

# Edward Ferrars and the scissors sheath

In Chapter 48 of *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward Ferrars awkwardly tells the Dashwood women that Lucy Steele has not in fact married him, but instead has married his brother:

He rose from his seat, and walked to the window, apparently from not knowing what to do; took up a pair of scissors that lay there, and while spoiling both them and their sheath by cutting the latter to pieces as he spoke, said, in a hurried voice,

"Perhaps you do not know—you may not have heard that my brother is lately married to—the youngest—to Miss Lucy Steele."

In her book *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical*, Helena Kelly considers this moment with the scissors to be highly significant, saying:

The Latin for sheath is 'vagina', as Jane, with her smattering of Latin, may very plausibly have known. The word was already in use as a medical term during her lifetime.

The sheath, then, is Lucy, or, strictly speaking, Lucy's private parts. The scissors are – what, a penis? Robert's? Edward's? Or something else, even. Jane seldom uses symbolism, but this looks like symbolism, and symbolism of a deeply disturbing, unhealthy, sexually violent kind. Perhaps we don't need to look any further for the reason why Edward was educated privately with a tutor, away from his younger siblings.

Kelly has a habit of taking passing references in Austen's work, and magnifying them and extrapolating them to an extent that really does not appear to be justified by the text. And this particular contention seems to be very much lacking in evidence. Indeed, it rests entirely on the idea that Jane Austen *may very plausibly* have known the Latin word for sheath.

We discussed this matter at some length in an episode of [Reading Jane Austen](#), and then had to cut it out due to time constraints. The following dot points summarise our arguments.

- Kelly rightly says that Jane Austen does not use symbolism very often. However, when she does (for example, twice in *Mansfield Park* – the scene by the ha-ha, and the game of Speculation) it is more clearly signalled than this.
- This minimally violent action may seem somewhat surprising.
- But it is quite possible that it simply arises out of observation. Many people do have a tendency to fidget, such as by twisting things in their hands, or doodling, particularly when in a stressful situation (which Edward most certainly was at the time).
- And if the object that is to hand is a pair of scissors (rather than, for instance, a fidget spinner), then the most natural – and probably unconscious – action would be to slip one's fingers into the handles, and open and close the scissors. And doing this would require taking them out of the sheath, meaning that if – again unconsciously – there was an inclination to actually cut something with them, then the sheath (rather than, say, a piece of paper) would be to hand. This is, of course, all pure speculation. But it is no less – and I would suggest rather more – likely than Kelly's speculations. It is, after all, based on observation of people (which Austen did a lot) rather than symbolism (which she used seldom).
- It is, of course, not particularly nice of Edward to destroy *someone else's property*.

- But using this action as a basis for describing Edward as sexually deviant – and suggesting that his family knew, and chose to have him educated privately - is an enormous and completely unsubstantiated extrapolation.

[I may expand the above dot points into more coherent paragraphs after I have re-listened to the material cut from the podcast episode.]

Harriet and Ellen, 2021

[Reading Jane Austen](#)