

16. Elinor Dashwood and Lucy Steele

Elinor Dashwood is a model of *decorum*. She is only nineteen (I, i, 6); and thanks to her father's death and the meanness of her half-brother and his wife (John and Fanny Dashwood), genteel poverty is her appointed lot. But she is good-looking, good natured, well read, and very sensible. These facts are noticed by Edward Ferrars, the brother of her grasping sister-in-law, who shows strong signs of becoming attached to her. Elinor herself tries to live up to the decorous standard established by Samuel Richardson, according to which a girl must not be in love with a young man until he declares himself (cf. I, iv, 21). But Edward is intelligent, bookish and sensible, like herself; so the attraction is mutual.

Edward, however, does not declare himself. He seems sometimes to be depressed; and he is surprisingly dubious about accepting an invitation to visit the impoverished Dashwoods at Barton in Devonshire (I, viii, 39). The Dashwoods are the victims of an entail; Edward's prospects are at the mercy of his mother's whim — and she does not approve of his desire to enter the Church (I, xix, 102).

In Devonshire, Elinor's sister Marianne (seventeen) has a romantically dramatic encounter with John Willoughby (twenty-five). They fall in love at first sight; but like Edward, Willoughby fails to declare himself. This offers us an interesting study of the virtue of "candour" (which is Jane Austen's ideal of Christian charity). Elinor wants to be "candid" (I, xv, 79); but she finds it much easier to trust in Edward's truth and honor than in that of Willoughby. She thinks Willoughby ought to speak; but she excuses Edward's silence by the same argument that her mother uses for

Willoughby. It is Mrs. Dashwood who is properly candid; and she “extorts” “candour” from Elinor (I, xix, 101).

The real reason for Edward’s depression (I, iv, 22; xviii, 96; xix, 104) is that he has been secretly engaged for four years — since he was nineteen — to Lucy Steele. Lucy is even poorer than Elinor; and although she is intelligent, she is sadly deficient both in education and in cultural interests (I, xxii, 127). She is clearly quite a charmer, and an accomplished flatterer; but Edward now bitterly regrets his engagement. He has felt this for at least three years (and Lucy has known how he feels for some considerable time). But he thinks that it would be dishonorable to ask her to release him. She *says* that she still loves him, and he feels obliged to believe her (but it is very doubtful whether he actually does so).ⁱ

Lucy Steele comes, with her older sister Anne, to stay at Barton Park. She is twenty-two or three, quite a beauty, and a well practiced hypocrite. She ingratiates herself with her hostess, Lady Middleton, by making much of the children (I, xxi, 120-1). Her sister, who is very plain, and quite empty-headed, is probably very jealous of her (though perhaps not consciously so).ⁱⁱ Lucy is afraid that Anne will betray her secret (I, xxii, 133); and the first hint of it that we get is some “rather ill-natured” comments by Miss Steele about Edward (I, xxi, 126).

Lucy has discovered that Edward is much attracted to Elinor (II, i, 142). She is jealous, and takes the first opportunity to tell Elinor about the engagement. She torments Elinor systematically about it. Volume I of the novel ends when Elinor is finally convinced that the engagement is a fact. She also realizes that Lucy has no real attachment to Edward; her own conclusion is that “if her [Elinor’s] case was pitiable, his [Edward’s] was hopeless” (II, i, 140). She can see that Edward is hoping that “family opposition and unkindness” will cause Lucy to release him; and from her insight into Lucy’s actual motivation she has little hope of that. She resolves “to combat her own affection for Edward and to see him as little as possible” (142).

Lucy professes to be quite willing to accept poverty (II, ii, 147). But in that case (as Elinor points out) she ought to make the engagement public. It is not just for Edward's sake that she does not do this (and, as we have seen, Edward's motives for secrecy are quite different). Elinor decides that Lucy is completely insincere (II, ii, 151); and Lucy's relations with her show that she is right.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mrs. Ferrars wants Edward to marry an heiress — Miss Morton, who is apparently quite willing. And if Edward displeases her in any way, the danger is that she will disinherit him, and settle everything on his brother Robert. We meet Robert as he is buying a toothpick case in a London shop (II, xi, 220-1). Jane Austen gives us a marvelous caricature of the young man about town, educated at a public school rather than by a private tutor like her own father. (Edward was educated privately in that way, and it was at his tutor's that he met Lucy. Robert, who is his mother's favorite, thinks this was the ruin of him — II, xiv, 250.)

Through Fanny Dashwood, Lucy finally meets Mrs. Ferrars. She sets out to be charming, and to flatter her; and she is rapidly taken into favor because Mrs. Ferrars wants to discriminate against Elinor (II, xviii, 238). (Everyone in the family knows that Edward is attached to her.) There is an illuminating moment when Edward finds himself together with both Elinor and Lucy. He is so embarrassed as to become quite tongue-tied — “which the case rendered reasonable, though his sex might make it rare” (II, xiii, 241), says Jane Austen. Her menfolk are usually quite self-confident, and even arrogantly ill-mannered in domestic situations.^{iv} For a man to take any (untitled) woman seriously is generally a mark of high moral character in Jane Austen's novels.

All of the outward drama of the book is concentrated in the story of Marianne and Willoughby. But the priority of Elinor's romance in Jane Austen's mind, is shown by the way that the second volume ends (like the first) with an invitation for the Steele sisters.^v They arrived originally at Barton Park; now they are to stay with Fanny Dashwood in London. Here again, they are preferred to Elinor and Marianne because of Edward's known attachment to Elinor. By this time John Dashwood is convinced that Colonel Brandon will marry Elinor; his wife's instincts are

sounder about that. But she too is deceived. (John Dashwood's error infects Edward Ferrars — who certainly ought to know better, but who is very insecure.)

Volume III opens with Anne's "betrayal." Misled by Fanny's apparent liking for Lucy, she reveals Lucy's engagement to Edward. Edward now behaves very "honorably." He declares that on no account will he give Lucy up; and he is duly disinherited. Mrs. Ferrars can now follow the inclination she has long nursed, and settle her main landed estate upon Robert. Edward waits for three days before he goes to see Lucy (III, ii, 272-3). Elinor "gloried in his integrity" (III, ii, 270). But it is clear that he was hoping that now that he has no prospects at all, Lucy would give him up; and perhaps she nearly did (273).

Lucy, however, decides to hang on. For the moment, she hardly has any option, since she must show herself to be as *faithful* as her lover is. But in the light of her later policy, we can fairly surmise that she still hopes at this moment to flatter Mrs. Ferrars into accepting her. Edward offers to release her (with Anne listening at the door). He will now go into the Church, and become a curate wherever he can. Lucy certainly does not want *that*. Edward is afraid that if he gets any sort of "living" she will marry him; but the clerical prospect certainly encourages her to look for any possible alternative.

What happens now is a surprise to everyone. Colonel Brandon asks Elinor to offer Edward the Delaford "living." This is most unwelcome to Edward (who thinks that the Colonel will soon make an offer to Elinor). But it turns out to be the means of salvation. The living is worth only £200 per annum; and Colonel Brandon thinks that is only adequate for a bachelor-existence (III, iii, 284). But Edward can now put Lucy's willingness to accept poverty to the test. Some months must pass before he can be ordained. His ordination will exacerbate the resentment of Mrs. Ferrars (and make any project of Lucy's to get them both received into the family again more difficult). But Edward plans to be married as soon as his ordination is complete.

Jane Austen lets the news of Lucy's marriage burst on us like a thunderclap. Elinor is quite plausibly deceived about who she has married. This is bound to raise doubt in the mind of the serious reader about whether Lucy's successful enticement of Robert Ferrars into marriage is plausible at all. I can remember thinking, when I first read the novel, that it was not. It was on a level, I felt, with the psychology of a comedy by Sheridan — or even of a farce by Molière.

That verdict, I now think, was quite unjust. We do not appreciate Lucy properly because we see her very largely through the eyes of Elinor and Marianne. Both of them are very *serious* observers; and they know that Lucy is a hypocrite. But they are also prejudiced. Elinor's prejudice is personal, and we sympathize with her completely. Marianne has a more general prejudice against the whole world of conventional values to which Lucy belongs. But in that world, what happens is plausible enough.

Robert Ferrars — and even Mrs. Ferrars, John and Fanny — are certainly figures of farce. But if we study the explanation of Robert's marriage, when we reach it, we can see that it is quite as well accounted for as many of the conventional alliances in Jane Austen's novels. Lucy, we must understand, is a *charmer*. Everyone — except Elinor and Marianne — would agree about that; and only Edward would be bitter about it. What Lucy wants, when she first approaches Robert, is to gain access once more to Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny. Robert, on his side, is newly independent; and his mother has now begun to think about marrying *him* off to the mysterious heiress, Miss Morton. Robert is as easily charmed, as he is empty-headed. He is also very jealous of his elder brother — whose seriousness he regards with an envy that is hardly concealed. Life is only a game for him; stealing his brother's lady-love is bound to appear to him as a first-rate joke. To John Dashwood the loss of Miss Morton's £30,000 would be a serious matter; but Robert is not ambitious to be richer than his mother has already made him. A wife who is completely dependent on him — and very charmingly *grateful* — is vastly preferable to one who is independently wealthy, and perhaps assertively fond of her own way. (The one fault that I can now see in the novel, is that Jane Austen ought to have given us a couple of paragraphs about Miss Morton's character. That would have made Robert's motives clearer.)

It is the “living” of Delaford that is the crux of the action. Mrs. Jennings thinks that it is quite adequate for the sort of marriage which Lucy is entitled to expect (III, iv, 292); and Edward presents it to her in the same light (III, v, 293). But Lucy’s “happiness” about it is a pretense; Jane Austen tells us that she is “secretly resolved” to get as much out of Colonel Brandon at the Manor house as she can. She will go through with the marriage to Edward if nothing better turns up. But the Delaford “living” is not good enough really. Elinor agrees with that “ninny” Colonel Brandon completely about its inadequacy; and neither she nor the Colonel really thinks that “two thousand a-year” is necessary.^{vi}

By showing that he is quite willing to accept poverty, Edward forces Lucy to seek an alternative as quickly as she can find one. Robert is willing to be charmed, happy to score off his brother, and, no doubt, mischievously delighted to defy his mother once he is no longer financially dependent upon her. He does not take marriage seriously, because he does not take his life seriously at all. It is illuminating to compare Robert and Lucy with the Eltons. Robert’s attachment is like that of Augusta Hawkins. She gets an appropriate social position out of her marriage; being a man, he does not need that. He gets an appropriately decorative partner. Both of them are more attached to their own self-image than to the other person. But their partners in each case are cold-hearted seekers after economic and social advantage. Neither couple knows what love is, and they do not deserve to be loved for themselves. So they are very appropriately matched. When Lucy’s flattery comes together with the longstanding personal favoritism of Mrs. Ferrars to make them all friends again in the family, they will be as happy together as they know how to be. They have only followed their own natures in a consistently believable way.

The published engagement of Edward and Lucy causes Mrs. Ferrars to see Elinor in a new light. She is, after all, a respectable family connection. When Lucy catches Robert — and *he* shows that the wishes and desires of his mother are not really important to him — Mrs. Ferrars is virtually compelled to accept her eldest son as the equal of her daughter Fanny at least. So Edward receives the equivalent of Fanny’s dowry (£10,000); and with this supplement, the living of Delaford becomes adequate for a properly respectable marriage. Edward and Elinor are no doubt very

grateful. But neither of them really wants to mend the breach with Mrs. Ferrars. Their relations will be perfectly *decorous*, but not *loving* in the only sense in which Mrs. Ferrars can understand the word. It is Lucy who will *appear* to her to be *loving*. So the reconciliation of those who *can* love one another is quite natural; and Edward and Elinor are partly responsible for their own exclusion from the Ferrars' circle. We can, of course, quite rightly say that the love of that circle is *hollow*. It would be impossible to love Mrs. Ferrars (or John and Fanny) in the way that Edward and Elinor love Mrs. Dashwood. But we can see what is lacking here, if we consider how Jane and Elizabeth will always continue to feel about Mrs. Bennet. This comparison shows how the *decorum* of Edward and Elinor falls very slightly short of the ideal of perfect Christian "candour."

Notes

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- i. He says (when the truth is known) that he had to “give her the option of continuing the engagement” and that only “disinterested affection” could induce her to continue it (III, xiii, 367). But he probably thought she would release him quite soon, if the situation continued. (He did not think that her affection was really “disinterested.”)
 - ii. At the conscious level, Anne is probably jealous on Lucy’s behalf. She, too, knows that Edward is now in love with Elinor.
 - iii. It cannot be said that Lucy’s unwillingness to publish the engagement proves that her affection is not sincere. A girl who wilfully ruined her fiancé’s prospects could hardly expect him not to be bitter about it later. Jane Austen will explore this whole issue later in the case of Jane Fairfax — and of the Miss Churchill who ran off with Captain Weston. What shows that Lucy is not sincere is her willingness to *share* her secret (contrast Jane Fairfax). It is *Elinor’s* character that is illumined by the issue of publicity.
 - iv. A good example in *S and S* is provided by Mr. Palmer. He is really quite kind-hearted, as his behavior to Marianne in her distress shows. But his manners to his wife are shocking.
 - v. Fanny Dashwood sends the invitation to Lucy. This is valuable to the plot — because Lucy can show the note to Elinor. But it is an error of etiquette (which reflects both on the character of Fanny, and on the social insignificance of the Steeles), since the invitation ought to be addressed to Anne. The faux pas highlights the *charm* of Lucy Steele.

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- vi. That is part of Marianne's romantic fantasy of material happiness. In Elinor's opinion £1000 p.a. is "wealth" (I, xvii, 91). They will end up with about £700 p.a. when Mrs. Ferrars gives them £10,000.