Addressing the Letter in Jane Austen’s Sense and Sensibility

This was all overheard by Miss Dashwood; and in the whole of the sentence, in his manner of pronouncing it, and in his addressing her sister by her Christian name alone, she instantly saw an intimacy so decided, a meaning so direct, as marked a perfect agreement between them. From that moment she doubted not of their being engaged to each other; and the belief of it created no other surprise, than that she, or any of their friends, should be left by tempers so frank, to discover it by accident. (Vol 1, ch 12)

Elinor persuades Marianne that their mother cannot bear the extra expense of keeping a horse and Marianne must reluctantly withdraw from the agreement she has made with Willoughby to ride with him regularly on a horse he has obtained for her. Elinor overhears Willoughby insisting he will keep the horse until Marianne leaves Barton to form her own establishment; Elinor draws her (as it proves wrong) conclusions.

The word ‘address’ is used 22 times in the novel, but only once in the sense we now most often use it, the ‘direction’ for correspondence (Willoughby, Brandon asserts, left a pregnant Eliza Williams ‘ignorant of his address’ (vol 2, ch. 9). It is more often used in the sense we find it above, the sense defined by the OED as ‘to direct spoken words to’.

To address, the first OED dictionary definition tells us is ‘To send in a particular direction or towards a particular location. (Senses relating to communication.)’ Here, the significant message is that only a relation of extreme intimacy could entitle Willoughby to use Marianne’s Christian name (and we note the paragraph opens by referring to Elinor as ‘Miss Dashwood’; we will return to the pointed significance of names in this novel in the course of this paper. Willoughby’s ‘aim is true’ in the sense here that he wishes to communicate the intensity of his feeling for Marianne (we later discover that at this stage he is coming to the decision to propose to her, a decision suddenly sent off course when Mrs Smith calls him to account for his behaviour with Eliza Williams). However, Elinor’s conclusions while reasonable are mistaken; as Marianne reveals later, there was no positive engagement. It is this issue of the ways in which first ‘direction’ or ‘address’ in Sense and Sensibility is so often mistaken, misapplied, to which I will pay attention in this paper. The paper falls into three parts. First, I’ll talk about the abandoned letter form and transition to third person narration and Austen’s much-admired use of free indirect discourse. Second, I turn to the ‘letter’ not as epistle but as alphabetical character and the serious fun Austen has with acrostic games of character in a novel in which the expectation of one arrival or event is so often displaced or replaced by the arrival of another. Third and finally I will compare two epistolary reading in which the ‘meanings’ of character are redirected or clarified through intense and dramatic moments realised through the use of the letter as theatrical prop.

1) From letter fiction to free indirect discourse/third person
2) The reproducibility of ‘character’ and the alphabetical ‘letter’
3) The letter as prop; Elinor’s scenes of epistolary reading – Brandon/Eliza, Willoughby/Marianne

Perhaps one way of understanding Austen’s ‘address’ to the different qualities, capacities and limitations of the letter as vehicle for ‘character’ is to look at the shape of some letters we have from Jane to her own sister, Cassandra. Postal rates in this period were calculated according to distance travelled and the number of sheets of paper included; they were payable by the recipient rather than the sender (with the exception of London’s penny-post system introduced in 1680, increased to tuppence in 1801, in which pre-payment was made by the sender). Stamps were not introduced until 1839 and envelopes not until the mid 19th century. So Austen’s letters sent through the postal
are themselves small miracles of dense and overlapping text, with every scrap covered by text (and crossed for good measure) except the small section left to show the address after folding. If Austen started writing Sense and Sensibility as a letter fiction and abandoned it, it still has something of the effect of a posted letter by its author: crammed with overlapping information and sentiment but carefully designed to take its reader to the destinations anticipated by the author. Like Austen’s own letters (or those we have surviving from Cassandra’s editorial intervention), the letter in Sense and Sensibility is not a vehicle for transparent emotion or the expression of authentic and solemn sentiment. Austen, I suggest, turns this first published work into a staged debate on the competing merits of communicating character in the letter (which necessarily substitutes for the body/is delivered in place of the physical person) and in the person or the flesh. Speech, letters and free indirect discourse are three different and competing means of revealing ‘character’ tested in this novel; in the end it is the narration which speaks in and through characters (free indirect discourse) which satisfies the questing ‘reader’ (for whom Elinor is so often a surrogate herself) with ‘direct’ meaning.

1. Redirecting the letter: from letter fiction to free indirect discourse/third person

The first ‘direction of travel’ we should be aware of is that the novel appears to have been first destined to take an ‘epistolary’ form. It is hard to imagine how Jane Austen may have constructed this novel. Despite the doubled names of its titles, I think it is unlikely that the epistolary draft would have consisted of an equal balance of letters from the two sisters. Austen’s early experiments with epistolary fiction show a writer inclined NOT to use multiple perspectives and voices to build up epistolary fiction. ‘Love and Freindship’ , a youthful satire on the cold-hearted excesses of apparent sensibility and dated 13 June 1790, is made up of a series of letters by Laura, largely to a correspondent named Marianne. ‘Lady Susan’ was probably composed in the same year as ‘Elinor and Marianne’ – 1795. It is a letter fiction involving two counterpointed correspondents, the hypocritical Lady Susan who writes to her co-conspirator, Alicia Johnson, and Lady Susan’s moral sister-in-law, Mrs Vernon, who writes to her mother expressing her concern that her brother, Mr de Courcy, is falling in love with the enchantress who has come to stay.

There are market as well as formal reasons why Austen departed from the epistolary form. By 1811 the epistolary form in fiction was in an evidently terminal decline after its high point in the 1770s . It is incontrovertible from the publishing evidence that the epistolary mode did undergo a new surge in the general output of novels in the 1770s and a decline in the first two decades of the nineteenth century (See Peter Garside, ‘Introduction’, to James Raven and Rainer Schowerling ed., The English Novel 1770-1829: A Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction Published in the British Isles: Volume II, 1800-1829 (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 53-4. Garside notes a decrease from 169 English epistolary fiction titles in the 1780s to 38 in the 1810s). Austen, uncertain of her market, would do better to criticise than embrace the mode.

It is difficult from the evidence we have of her other epistolary works to imagine how ‘Elinor and Marianne’ could effectively have rendered Elinor as the kind of heroine she presents in the third person novel. When in London, Elinor does correspond with her mother but her letters are not so much confiding as reactive; she is seeking to prompt her mother to act, to give advice, to take on the role of maternal mentor which might redirect or temper Marianne’s obsessive thoughts of Willoughby. It is hard to envisage from the cast we know who might have served as Elinor’s possible CORRESPONDENT; Elinor thinks her way through to conclusions alone and it is her solitariness in what a novel otherwise full of crowds and noise, her absolute lack of a confidante, which makes her such a powerful presence for the reader of the novel and so apparently tangential to the dramas of its action. Perhaps this transition to a third person narration largely rendered through Elinor’s focalisation (or free indirect discourse) is most decisively marked in the first chapter of the second
volume, in which Elinor deliberates about Lucy Steele’s revelations of the latter’s engagement to Edward Ferrars.

Had Edward been intentionally deceiving her? Had he feigned a regard for her which he did not feel? Was his engagement to Lucy, an engagement of the heart? No; whatever it might once have been, she could not believe it such at present. His affection was all her own. She could not be deceived in that. Her mother, sisters, Fanny, all had been conscious of his regard for her at Norland; it was not an illusion of her own vanity. He certainly loved her. What a softener of the heart was this persuasion! (Vol 2, ch. 1)

Elinor, as always, reaches her conclusions through observation of the behaviour and judgement of others, but nevertheless it is impossible on the evidence of the novel we have in its 1811 and 1813 forms to imagine any of its central or marginal characters as suitable correspondents. The POINT of the novel is that no one shares Elinor’s knowledge, understanding and suffering. Marianne has the capacity to do so, but lacks the self-knowledge and experience until the last few chapters to take on that role.

It is Elinor’s ‘address’ that the reader is encouraged to recognise through Austen’s use of a third person narration. Elinor observes and we observe her. One of the ways, however, in which Austen maintains a lightness of tone not found in ‘Lady Susan’ is in ‘Sense and Sensibility’s’ knowing playfulness with character’s names, exits and entrances, a form of novelistic acrostics which serves to maintain some distance for the reader from the otherwise painful account of Elinor’s silent suffering.

2. The reproducibility of ‘character’ and the alphabetical ‘letter’

Characters stories repeatedly DOUBLE in S and S: Mrs Dashwood and Marianne have a strong resemblance and both, despite their insistence on first and hasty feelings, marry men who have loved before; we are told that to Marianne, on hearing of Edward Ferrars connections with Lucy, ‘Edward seemed a second Willoughby’ (vol 3, ch.2); Marianne’s story threatens to repeat that of Eliza Williams which in turn imitates that of Eliza’s mother (who shares her name); Lucy substitutes Robert Ferrars for Edward when the former is elevated to a position better than that of his elder brother by their aggrieved mother. And characters, especially men, are often mistaken for each other; Edward Ferrars is mistaken for Willoughby when he approaches Barton cottage on horseback, Marianne leaves the room in disappointment when she discovers it is Colonel Brandon not Willoughby who enters the house in Berkeley Square, Elinor expects her mother when Willoughby enters the house at Cleveland, the Ferrars’ son Lucy is presumed to have married is Edward when in fact it is Robert, Edward Ferrars is thought to be Colonel Brandon when a horse approaches Brandon Cottage in the penultimate chapter.

Characters, especially male characters, threaten to dwindle into mere alphabetical signs. Margaret unwittingly exposes her oldest sister to relentless teasing at Barton when she discloses that she has a suitor ‘his name begins with an F’ (vol 1, ch. 12). In London, Elinor observes ‘a large W’ in the direction of a note Marianne writes (vol 2, ch. 4). Men sometimes seem to be summoned by simply writing to the: the jokes about the letter ‘F’ are swiftly followed by Edward’s arrival at Barton, Elinor is about to write a letter to him about Colonel Brandon’s offer of a living when he appears in person, when Mrs Jennings enters holding a letter to Marianne (in fact from her mother), Marianne fantasises that it is a penitent explanatory note from Willoughby and imagines that it will be ‘instantly followed by Willoughby himself, rushing eagerly into the room to inforce at her feet, by the eloquence of his eyes, the assurances of the letter’ (vol 2, ch. 9).

Throughout the eighteenth century, literary characters are understood not in terms of ‘deep’ psyche but rather in terms of the quality of the impression they make, and the extent to which their
differences from other characters are legible; the word ‘character’ resonates with the association with the written and especially the printed ‘mark’ and it is only in the early nineteenth century that it begins, precisely through the fictional experiments of authors such as Austen and Edgeworth, to be defined in terms of ‘depth’ and ‘roundedness’ rather surface impression.

In some ways, Austen still seems in this first published novel to be looking backward to the traditions of epistolarity and to the more structural and formulaic expectations of character and ‘type’ dominant through the eighteenth century. She couldn’t resist for instance the following pun with respect to the ‘hand’ and the ‘letter’ embedded in the name she chose for the minor characters, the Palmers: Charlotte Palmer is talking to Elinor about the canvassing for election undertaken by her husband, Thomas Palmer:

“How charming it will be,” said Charlotte, “When he is in Parliament! —won’t it? How I shall laugh? It will be so ridiculous to see all his letter directed to him with an M. P. — But do you know he says he will never frank for me? He declares he won’t. Don’t you, Mr Palmer?”

Mr. Palmer took no notice of her.

“He cannot bear writing, you know,” she continued—“he says it is quite shocking.”

“No;” said he, “I never said any thing so irrational. Don’t palm all your abuses of language upon me.” (Vol 1, ch. 20)

Mr Palmer’s letters are of course currently directed to him by the initials T.P. , and hence it is no vast transition to M.P. ; as usual, Charlotte’s laughter is excessive. M.P’s do not have to pay postage but Mr Palmer refuses to send Charlotte’s letters under his ‘frank’. He refutes however her claim that he does not like to write at all. His choice of the metaphor ‘to palm’ is a telling one; he of course has conferred his name (palmer) on his wife and here an apparent resistance to ‘abuses of language’ is a resistance to an abuse of marital hierarchy (the wife speaking for the husband, the wife exploiting the husband’s political and social privilege for her own trivial purposes).

Austen and her family loved puns and acrostics and they figure regularly in her own novels. Look at another example of her punning pleasure with the idea of conferring marital names, a short poem written in response to an announcement in Hampshire Telegraph and Sussex Chronicle, ‘Sussex, Saturday, February 23, 1811. On Saturday was married, Mr. Gell, of Eastbourne, to Miss Gill, of Well-Street, Hackney’:

Of Eastbourn, Mr. Gell
From being perfectly well
Became dreadfully ill
For the love of Miss Gill.

So he said with some sighs
I’m the slave of your i.s
Ah! Restore if you please
By accepting my e.s.-

The punning on names proliferates in Sense and Sensibility. Here’s some speculation about potential puns secreted (or not so secreted) in names:

TREES
Willoughby – willow-be. His name embeds the ‘will’ so stubbornly associated with Restoration rakes who act on their ‘will’ to power and to sexual pleasure. Think of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester and Aphra Behn’s Willmore in ‘The Rover’ (1677). Note that Willoughby seduces another ‘will’ in the novel, that of Eliza Williams. Note also the reference to the ‘willow’, a tree famous for its ‘bending’; it lacks uprightness and is associated with grief and mourning.

Brandon – brand-on. This suggests a more vigorous or burning desire than the ‘stick of wood’ the hero appears to be.

Dashwood – Dash wood. Obviously John Dashwood literally dashes down a wood, the old chestnuts for his improvement at Norland. ‘Would’ is also a common name in Restoration drama (Harriet Woodvil in Etherege’s ‘Man of Mode’ of 1675, ‘Witwould’ in Congreve’s ‘The Way of the World’ in 1700. Both Elinor and Marianne ‘would dash’ into matrimony given the opportunity.

METAL

Ferrars – Ferrous. Iron. Makes useful tools and is the basis of all metalwork.

Steele – Steel. Made by removing the impurities from iron ore and adding alloying elements. Also of course a pun on ‘steal’ (Lucy steals affections due to others).

This brief exploration of names implies that we should be aware of the significance of theatrical references and the experience of theatre-going which also informs Austen’s novels (names recall the character types and names of a libertine Restoration drama concerned to explore issues of ‘will’ and ‘desire’, social obligation and personal liberty, which are at the heart of Sense and Sensibility.

Let us conclude by looking at the theatricality of the business with letters in Sense and Sensibility. I suggest that these are staged ‘scenes’ of reading in which the letter serves as a significant prop in the disclosure of plot and the (more novelistic) preoccupation with explaining and understanding motive and behaviour.

3) The letter as prop; Elinor’s scenes of epistolary reading – Brandon/Eliza, Willoughby/Marianne

I concentrate here on two scenes which involve the two men who most often ‘double’ for each other: Brandon and Willoughby. These are also ‘doubled’ or repeated scenes: a letter is introduced and its effect observed by Elinor. The same letter is returned to many chapters later with an explanation of its provenance and significance and Elinor’s understanding or judgement is redirected as a result. In both cases, Elinor receives significant information and a new understanding of the character of her sister’s suitors which she is charged to communicate to Marianne at a later date.

In Vol 1, ch 13 Brandon receives a letter which leads him to leave Barton Park suddenly. Vol I2, ch. 9 Brandon gives Elinor the context for the letter from Eliza for her to communicate his turpitude to Marianne. In Vol I2, ch. 7 and 8 Marianne receives Willoughby’s letter. In Vol. 3, ch. 8 Willoughby visits Elinor at Cleveland and gives her the context of that correspondence for her to communicate his moral weakness but also his genuine feeling to Marianne. The receipt of both letters is at breakfast and in both cases the letter prompts curiosity in those to whom it is not addressed.
Let us look more closely at how this passage and exchange of letters about and by Willoughby play out through Elinor’s consciousness in three key scenes in the novel:

**Scene 1 (vol 1, ch. 13)**

While they were at breakfast the letters were brought in. Among the rest there was one for Colonel Brandon; --he took it, looked at the direction, changed colour, and immediately left the room.

“What is the matter with Brandon?” said Sir John.

Nobody could tell.

“I hope he has no bad news,” said Lady Middleton. “It must be something extraordinary that could make Colonel Brandon leave my breakfast table so suddenly.”

In about five minutes he returned.

“No bad news, Colonel, I hope,” said Mrs. Jennings, as soon as he entered the room.

“None at all, ma’am, I thank you.”

“Was it from Avignon? I hope it is not to say that your sister is worse.”

“No, ma’am. It came from town, and is merely a letter of business.”

“But how came the hand to discompose you so much, if it was only a letter of business? Come, come, this won’t do, Colonel; so let us hear the truth of it.”

After Brandon hears of Willoughby’s engagement to Sophia Grey he comes to impart to the Dashwood sisters in London the account that Willoughby had seduced and abandoned his ward, Eliza Williams, and that the letter received at Barton Park was from the missing girl.

**Scene 2 (vol 2, ch. 9):** ‘The first news that reached me of her, came in a letter from herself, last October. It was forwarded to me from Delaford, and I received it on the very morning of our intended party to Whitwell’

Elinor later communicates the story to Marianne, but it brings little relief to its addressee.

Marianne’s reaction ‘She felt the loss of Willoughby’s character yet more heavily than she had felt the loss of his heart’ (vol 2, ch.10).

Willoughby’s character (in the sense of reputation rather than alphabetical sign or novelistic construction) is ‘lost’. Of course, later Willoughby (rather feebly) defends his character in the later scene with Elinor; Eliza Williams was too silly apparently to deserve his loyalty and could easily have found his whereabouts had she put some thought to the task. However, Willoughby’s parallel scene with Elinor concentrates on mitigating his behaviour to Marianne, Eliza’s successor.

**Scene 3 (vol 2, ch. 8)**

Willoughby comes to Cleveland having heard of Marianne’s illness and in a private audience with Elinor explains the context in which the letter he wrote to Marianne breaking with her in London was written. This is how Elinor’s first reading of that letter is described:

> With what indignation such a letter as this must be read by Miss Dashwood may be imagined. Though aware, before she began it, that it must bring a confession of his inconstancy, and confirm their separation for ever, she was not aware that such language could be suffered to announce it; nor could she have supposed Willoughby capable of departing so far from the appearance of every honourable and delicate feeling—so far from the common decorum of a gentleman, as to send a letter so impudently cruel: a letter which, instead of bringing with his desire of a release any professions of regret, acknowledged no breach of faith, denied all peculiar affection whatever—a letter of which every line was an insult, and which proclaimed its writer to be deep in hardened villainy.
Willoughby reveals that his fiancée, Sophia Grey, opened Marianne’s letter after Willoughby snubbed Marianne at a party and wrote an answer on his behalf which he was forced to copy.

Scene 2 (vol 3, ch.7)

“Your wife!—The letter was in your own hand writing.”

“Yes, but I had only the credit of servilely copying such sentences as I was ashamed to put my name to. The original was all her own—her own happy thoughts and gentle diction. But what could I do?—we were engaged, everything in preparation, the day almost fixed—But I am talking like a fool. Preparation!—day!—In honest words, her money was necessary to me, and in a situation like mine, anything was to be done to prevent a rupture. And after all, what did it signify to my character in the opinion of Marianne and her friends, in what language my answer was couched?—It must have been only to one end. My business was to declare myself a scoundrel, and whether I did it with a bow or bluster was of little importance

After he departs, we are told that Elinor ponders her responses to what he has told her:

Elinor’s response: Willoughby, he, whom only half an hour ago she had abhorred as the most worthless of men, Willoughby, in spite of all his faults, excited a degree of commiseration for the sufferings produced by them, which made her think of him as now separated for ever from her family with a tenderness, a regret, rather in proportion, as she soon acknowledged within herself—to his wishes than to his merits. She felt that his influence over her mind was heightened by circumstances which ought not to have weight;—that person of uncommon attraction, that open, affectionate, and lively manner which it was no merit to possess; and by that still ardent love for Marianne, which it was not even innocent to indulge. But she felt that it was so, long, long, before she could feel his influence less. (vol 3, ch. 9)

It is arguable that Austen here (and in the novel in general) charts the triumph of the novelistic hero of quiet and feeling sentiment (Brandon) over the stage libertine (Willoughby). Willoughby himself admits to playing the stage villain in a scene which consciously echoes (although it inverts) the scene in William Wycherley’s ‘The Country Wife’ (1675) in which Pinchwife dictates a letter from his country wife, Margery, to the libertine Horner rejecting his advances (Margery unlike Willoughby slyly manages to substitute her own welcome to his addresses o course). Willoughby confesses that a bow or a bluster have the same effect in his occupying this role and speaks of a lack of concern in what language his loss of ‘character’ is couched. In these scenes of long ‘speechifying’ by central male characters, Austen sets up a drama of conflict between different modes of communication: speech, letter and novelistic discourse. The ‘character’ which is proved and tried as more than a mechanical hand or a theatrical impersonation in the process is of course that of Elinor herself as conduit of information and self-reflexive commentator on her own responses. And the choice of language to describe Elinor’s response to Willoughby is especially telling: she ‘felt’ a moral judgement but could not use it to counterweigh the ‘feeling’ of influence of his physical presence, his character in person, until much afterward. The capacity of the novel to reflect on, to return to, to double situation, circumstance and personality to produce reflective response is duly celebrated in the character of Elinor.

The achievement of Sense and Sensibility as a not-quite not-epistolary novel is that despite all its tricksiness and wordplay it stages a triumph of ‘heart’ over hand; it manages to convey an
impression of genuine feeling and to move its readers to feel for both its heroines. We’ve noted the
debt to Restoration theatre in character names – we might also note that the use of letters in this
novel is also often THEATRICAL – staged encounters in which letters are part of the business of
disclosure of secret alliances (see the conclusion of Congreve’s *Way of the World* and the deed of
trust between Miss Wishfort and Mirabell prior to her marriage which undoes her villainous
husband’s plans). Letters are not disclosures of the heart but ‘stage business’ and the novel gives us
access to a different form of knowledge of feeling through its use of free indirect discourse in which
we travel WITH Elinor in these crowded scenes aware of her own inner conflicts and tensions as
reader of scenes very close to her heart