characters: “Yet this, however, remember: if to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination […]” (Burney 380). As previously mentioned, Austen also makes several direct references to *Camilla* in *Northanger Abbey* (1803).
2. Sense and Sensibility and The Influence of the Marriage Market in Jane Austen's Popular Fiction

2.1 Preliminary Considerations

2.1.1 Social Divisions

*Sense and Sensibility* (1811) has been chosen as the focus of this essay because of its importance as the first of Jane Austen’s novels to be written and published. As her earliest published attempt at novel writing, *Sense and Sensibility* is the most clearly influenced by common eighteenth-century propensities, which makes it rather unsurprising, given all that has been stated previously, that the marriage market plays a prominent role in the novel; so much so in fact, that it may be argued that the search for an economically beneficial, though not always morally appropriate marriage, and the intricacies of courtship that accompany this search function as the catalysts for any and all character development.

It would behoove us at this point, before making any further inquiry into the role of marriage and courtship in the novel, to divide the characters into their respective social classes so that we might, in so doing, build a foundation from which to better understand the motives behind the actions of certain characters and how these actions are necessarily influenced by a profound perception of class and rank.

The major characters of the novel all belong to the landed gentry. The Dashwood family, we are informed in the opening paragraph, “had been long settled in Sussex. Their estate was large, and their residence was at Norland Park, in the centre of their property, where for many generations they had lived” (1). A large estate, the reader
will recall, is the minimal indicator of the lesser gentry, and the primary source of income of the leisured classes. Furthermore, we are told that Mr. Henry Dashwood and his uncle, the late owner of the Dashwood estate, upon their deaths, bequeathed, between them, a small fortune of ten thousand pounds to the surviving Mrs. Dashwood and her three daughters (1-2), the interest of which was expected to be more than enough to secure a small residence and provide for at least a manservant and two maids, as is explained in chapter six. Though their loss of greater fortune via an entailment and their eventual removal from Norland Park certainly diminish the social standing of Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters, Elinor and Marianne are still considered to be genteel girls by virtue of birth, education, and connections, and are, therefore, worthy of good marriages, even if excellent matches are perhaps too much to hope for.

Of Edward Ferrars, we are told that he is “gentleman-like” and that he is “the eldest son of a man who had died very rich” (11). He is also the brother of Mrs. John Dashwood, whose own fortune we know from the first chapter substantially increased that of Elinor and Marianne’s half-brother. Though he is not completely independent, Edward possesses a small holding of two thousand pounds (109) and is relentlessly being bribed into forming a good marriage by his mother, Mrs. Ferrars — whose estate he stands to inherit upon her demise — by the generous offer of an annuity worth a further thousand pounds if he agrees to marry Miss Morton, the extremely wealthy daughter of a late nobleman — most likely a baron, given the use of the title Lord Morton (168). The fact that an aristocrat worth thirty thousand pounds on her own would even contemplate entering into a match with Edward is enough to vouch for the wealth and status of the Ferrars family among the upper gentry.
Colonel Brandon, a member of the armed forces and, therefore, a holder of one of the few recognized genteel professions, is introduced not only as a gentleman by the Middletons, but as the only other gentleman that Elinor and Marianne are likely to meet in the area of Barton (25). He has an estate — Delaford — which Mrs. Jennings describes as “a nice old-fashioned place, full of comforts and conveniences […] covered with the best fruit-trees in the country […]” and is worth two thousand pounds a year “without debt or drawback” (145), which we will recall is the annual income of a Baronet at the time of the novel’s publication. We are also informed that Delaford, being a very old estate, was originally much “encumbered” until propped up via the arranged (forced) marriage of Brandon’s older brother to a girl with a large fortune (152); a literary reproduction of commonplace practices among contemporary elites, along the same lines as Richardson’s Clarissa.

Willoughby, though certainly a member of the lesser gentry, is a much more complex and mysterious character, possessing qualities and characteristics of both the upper and lower classes. He is called a gentleman (30), and we are told that he is in Barton visiting a certain Mrs. Smith “to whom” according to Sir John, “he was related, and whose possessions he was to inherit […]” at her estate, Allenham Court. He is also described as “well worth catching” (32), suggesting that he is either already in possession of a large fortune, or that Mrs. Smith’s estate is significant. We know that he has an estate of his own — Combe Magna — in Somersetshire, which is some thirty miles from the Palmers’s residence, and that he can apparently afford to keep and give away horses at a whim, which is certainly something, considering the suggested privative cost of their upkeep (42). Despite all this, Elinor posits that “there was no reason to believe him rich. His estate had been rated by Sir John at about six or seven
hundred a year [...]” (53) Six or seven hundred a year, naturally, is hardly enough to be considered a proper fortune, and it is, in fact, just a hundred or two over Mrs. Dashwood’s own annual income. Willoughby is also constantly referring to himself as “poor” and “dependent” (56), and hardly anyone except Sir John really knows who he is or anything about him besides the fact that he is handsome:

‘Is Mr Willoughby much known in your part of Somersetshire?’ said Elinor.

‘Oh! yes, extremely well; — that is, I do not believe many people are acquainted with him, because Combe Magna is so far off; but they all think him extremely agreeable, I assure you.’ (87) [emphasis mine]

The minor characters, as befits their roles within the plot of the novel, are a much more heterogeneous group, representing, both in manners and in status, a mélange of social classes. The Middletons, relations of Mrs. Dashwood, are an interesting case given that it is made evident in the opening of the novel that Mrs. Dashwood had very little by way of a fortune herself at the moment of her marriage, and yet Sir John Middleton, her distant cousin, is a knight of the realm with an estate — Barton Park — large enough to support an adjoining cottage and to admit its owners into polite society (21), though not, it should be noted, into the society of members of the upper gentry like Mrs. Smith. As with Colonel Brandon, Sir John served as a member of the armed forces. Like the Middletons, their relatives, the Palmers, are members of the gentry, but not completely leisured. Mr. Palmer, whom we must assume to be conversant with the Law, passively seeks a seat in parliament. The Palmers are likewise possessed of an estate — Cleveland, in Somersetshire.
Mrs. Jennings, a relation of both the Middletons and Palmers via her daughters, Mary (Lady Middleton) and Charlotte, is described as a “widow with an ample jointure” (26), which she obtained “[s]ince the death of her husband, who had traded with success in a less elegant part of the town” (114). It would be difficult to even attempt to suggest that Mrs. Jennings — who possesses no estate and whose fortune is entirely due to her husband’s labor — is a member of the gentry, and she is not, at least not directly. She began her life as a member of the lower class and, through a fortuitous marriage to a merchant, rose to the ranks of the upper bourgeoisie as her husband’s success increased their fortunes. Such was the Jenniges’s success, in fact, that Mrs. Jennings was able to marry her daughters to members of the upper class through the use, we must suspect, of ample money-portions. By doing so, the Jenniges, like many factual members of the eighteenth-century English bourgeoisie, managed to raise their own social status through improved connections and cement their position in polite society. Much to the chagrin of more respectable characters (Lady Middleton and Marianne in particular), Mrs. Jennings retains many of her working-class traits and regularly keeps in touch with old contacts in London’s merchant quarters, constantly blurring the line between the genteel and the common.

The Miss Steeles, the last set of minor characters of consequence, are cousins of Mrs. Jennings. As such, they are not genteel, but members of the lower bourgeoisie. We are told by none other than Mrs. Jennings that “Lucy has next to nothing herself” (195), reflecting the clear lack of fortune and low status of the sisters. Their only admission into polite society is through their connection to Mrs. Jennings and, through her, to her daughters and two of the novel’s foremost families. Nevertheless, when staying in Town, the Miss Steeles reside far from their privileged cousins in “Bartlett’s Buildings,
Holborn”, apartments in London’s less fashionable commercial district (The City), populated mainly by merchants and solicitors. Though no further evidence of the meanness of the Miss Steeles’s status is strictly required, it is worth mentioning that Bartlett’s Buildings, though no longer standing, were once located off Fetter Lane, the name of which originally may have referred either to a particular occupation (dog keepers) or to the general unsavory reputation of those who lived there.

### 2.1.2 Money and Wealth

It is of interest to note, though not at all unexpected, given all that has been treated in the first part of this essay — that most of the novel’s minor characters, and especially those belonging to the bourgeoisie, are greatly preoccupied with finances and economic prospects — both their own and those of third persons — even to degrees that most modern readers would consider gauche. Nevertheless, as is to be expected in a work that so clearly reproduces the contemporary social Zeitgeist, none of the characters entirely manages to get away without showing some concern for money matters. Next to social status, wealth is what the characters care most about.

Mrs. Jennings, ever the cunning bourgeoise, is more than almost any other character influenced by considerations of money, and the desire for amelioration of one’s social position through the increase of fortune. The first to be aware of Colonel Brandon’s interest in Marianne, she immediately pronounces her support of the match on the grounds that “he was rich and she was handsome” (27) [original italics]. For Mrs. Jennings, no other consideration is important in the formation of a union, and she simply assumes that, given these facts, love must flourish in due time. Later in the novel, it is she alone who can offer a reason for Willoughby’s ill treatment of Marianne, stating that “when there is plenty of money on one side, and next to nothing on the
other... they [men] care no more [...]” (143). It is through this interjection that the reader first begins to understand that Willoughby’s betrayal is founded on his immediate necessity of liquidity, with Miss Grey, worth fifty thousand pounds, triumphing over Marianne, whose total fortune could never hope to reach even four thousand pounds. Mrs. Jennings’s solution to Marianne’s dire situation — and one can expect no less from such an obvious supporter of mercenary marriages — is for her to give in to Colonel Brandon’s devotion, based, yet again, on nothing but the fact that he is wealthy enough to give her a life of ease: “One shoulder of mutton, you know, drives down another” (145).

Lucy, like Mrs. Jennings, is obsessed with money, and her character, as well as all of her actions, are motivated by it in some way: “Nothing escaped her minute observation and general curiosity; she [...] was never easy till she knew the price of every part [...] and was not without hopes of finding out before they parted [...] how much she had every year to spend upon herself” (187-188). Lucy’s fascination with money is understandable given the fortunate situation of her relations, and her desire for a wealthy husband springs from a need to break into the circle of the elite that the rest of her family has entered into so easily. She absolutely refuses to even consider marrying Edward until he is fully independent or has inherited Mrs. Ferrars’s estate because she is fully cognizant of the fact that a holding of two thousand pounds cannot supply an annual income that would provide for a comfortable life (109). For the sake of clarity, the reader may be reminded that Mrs. Dashwood’s fortune of ten thousand pounds total — considered small by most major characters — provides no more than five hundred pounds a year, from which it may be deduced that, if Edward and Lucy were to defy Mrs. Ferrars and marry without the consent of his family or another source of
independent income, his two thousand pounds would leave them with an annuity totaling no more than a hundred pounds — barely enough for a bachelor to subsist on, let alone a young couple.

Ever hopeful, Lucy persists in her attempt to catch Edward even when it seems that all is lost, even when he comes to formally break off the engagement. Though her sister Nancy’s telling of the events is naturally tailored to favor Lucy and obscure the facts, it is extremely revealing that she should overhear her say that “how little soever he might have, she should be very glad to have it all” (208), because it exposes, in the manner of a Freudian slip, Lucy’s real motive for trying to keep Edward tied down in his promise of engagement: “[F]or self-interest alone could induce a woman to keep a man to an engagement of which she seemed so thoroughly aware that he was weary” (113). Nevertheless, Lucy is, like her cousin Mrs. Jennings, quick to recognize a lost cause when she sees it, and her capitulation to the reality of Edward’s situation comes in the form of the cunning seduction of his brother Robert, whom Mrs. Ferrars names her sole heir after disinheriting the former. By marrying Mrs. Ferrars’s favorite son — the only son she would never act harshly against — Lucy cleverly obtains the wealth and status that she so desperately sought without any risk of losing it all at his mother’s whim.

Both Mrs. Ferrars and her daughter, Mrs. John Dashwood, are acutely aware of the importance of money and are wont to act on this recognition. Neither woman will stand for a union between Edward and Elinor because of the significant loss of fortune, and therefore status, suffered through the entailment of Norland Park — a loss that, ironically enough, is completely within Fanny’s power to ameliorate. Though John promises to do all that he is able to make his sisters and their mother comfortable, it is
his wife’s council that causes him to desist in the notion of increasing their income (5-7). Her argument against monetary assistance is not entirely selfish, though it may seem to be at first, as it is based on the security of her own son’s future. Fanny is wary of giving even a penny of what will eventually be her son’s inheritance to his aunts because she is completely aware of the reality of the society to which she belongs, and understands that every penny counts toward cementing her son’s social standing, arranging a fortunate match, and eventually providing for future generations (6). It may be reasoned, however, that through Mrs. John Dashwood’s actions, and through the narrator’s obvious contempt of her character, Austen implicitly argues against selfishly trying to increase one’s personal fortune at the expense of others (5), taking on, as such, the banner of both conduct writers and sentimental novelists before her.

Edward’s engagement to Lucy Steele, when finally revealed, causes Mrs. Ferrars and his sister a great deal of consternation both because it is carried out completely in secret, without official approval — which represents a serious breach of propriety and runs contrary to the esteemed recommendations of conduct literature — and because the lack of complementarity between the two lovers is a direct affront to their pride. Both women, along with Lady Middleton, to whom they are related by marriage, as well as, to a lesser extent, Mr. Palmer, are alike in that they base their entire identity on their conceived superiority to the people that surround them. Though Mr. Palmer’s affected discourtesy is based partly on the notion of intellectual and moral superiority, the women’s pride is founded solely on the status given to them by their pecuniary puissance. In the case of the Ferrars women, the prejudice motivated by pride can only be overcome by an appeal to the very pride that causes it, and so it is only by lovingly accepting the ill treatment and condescension that Mrs. Ferrars and Mrs. John
Dashwood throw at her that Lucy manages to win them over after secretly breaking off her engagement to Edward and marrying his brother Robert.

As previously mentioned, however, the minor characters are not entirely alone in their preoccupation with money. Mrs. Dashwood, a woman long accustomed to that certain level of privilege which life among the leisured elites is wont to provide, but who does not herself seem to possess any significant affectation, is, according to the narrator, “uninfluenced” by Edward’s financial prospects, and actively discourages mercenary marriages. Instead, she prefers to focus on the fact that “he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality” (11). As someone who is, like her daughter after her, prone to wholeheartedly embrace that eighteenth-century sentimentalist worldview, and who, possessing no clear fortune at the time of her own marriage, was able, nevertheless, to make a good match to the heir of a significant estate, she seems, at first to lack the sense of the importance of monetary proportionality which the rest of society takes to heart, but all is not as it seems; a fact that is exposed later on in the novel when she shares with Elinor that Colonel Brandon has revealed his love of Marianne to her. Mrs. Dashwood reacts, rather suspiciously, by asserting her own love for and approval of Brandon, listing his virtues one by one — virtues that Elinor cannot recall her every having taken into consideration before — and ending her elegy with a short, but pointed comment about his wealth: “His fortune too! for at my time of life, you know, everybody cares about that […] I am sure it must be a good one” (262). She is so sure, in fact, that, despite claiming to have no knowledge of the extent of Brandon’s ability, she personally expects to remove from Barton after the marriage and settle in Delaford, and all this before there even having been a proposal!
Elinor and Marianne are of particular interest in their appreciation of the influence of finances upon courtship and marriage because they seem, at first, to champion opposite opinions. In truth, however, they have very similar ideas, but Marianne, who is far more sentimental than her older sister, prefers to hide behind euphemisms that serve to obscure her understanding of the importance of money, which, to the sentimental mind, is vulgar at best, and not to be discussed. The discussion of the two sisters in chapter seventeen, analyzed below, offers sufficient evidence for this.

Marianne, surprised by the idea brought forth by Edward that social recognition and happiness should be thought to be in any way connected, begs the question “What have wealth or grandeur to do with happiness?” (68). Elinor, whose view of the world is unhindered by notions of sentimentalism and tends to be more straightforward in her estimations, responds that, though grandeur and happiness may not be connected, there is certainly some correlation between one’s finances and one’s level of happiness. Marianne feigns an inability to understand her sister’s reasoning, and argues that, so long as a “competence” is readily available, wealth cannot give any more happiness than can anything else. Suspecting a congruence of opinions where Marianne would seek to pretend there is none, Elinor asks her sister to reveal the exact value of her notion of a competence, which Marianne openly proclaims to be no more than eighteen hundred or two thousand pounds per annum.

The reader will again recall that an annual income of two thousand pounds was no small fortune at the time, equaling the average income of lesser members of the titled aristocracy, and that a much lower amount was considered enough to provide for a comfortable home. Mrs. Dashwood’s own income, we repeat, was no greater than five...
hundred pounds per annum, and it was sufficient to cover the rent of Barton cottage, the personal expenses of all four householders, and provide for three salaried servants! Colonel Brandon, whose own income did not exceed two thousand pounds a year, is considered very wealthy, with enough to provide for his own needs as a leisured gentleman, a living of two hundred pounds for Delaford’s rectory (219) — which is considered more than enough for the requirements of a bachelor — seasonal lodgings in London, and the upkeep for his niece Eliza and her newborn. In short, Marianne’s notion of the minimal economic requirements for the maintenance of a “family”, which, in her mind, includes servants, carriages, and hunters (69), is not in the least bit romantic or sentimental, but predicated, like Elinor’s idea of sufficient wealth, on the experience of the leisured class and an inherent understanding of the reality that money is a necessary evil, without which comfort is impossible to assure.

Of the major characters, Willoughby is, besides Elinor, the most honest about his appreciation of and preoccupation with money. Hardly able to call himself rich and far too profligate to wait for Mrs. Smith to pass on her wealth, Willoughby’s actions are entirely based on his greed:

My fortune was never large, and I had always been expensive, always in the habit of associating with people of better income than myself. Every year since my coming of age, or even before, I believe, had added to my debts; and though the death of my old cousin, Mrs Smith, was to set me free, yet that event being uncertain, and possibly far distant, it had been for some time my intention to re-establish my circumstances by marrying a woman of fortune. (247)

He openly acknowledges his dire situation in his heartfelt confession to Elinor, and explains that, though he had actually fallen in love with Marianne, he was simply too
practical to give up his engagement with Miss Grey. Her fifty thousand pounds were simply too enticing: “[…] her money was necessary to me, and in a situation like mine anything was to be done to prevent a rupture” (255). It is because he desperately needs Miss Grey’s money, that he allows her to act against Marianne, and resigns himself to serve as a pawn in her revenge, writing out her letter in his hand and breaking off all contact with Marianne by returning the lock of her hair. Though he knows these things will hurt her — and, in a plot twist that recalls that of Richardson’s *Clarissa*, they inspire an illness that nearly causes her death — he is willing to risk everything for the advantage that his new wife’s fortune will give him, especially after his reputation as a rake, and the details of his ill treatment of Eliza cause Mrs. Smith to disown him.

Though Willoughby’s confession does gain some sympathy from Elinor, she quickly recognizes that it too, like everything else, is motivated by his immense egocentrism, and her comments on the matter serve as an indirect condemnation of his selfish impropriety, in the same way that the narrator indirectly condemns the actions of Mrs. John Dashwood:

‘At present,’ continued Elinor, ‘he regrets what he has done. And why does he regret it? Because he finds it has not answered towards himself. It has not made him happy […] All Willoughby’s difficulties have arisen from the first offence against virtue, in his behavior to Eliza Williams. That crime has been the origin of every lesser one, and of all his present discontents.’ (271-272)

Though the reader may at first fail to recognize any overt concern with money in two particular major characters — namely Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon — they do not in fact manage to altogether avoid such concerns, though they are obviously the least preoccupied with the topic of personal economy, and for a very valid reason.
Edward and Brandon serve as the two “true” heroes of the novel, and stand in firm opposition to Willoughby as the “sentimental” antihero. As such, they are purposely set up as his exact opposites in every way. Where Willoughby is handsome and extroverted, both Edward and Brandon are noted for their lack of physical beauty and their often intense introversion. Where Willoughby is excessively driven by the desire and need for constant liquidity to furnish his ostentatious lifestyle and want of greatness, Edward and Brandon are almost completely unconcerned with money and show no aspirations to be anything other than who they are.

Edward in particular is set apart from every other character save Elinor in his desire for a simple life, “All his wishes centred in domestic comfort and the quiet of private life” (11-12). Though his complete economic dependence on his mother vexes him, it does so not because of some pretension to extensive personal wealth, but because it keeps him from acting on his love for Elinor, as does his insistence on adhering to established conventions of propriety, which makes it impossible for him to break his engagement with Lucy. Edward knows that, should he attempt to marry Elinor without first becoming independent, he will be disinherited and left with no means to provide for her, just as he knows that, if he breaks his engagement with Lucy, the ensuing embarrassment will likely ruin her already meager chances of ever being married. Through this conundrum, then, it becomes clear that where Edward does show some preoccupation with money, it is entirely unselfish, further marking his difference from Willoughby.

This unselfish concern for others is something Brandon shares, and which drives his own use of his personal wealth. Where Willoughby would take from others to preserve himself, Brandon prefers to share what he has to preserve others. Such is the
case with Eliza, the daughter of his first love, whom Brandon takes into his care shortly after her mother’s death and whose own bastard child he freely and lovingly chooses to provide for despite his complete lack of obligation. Brandon’s free charity is also seen in his gift of the Delaford living to Edward. Though he cannot imagine that it would ever be enough to allow for a marriage, Brandon takes pity on Edward for having been disinheritied for apparently choosing to love the wrong girl. Brandon’s use of money, like his use of language — the few times he is portrayed speaking — is founded solely on his desire to be of use to his peers and, as the most direct opposite to Willoughby, he shows a complete absence of egocentrism.

2.2 The Marriage Market as the Driving Force in Sense and Sensibility

Having provided a comprehensive historical overview to serve as the basis for a critical approach to Austen’s characters, and an in-depth coverage of the preliminary considerations of social status and wealth, both of which are inherently tied to courtship and marriage, it should, by this point, be no difficult task to recognize the role of the marriage market as the major force behind the plot of the novel. Notwithstanding, it is the goal of this section to present a concise, annotated summary of the way in which the marriage market acts to drive the plot forward by both creating unpleasant situations and inspiring the actions that the characters take in an attempt to better or escape the said situations.

The novel begins with the absence of a marriage and its consequences: a wealthy old bachelor with no direct heir and an estate whose future is uncertain. This fact both underscores the importance of marriage and legitimate progeny in eighteenth-century society and artfully sets up Henry Dashwood, his wife, and daughters to inherit Norland
Park. Unfortunately, an entailment — one of the measures purposely created to protect the integrity of property from the threat of female inheritance and the abuse of money-hungry husbands — sees the Park pass instead to John Dashwood, Henry’s son by a former wife. After the death of both old Mr. Dashwood and his nephew Henry, the entailment sees Mrs. Henry Dashwood and her daughters deprived of both a home and a fortune, which seriously diminishes their social standing and makes a successful match — a marriage to a wealthy individual — the only possibility for a comfortable independent life.

While staying on at Norland Park as not entirely welcome guests, Elinor becomes acquainted with Edward Ferrars, the eldest son and heir of the wealthy Mrs. Ferrars, beside whom Elinor begins to imagine a future. Because she is the perfect conduct manual heroine, however, propriety prohibits Elinor from worrying too much about money in the open, and, though one must assume, given her later acknowledgement of the direct connection between wealth and happiness, that Edward’s financial prospects are not entirely ignored by her, she limits herself to focusing on the virtue of his character, as any proper lady should do. Fanny Dashwood — Edward’s sister and Elinor’s sister-in-law — being less bound by propriety, instantly recognizes the threat of the attraction and, sharing her mother’s desire that Edward marry well — by hoping to arrange a marriage to a wealthy heiress in order to increase the family’s fortune — begins to act against the possibility of a match. Fanny’s actions offend Mrs. Dashwood, and force her to accept her cousin’s invitation to remove to Barton Cottage.

At the cottage, Marianne meets two suitors: Colonel Brandon and John Willoughby. Marianne, with her sentimentalist ideals, finds it impossible to even
consider a union with Brandon. In her mind, his age and his having been formerly attached are enough to serve as a firm impediment. Fortunately for her, she is the only one blinded by her ideals, and nearly every other character, focusing more on Brandon’s substantial wealth, act to encourage the match — none more so than Mrs. Jennings, whose sole purpose in life is to help young women marry well. Ironically, the more everyone else insists on the benefits of a match between herself and Colonel Brandon, the more Marianne insists on finding him unworthy, until she eventually falls into the hands of Willoughby, the one man who meets all of Marianne’s romantic ideas of what a perfect match should be (which, the reader will note, is someone who, lacking a firmly defined personality of his own, is willing in everything to give in to her tastes, thoughts, and opinions).

By never being anyone or anything but a reflection of Marianne’s desires, Willoughby manages to seduce her, and the two lovers begin to openly flaunt their feelings, going against basic notions of propriety and eliciting both Elinor’s reproof and the gentle teasing of their peers. One suspects that it is Willoughby’s position as a gentleman and the heir of the incredibly wealthy Mrs. Smith that serve to calm society’s often sensitive nerves, and soon, long tours of Willoughby’s future estate, gifts of horses, and even a lock of hair cut from Marianne’s head in the presence of her younger sister convince everyone, including Elinor, that Willoughby has made a formal offer of engagement and that the couple will be married at any moment, securing Marianne’s future. Willoughby’s licentious character and selfish greed, however, dash Marianne’s hopes. His scandalous affair with Brandon’s ward causes Mrs. Smith to disinherit him, and his desire for wealth sees him abandon Barton for London, where he contracts a mercenary marriage to a Miss Grey, worth fifty thousand pounds. The news of
Willoughby’s marriage and his cruelty towards her cause Marianne to become physically ill and, ironically enough, it is this illness that acts as her panacea. By giving her time to meditate on her behavior, the sickness cures Marianne of her overly romantic notions and causes her to adopt a more sensible lifestyle, adhering to propriety as her sister Elinor does. This acts as both a clear indication of Austen’s own thoughts on sentimentalism and a buttress for conservative ideals in an England that was becoming ever more individualist.

In the meantime, Elinor meets the Miss Steeles, the youngest of which, Lucy, is quick to reveal a secret engagement to Edward Ferrars. Elinor instantly realizes that Lucy’s only reason for doing so is because she is aware of Elinor’s position as a rival for Edward’s love, but she resolves to respect the engagement instead of fighting to steal Edward away from his fiancée. In Lucy Steele, Austen presents the reader with Willoughby’s female moral counterpart, a young woman of the lower bourgeoisie with practically nothing to her name who seeks to climb the social ladder by marrying into wealth and distinction. Though Lucy is well aware that Edward’s feelings for her have long since changed and that his love belongs to Elinor, she refuses to give up what she sees as her one chance at marrying into a life of luxury, even if it means an unhappy marriage with a man who can never love her, and she makes excellent use of every available opportunity to remind Elinor of her claim on Edward, making the recollection as painful as possible. Eager to avoid a marriage between Edward and Elinor and hoping to force Edward into an advantageous match with Miss Morton (thirty thousand pounds), Fanny and Mrs. Ferrars take it upon themselves to dote on Lucy at Elinor’s expense, giving her false hopes. These hopes are quickly dashed when Lucy’s older sister reveals the engagement to Fanny, causing her to fly into a rage and throw the
Steeles sisters out of her house. As a consequence of his insolence, Mrs. Ferrars provides Edward with an ultimatum: marry Miss Morton or lose his place to his younger brother Robert. A true conservative hero, Edward gives in to propriety (and society’s expectations) and renounces his inheritance in favor of preserving Lucy’s reputation. In gratitude for his chivalry, Lucy seduces Edward’s brother by appealing to his pride (just as Willoughby does with Marianne) and, once she has secured his affection, breaks off her previous engagement to become Mrs. Robert Ferrars.

All obstacles having been finally removed — by none other than two mercenary marriages — and Marianne having survived her illness for the better, Colonel Brandon steps in as a true hero must, to remedy the situation and save the Dashwood sisters from their misery. He finally openly reveals his love for Marianne, but not to her and in secret, the way Willoughby might have done. Instead, Brandon follows proper conduct to a tee and speaks first to Marianne’s mother so that he might gain her approval for any possible match. Mrs. Dashwood, more than a little influenced by Brandon’s economic puissance, gives her full support, and the two are soon married, making Marianne the wealthy mistress of a large estate and “patroness of a village” (294), much more than she could ever have hoped for with Willoughby.

Brandon also provides for Elinor by giving Edward the Delaford living, which, along with Elinor’s own small inheritance and the ten thousand pounds given to them by a slightly amended Mrs. Ferrars, is more than enough for the two lovers to marry.
Conclusions
In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Jane Austen appropriates many of the themes and devices that are so prominent in the works of her Sentimentalist contemporaries. In so doing, she aligns herself with a conservative movement whose goals included, from the start, the defense of the institution of marriage from what it perceived to be an abusive form of individualism predicated on the selfish desire for financial gain. As such, the theme of marriage — and the marriage market in particular — becomes, as it must, the driving force behind the novel.

The pressure of the market — which is nothing but the feeling of intense need to form a union that will bring the utmost benefit — affects every character either directly, as in the case of those characters (both major and minor) of marrying age (the Dashwood sisters, Willoughby, the Miss Steeles, etc), or indirectly, as with those characters who are already married and who must now preoccupy themselves with acquiring prosperous matches for their children (Mrs. Dashwood and Mrs. Ferrars), relatives (Fanny Dashwood, Mrs. Smith, and Lord Middleton), or friends (Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer). No one within the scope of the novel escapes untouched, and even those characters who present themselves as superior or aloof (e.g. Mr. Palmer) are not above the occasional comment on someone’s marriage prospects or financial situation.

Marriage is, furthermore, in every way possible, responsible for setting up the plot of the novel through the issue of the entailment, which throws the two Dashwood heroines head-first into the marriage market (i.e. the search for wealthy husbands). Marriage also provides the impetus for character development, first through the mistaken assumption of Marianne’s engagement and later via her sickness following
Willoughby’s actual marriage to Miss Grey, both of which eventually cause Marianne to amend her ways and force Brandon and Willoughby to consider their emotions and actions, leading directly to the revelation of truths which the two men kept secret for much of the novel through cathartic confessions to Elinor. Finally, it is marriage that offers a satisfactory resolution to the preceding drama through the harmonious union of complementary counterparts. In other words, everything in the novel is made socially correct again by the marriage of the heroines (Elinor and Marianne) to the heroes (Edward and Brandon), of the careless rake (Willoughby) to the cruel heiress (Miss Grey), and of the heartless opportunist (Lucy) to the vapid socialite (Robert), because it is through these morally appropriate unions that the delicate equilibrium of the novel is restored and harmony returns.

Though it is true that Austen adopts Sentimentalist themes and devices, she cannot be called a true Sentimentalist. In fact, she rejects, in her ironic portrayal of Marianne, a complete surrender to overt sentimentalism, citing its consequences as many and dire. Instead, through exemplary characters like Elinor, Edward, and Brandon, and through Marianne’s later epiphany and subsequent amendment, Austen argues in favor of conservative “sense” (rationalism) as the bedrock of the only type of happiness the eighteenth-century wished to concern itself with: a stable, ordered contentment that served to sheer up all levels of society. Likewise, though Austen champions love and affection as the driving force behind formal attachments, she accepts the search for material comfort as the central pillar of matrimony, as evidenced by the fact that all of the novel’s couples, in the end, form marriages that are economically advantageous, or at least appropriate. Furthermore, in her portrayal of Lucy Steele as a heartless opportunist and by giving her a moral position equal to that of
Willoughby, Austen breaks with the accepted Sentimentalist notion of the woman as the ever virtuous and ever innocent victim of negative external influences. Like Defoe’s Moll Flanders, Lucy Steele is not a literary ideal. Instead, she is one of the “she-rakes” referred to by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu — a flesh and blood woman, a clever trickster who knows how to manipulate her peers to get what she wants and achieve success. In this gradual turning away from the ideal towards the actual, Austen foreshadows the shift to nineteenth century Realism, showing that, though she did accept the predominant socio-domestic philosophy and literary conventions of her time, she also helped to pave the way for something different and new.
Works Cited


