For almost two hundred years, readers of *Sense and Sensibility* have been occupied in discussions about Jane Austen’s allegiances or ambivalences regarding the value of proper conduct versus inner-directed behaviour, but such discussions have tended to obscure another ideological issue in the novel – the issue of feminine authority and power.¹ While readers debate whether the narrator is drawing rigid lines between sense and feeling, they may overlook the book’s attitude towards female power, an attitude which is negative, cautionary, devaluating. I want to argue that *Sense and Sensibility* is a text that reveals Austen’s anxieties about female authority, and that seen from such a perspective it is descriptive of struggles and tensions rather than of ideological serenity.

The most straightforward way to begin is to assert that *Sense and Sensibility* is an enactment of Austen’s failure to legitimate feminine authority. It is Austen’s most anti-feminist book, a book inhabited by monstrous women and victimized men, a book which, in spite of its tepidly bracing last words (‘and among the merits and the happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that though sisters, and living almost within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves . . .’ [380]), seems to deny all possibility of sisterhood. At the same time, as feminist critics such as Patricia Meyer Spacks and Deborah Kaplan have shown, *Sense and Sensibility* articulates a critique of patriarchal values and practices.² This dichotomy between fear of feminine authority and desire for it occupies Austen’s novelistic imagination and informs her narrative strategies in *Sense and Sensibility*.

One anti-feminist strategy that Austen consistently invokes is that of diversion. The sins of a man, while not ignored or
excused, are overshadowed by an emphasis on the despicable behaviour of a woman. This technique is pervasive, manifested in nearly every male/female relationship in the novel. For example, although Elinor moves away from blaming Charlotte Palmer for her husband's rudeness (112), the dialogue following her revaluation demonstrates not the husband's ill breeding, but the wife's foolishness. What the reader experiences, through Elinor's conversation with Mrs Palmer, is the difficulty of responding politely to vulgarity and mindless chatter. No comparable experience of Mr Palmer is offered; instead, we have a report of Elinor's mixed feelings:

She found him, however, perfectly the gentleman in his behaviour to all visitors, and only occasionally rude to his wife and her mother; she found him very capable of being a pleasant companion, and only prevented from being so always, by too great an aptitude to fancy himself as much superior to people in general, as he must feel himself to be to Mrs Jennings and Charlotte. (304)

Not only does this evaluation point back to women's inadequacies, but Elinor's judgement is itself problematized. We learn that her mild resistance to Mr Palmer is connected to her 'remembrance of Edward's generous temper' (305), which personalizes and renders less authoritative her evaluation; Mr Palmer emerges relatively unscathed by either Elinor's criticisms or Austen's. 3

More significantly, the text allows the irresponsible or self-centred actions of John Dashwood and his great-uncle to become peripheral. The famous dialogue between John Dashwood and his wife obscures the patriarchal insensitivity of the old man and shades the cold selfishness of the young one. What remains prominent in the reader's mind is Fanny Dashwood's aggressive manipulation of her husband's irresolute desires. John himself formulates his decision in language that gives Fanny credit for it: 'I believe you are perfectly right. My father certainly could mean nothing more by his request to me than what you say. I clearly understand it now, and I will strictly fulfil my engagement by such acts of assistance and kindness to them as you have