

**JANE AUSTEN'S WOMEN**



**CHERYL BYRD WARDEN**

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An Abstract  
Presented to  
the Graduate Council of  
Austin Peay State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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by  
Cheryl Byrd Wasden  
August 1976

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine closely the female characters of Jane Austen's six novels, to reveal the variety of those characters, and to illustrate the skill with which each individual character is delineated.

These female characters are examined in the context of their relationships with other women, with men, with husbands, and with the community. Jane Austen was very much aware of the complexity of interaction among individuals and demonstrated the effects of such interaction upon each character. Her understanding of human nature ensures that her novels will continue to be read. Her mastery of characterization is shown by the validity of her women, whether seen through psychological or historical perspectives.

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Cheryl Byrd Wasden entitled "Jane Austen's Women." I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Edward E. Irwin

Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Lewis C. Tatham

Second Committee Member

Clarence Skurd

Third Committee Member

Accepted for the Council:

Way E. Shamp

Dean of the Graduate School

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Seldom has English literature produced a writer capable of such a wide range of character portrayals as those seen in the novels of Jane Austen. A careful study of her feminine characters reveals the great variety of her women, their universality of impulse and emotion, and their relevance to the modern reader. Because Jane Austen perceived so well the subtle and encompassing web of interaction that ties one individual to many other individuals and to society as a whole, it is more rewarding to examine her characters in the context of their relationships with others than in a static condition.

This study will discuss Jane Austen's skill in delineating feminine characters--one important aspect of her talent as a novelist. This paper will assist in disproving the conclusions of those critics who state that her voluntary limitation of topic and setting reduces the value of her work. There is a tendency among some critics to assume a rather patronizing attitude toward Jane Austen, because she limited herself to "3 or 4 families in a Country

Village."<sup>1</sup>

Such critics save their most ardent admiration for authors who wrote on a grander scale, of wars raging and empires crumbling, of deformed hermits and mad kings.<sup>2</sup>

When discussing the question of scale in Jane Austen's work, one quotation is often seen, and, as Elizabeth Jenkins rightly points out, often misinterpreted by being quoted out of context.<sup>3</sup>

By the bye, my dear Edward, I am quite concerned for the loss your Mother mentions in her Letter; two Chapters & a half to be missing is monstrous! It is well that I have not been at Stevenson lately, & therefore cannot be suspected of purloining them; two strong twigs & a half towards a Nest of my own, would have been something. I do not think however that any theft of that sort would be really very useful to me. What should I do with your strong, manly, spirited Sketches, full of Variety and Glow? How could I possibly join them on to the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labor?<sup>4</sup>

Jane Austen was writing breezily and tenderly to a

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<sup>1</sup>R.W. Chapman, selected and ed., Jane Austen: Letters 1796-1817 (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 170.

<sup>2</sup>Q.D. Leavis, "Pride and Prejudice and Jane Austen's Early Reading and Writing," from "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings," Scrutiny, X (1942), rpt. in Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Reviews and Essays in Criticism, ed. Donald J. Gray, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 194.

<sup>3</sup>Elizabeth Jenkins, Jane Austen (1949, rpt. U.S.A.: Minerva Press, 1969), p. 372.

<sup>4</sup>Chapman, Letters, p. 188.

nephew of whom she was fond, and whose attempts at writing she encouraged as she always did among her young relatives. She could speak lightly and humorously of her own work in comparison to his, but to believe that she considered her own novels as merely "a little bit . . . of ivory" is belied by the painstaking craftsmanship and meticulous artistry that went into every page. She wrote and re-wrote her novels, and was not easily satisfied with her work.<sup>5</sup>

She concentrated on the daily rounds of the middle class, their fairly routine pleasures and misfortunes, not only because she felt it imperative for an artist to work only with materials completely familiar,<sup>6</sup> but further, because of her intuitive knowledge that neither great catastrophes nor violently abnormal events belong in the life of the average individual, and neither will reveal character nor illuminate folly so well as the ordinary trivialities that make up ninety percent of one's daily life.

And because her perception is so keen, her intuition so sure, her depiction so precise, Jane Austen's novels have a quiet greatness that has survived the passing of time and can still delight and intrigue the reader today. Virginia

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<sup>5</sup>Jenkins, p. 334 and p. 350.

<sup>6</sup>Chapman, Letters, p. 165.

Woolf said that "of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness,"<sup>7</sup> but it is easy to disagree. Besides the elegant and expressive simplicity of her prose, the almost architecturally precise structure of her novels, the scathing satire and delicate ironies, besides all these quite obvious perfections, the reader is aware of what Elizabeth Jenkins called Jane Austen's "supernatural power of creating character."<sup>8</sup> Because a significant amount of Jane Austen's genius lies in the real and precise characters she drew, it is profitable to study closely her women.

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<sup>7</sup>Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen," from "Jane Austen at Sixty," Nation, December 15, 1923, p. 433, rpt. Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1963), p. 15.

<sup>8</sup>Jenkins, p. 339.

## Chapter II

### WOMAN'S DUAL ROLE IN SOCIETY

Before examining Jane Austen's women in the context of their relationships with others, it is helpful to note briefly the dual role held by women in Jane Austen's age and society. Women were nurturers of the family and the community and yet also intellectual entities. Jane Austen was in an excellent position to appreciate this duality of role because she excelled in fulfilling each.

It is important to remember, as Marghanita Laski points out, that although Jane Austen's name became more generally known in the Victorian era after the publication of Edward Austen Leigh's Memoir, she herself was "in fact a Georgian, and brought up in the frank atmosphere of that enlightened age."<sup>9</sup> She grew up in an intelligent, well read, and articulate family, in an atmosphere of learning and inquiry that was not stifled by their quiet but sincere Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Marghanita Laski, Jane Austen and her World (New York: The Viking Press, 1969), p. 24.

<sup>10</sup>Laski, p. 24.

The Austen family was not only intelligent but also generally both attractive and charming. Jane Austen moved amid the circle of her family, its connections and friends, and seems to have enjoyed her life to the fullest extent. She wrote once about her pleasure at an indifferent ball, "I do not think it worthwhile to wait for enjoyment until there is some real opportunity for it."<sup>11</sup> To this appreciation of the joy of life she added wit, intelligence, and a striking perception--the results of which may be seen in the keen satire and delicious ironies of her novels.

From this viewpoint, secure in her society but with her eyes open to the ironies and the discrepancies of social moral codes, Jane Austen was able to depict accurately and objectively woman's dual role as nurturer and intellectual free spirit.

Then as now, the role of woman as purveyor of domestic comfort and supplier of both physical service and emotional support was always important. In Emma, Emma Woodhouse's older sister Isabelle, whose life and time were filled with thoughts of and concern for her family, "might have been a model of right feminine happiness."<sup>12</sup> The self

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<sup>11</sup>Jenkins, p. 107.

<sup>12</sup>Jane Austen, Emma (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1966, first published 1816), p. 96. Subsequent references will be included within the text.

sacrificing Fanny Price, in Mansfield Park, spends all her time at the beck and call of her adopted family, running errands, acceding to whims, fulfilling her role as humble poor relative with such an excess of humility and deficiency of self-esteem that she cannot even actively resent it. Anne Elliot, whose nearer relationship does not save her from being similarly neglected and ignored in Persuasion, also spends much of her time willingly promoting her sisters' happiness and mothering their children. Even Emma, who possesses enough pride and self-esteem to have supplied the hapless Fanny Price twice over, is affectionate and attentive to her nephews and nieces.

Emma herself describes "woman's usual occupations of eye, and hand, and mind . . . If I draw less, I shall read more; if I give up music, I shall take to carpet-work. And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections . . . I shall be very well off with all the children of a sister I love so much to care about" (Emma, p. 61).

A gentle satire of woman's nurturing role in society can be seen in Miss Bates, one of Jane Austen's most splendid creations. Miss Bates contains all the usual "feminine" traits exaggerated to a highly comic degree: she is overly fond of her relatives, attached to many friends and acquaintances, truly grateful of notice or favor, completely generous

of her own time and meager resources, intensely interested in everyone around her, and so over ready to share any news or speculation that she can be quite overpowering. Yet the satire is so disarmed by her essential goodness and concern for others that even as the reader laughs, he can do so tenderly and without revulsion.

Jane Austen was well aware, however, that woman does not live by needlework alone. Mr. Darcy, discussing accomplished women, notes scathingly that "The word is applied to many a woman who deserves it no otherwise than by netting a purse, or covering a skreen."<sup>13</sup> Miss Bingley, his companion, states that to be truly accomplished, a woman must have "a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 28), and Darcy adds that she must also improve her mind by extensive reading.

The emphasis on the merit of a woman's mind as opposed to her social graces is also pointed out by the splendid satire of Mrs. Elton, who has "resources." "Blessed with so many resources within myself, the world was not necessary to me. I could do very well without it. To those who had no

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<sup>13</sup>Jane Austen, Pride and Prejudice (London: Pan Books LTD, 1967, first published 1813), p. 28. Subsequent references will be included within the text of the paper.

resources it was a different thing; but my resources made me quite independent" (Emma, p. 183).

And when Emma, perversely bent on winning her argument with Mr. Knightley, protests that beauty and good temper are the highest claims to becoming an intelligent man's companion that a woman can possess, Mr. Knightley exclaims angrily that Emma is abusing her own reason to make such a statement (Emma, p. 48).

It is obvious that Jane Austen was well aware of the complex demands made by society on woman in her dual role. The woman was the nurturer of children, of men, and of the community as a whole, supplying services, fulfilling physical and emotional needs, and holding the community together. She was also a free intellect with a keen perception of the ironies that lay beneath the facade of the middle class structure. The tension resulting from the conflicting demands of the needs of others and the need to be true to oneself is released in the wit, the humor, the skillfully crafted display of irony and satire seen in Jane Austen's novels.

## Chapter III

### WOMEN AND OTHER WOMEN

The many subtle variations of relationships between one woman and another are explored by Jane Austen with great perception. She was fully aware, all folk mythology to the contrary, of the strong, unselfish devotion that can exist between two females, and portrayed such feelings very sympathetically, as between the sisters Jane and Elizabeth Bennet and Elinor and Marianne Dashwood. The fact that in these two instances the two females are sisters, and thus might be expected to possess sisterly love, is mainly incidental, as can be seen by the complete lack of communication and feeling between the younger and older Bennets. Two other sisters not bound by any strong bond of affection are Maria and Julia Betram, who are rendered bitter enemies by the triflings of one personable young man. "With no material fault of temper, or difference of opinion, to prevent their being very good friends while their interests were the same, the sisters under such a trial as this, had not affection or principle enough to make them merciful or just, to give them honour or

compassion."<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Anne Elliot finds very little common interest or mutual affection with her sisters, but that she herself is capable of loyal, unselfish devotion is shown by her pleasure in seeking out and renewing her friendship with Mrs. Smith.

Even Emma, who has no great affection for the much praised Jane Fairfax, is troubled by betraying her. "She doubted whether she had not transgressed the duty of woman to woman, in betraying her suspicions of Jane Fairfax's feelings to Frank Churchill" (Emma, p. 154). With no real friendship between them, yet Emma is conscious of a bond of femininity that she feels should not be broken. And Mary Crawford, who by a stratagem allows Henry to bestow a gold chain upon Fanny Price against her wishes, is condemned as "careless as a woman and a friend" (Mansfield Park, p. 175).

An amusing satire on the subject of feminine friendship is seen in Northanger Abbey. Isabella Thorpe declares, "There is nothing I would not do for those who are really my friends . . . The men think us incapable of real friendship you know, and I am determined to show them the

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<sup>14</sup>Jane Austen, Mansfield Park (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1967, first published 1814), p. 133. Subsequent references will be included within the text of the paper.

difference."<sup>15</sup> Isabella proceeds to contradict by her actions everything that she has so insincerely professed, and is afforded an effective contrast by the quieter but genuine friendship between Eleanor Tilney and Catherine Morland.

Between Emma and Mrs. Weston exist not only friendship but the affection due to a mother-substitute, and their strong mutual interest gives the greatest pleasure to both-- "there was not a creature in the world to whom she spoke with such conviction of being listened to and understood, of being always interesting and always intelligible, the little affairs, arrangements, perplexities, and pleasures of her father and herself. She could tell nothing of Hartfield, in which Mrs. Weston had not a lively concern; and half an hour's uninterrupted communication of all those little matters of which the daily happiness of private life depends, was one of the first gratifications of each" (Emma, p. 81).

There are also two striking examples of a feminine pair in which one takes a superior or guiding role, and the other a subordinate. The first of these is Emma Woodhouse and Harriet Smith. Emma's intimacy with Harriet is originally conceived as good because "she would improve her; she would detach her from her bad acquaintances, and introduce

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<sup>15</sup> Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey (London: Pan Books LTD, 1968, first published 1818), p. 44. Subsequent references will be included within the text of the paper.

her into good society; she would form her opinions and her manners" (Emma, p. 19). This effort is predestined to failure not only because of Emma's lack of self-discipline, but also because her own egotism misleads her into wrongly assessing both her own powers and Harriet's potential. "It would be an interesting and certainly a very kind undertaking; highly becoming her own situation in life, her leisure, and powers" (Emma, p. 19). Emma's pride is her undoing.

A strong contrast to Emma's condescension can be seen in Fanny Price's dealings with her sister Susan. In this case Fanny's genuine and selfless desire to aid and improve Susan is hindered only by her own inability to see herself in the role of guide. The real generosity and delicacy of Fanny's efforts cause a significant improvement in Susan. Further, it is Fanny's mention of Susan in her letters to Mansfield Park that probably prompts the invitation to her sister and thus brings about Susan's release from the squalor of Portsmouth and her elevation to the comfort and tranquility of Mansfield Park.

The relationship of Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax can be seen as a parody of this type of relationship, with Mrs. Elton determined to patronize and aid, and Jane Fairfax, a captive to her own good manners, unable to repulse her.

Jane Austen was also well aware of the multitude of feminine relationships which were not so pure in motive nor

generous in fact. The sycophantic relationship is well portrayed in Sense and Sensibility in the persons of the Misses Steele, who connive to overcome the disadvantages of poverty and low social class by attaching themselves to those better provided with wealth and social position. "They came from Exeter, well provided with admiration for the use of Sir John Middleton, his family, and all his relatives."<sup>16</sup> The perceptive Dashwoods are amazed at such blatant flattery, but the Steele sisters achieve their goal and become indispensable to their hosts.

Jane Austen was also familiar with the type of snobbery that delights in looking down upon those less favoured in wealth and social position. Mr. Bingley's sisters are summarized thus: "They were in fact very fine ladies; not deficient in good humour when they were pleased, nor in the power of being agreeable when they chose it; but proud and conceited" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 10). Although they declare themselves devoted friends of Jane Bennet, when she is ill they find her easy to forget, and "their indifference towards Jane when not immediately before them, restored Elizabeth to the enjoyment of all her original dislike" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 25).

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<sup>16</sup>Jane Austen, Sense and Sensibility (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1965, first published 1811), p. 156. Subsequent references will be included within the text of the paper.

Another pair of proud ladies is found in Sense and Sensibility--Lady Middleton and Mrs. John Dashwood. "Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of coldhearted selfishness on both sides, which mutually attracted them; and they sympathised with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanor, and a general want of understanding" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 156). It is said of Mrs. Dashwood, "The dinner was a grand one, the servants numerous, and everything bespoke the Mistress's inclination for show and the Master's ability to support it" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 158). But they are both outdone by Mrs. Ferrars, whose "complexion was sallow; and her features small, without beauty, and naturally without expression, but a lucky contraction of the brow had rescued her countenance from the disgrace of insipidity, by giving it the strong characters of pride and ill nature" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 158). Mrs. Ferrars, who had objected to a daughter-in-law possessing principle and good understanding but lacking wealth, receives her punishment when she gains instead Lucy Steele, who is inferior to Elinor Dashwood in every respect.

Another portrait of snobbery and supreme self-importance is seen in Lady Catherine de Bourgh, who likes "to have the distinction of rank preserved" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 120). She also receives a severe shock when her nephew

Darcy, earmarked for her sickly daughter, defies her threats and marries Elizabeth Bennet. Such summary and humorous treatment of snobs suggests that Jane Austen had little tolerance for such misconceived pride.

Elizabeth Elliot, who is very like her father, thinks their name and title all important, and combines pride of position and personal vanity with sad results for her mind and heart. She is left at the conclusion of Persuasion still unmarried, older but not at all wiser.

Looking at the wide spectrum of feminine relationships so well portrayed by Jane Austen, one must conclude that these relationships, and the emotions depicted, have changed very little and are easily transferable to the present age. Love and friendship, envy and flattery, pride and vanity, snobbery and condescension--all these are easily understood. Nor have the situations changed to a great degree where one would expect to encounter these emotions. Women are still jealous of rivals, fond of those close to them; they may be vain of personal beauty or social position, impatient with relatives, flattering to those whose rank in society is superior and condescending to those beneath them. Neither the virtues nor the vices of Jane Austen's women are unfamiliar to the reader today.

## Chapter IV

### WOMEN AND MEN

Another proof of Jane Austen's enduring greatness as a novelist is the continuing relevance of the relationships she depicts between men and women. These heterosexual relationships are the ones most likely to be affected by the stricter proprieties and morals of Jane Austen's age, and thus more difficult for the modern reader to feel complete empathy for.

Deference to or defiance of the rules of propriety serves as evidence of the inner character of the women in Jane Austen's novels. Jane Nardin agrees, "In Jane Austen's novels, a person's social behavior is the external manifestation of his moral character."<sup>17</sup> Propriety is thus more than a question of correct social behavior. The propriety of Jane Austen's heroines is based upon sound Christian principles--that necessary foundation of correct judgment and civilized, moral conduct upon which their world was based. These

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<sup>17</sup>Jane Nardin, Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen's Novels (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), p. 1.

Christian principles, as adapted and translated by centuries of Anglican tradition, form not only the preparation for an after-life but an important frame of reference within which the rules of social intercourse were evolved. Correct behavior reflects not only consciousness of social etiquette but reveals the moral fabric of each individual soul--the correct principles which each right thinking person must possess.

There is to this general rule a partial exception. Characters do exist who seem to follow the dictums of propriety while not possessing the right principles that should support them. Lady Middleton follows the rules of decorum, but that she does so incompletely because of a lack of genuine feeling is recognized quickly by intelligent observers like Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, and only acceptable to those like Mrs. John Dashwood who share a similar lack of principle. A reprehensible character like General Tilney professes to be the soul of propriety, but his actions so obviously deny this that only a very naive observer like Catherine Morland can be fooled for a time. The person most thoroughly lacking in principle and most difficult to detect is Mr. Elliot, but he too is eventually suspected, even before his own actions prove his guilt.

Jane Austen's heroines invariably possess a strict

sense of propriety, and generally combine it with intelligence and perception. In Sense and Sensibility, Elinor points out the desirability and propriety of self-command (Sense and Sensibility, p. 42), and again, in a plea for stricter observance of the rules governing a young lady's behavior, warns that pleasantness does not always evince propriety (Sense and Sensibility, p. 52). Marianne, though basically innocent, ignores these warnings in her excess of romanticism and ends by bitterly regretting that she had ever behaved so rashly, and indeed, sees most of her misery as a direct result of her thoughtless behavior (Sense and Sensibility, p. 232).

Elizabeth Bennet, who had already warned her father that the "wild volatility" and "disdain of all restraint" which marked her sister Lydia's character would affect the respectability of the whole family, is so cast down by the disgrace of Wickham and Lydia's elopement that Mr. Darcy's objections to her family seem no longer capable of censure (Pride and Prejudice, pp. 170, 171, 204). Lydia's behavior is rendered all the more credible by Jane Austen's delicate sketching of Mrs. Bennet's own sense of propriety, in that "she was more alive to the disgrace, which her want of new clothes must reflect on her daughter's nuptials, than to any sense of shame at the eloping and living with Wickham a fort-

night before they took place" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 229).

Catherine Morland, the naive heroine of Northanger Abbey, is not always certain of the exact nuances of proper behavior, but she strives earnestly to conform to the rules, and is only misled by the mindless inanity of her social guide, Mrs. Allen.

In Mansfield Park, an early example of Mary Crawford's indecorous and improper conversation gives a hint of her basic lack of principle that her blinded lover will discover at the novel's end (Mansfield Park, p. 49). And in the same novel, the reader learns early on that Julia Bertram had never gained "that just consideration of others, that knowledge of her own heart, that principle of right," and is thus prepared for her folly at the conclusion of the novel (Mansfield Park, p. 67).

Emma, in her deepest depression, is only too vividly aware that she has--she believes--sabotaged her own happiness by her foolish intimacy with Harriet Smith and her egotistical attempts to manipulate the people around her (Emma, p. 274).

Anne Elliot, the gentle heroine of Persuasion who erred in her youth towards a too strict interpretation of proper behavior and suffered the alienation of her lover as a result, is presented with a strong contrast in the person of Louisa Musgrove, whose stubborn willfulness causes an alarm-

ing accident. 18

Most of the young ladies, however, are not afraid to disregard the stricter notions of propriety when the occasion seems to warrant it, as shown by Elizabeth Bennet's walk to Netherfield to check on her sister Jane's health, undismayed by Miss Bingley's strictures on "country-town indifference to decorum" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 26).

Outright defiance of the rules of propriety, however, usually is evidence of a basic defect--whether of morals, as in the case of Lydia Bennet; or intelligence, as in the case of Mrs. Allen; or of character, as in the case of Mary Crawford--and usually brings about dire consequences.

There are two notable examples of impropriety that spring immediately to mind, two scandals at once so similar and so different as to bear examination. The first is the elopement of Lydia Bennet and George Wickham in Pride and Prejudice; the second is the elopement of Maria Rushworth and Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park. The two are similar in many though not all respects, and Mary Threapleton comments on the anomaly of the different reactions to each elopement. "Sir Thomas condemns his daughter's behavior in much the same

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<sup>18</sup>Jane Austen, Persuasion (New York: Airmont Publishing Company, Inc., 1966, first published 1818), p. 85 and 91. Subsequent references will be included within the text of the paper.

terms as those in which Mr. Collins of Pride and Prejudice condemns Lydia's, and yet we are invited to accept Sir Thomas' views, and to regard Collins' as intolerant humbug" (Mansfield Park, p. 8).

To understand this difference of treatment, it is necessary to examine the two novels. Mansfield Park was written after the modest but exhilarating success of Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice, the first novel to be so conceived with full knowledge that publication was certain to follow.<sup>19</sup> Jane Austen wrote this book knowing that it would be read not only by her family, as were all her earlier works, but by a relatively large number of the reading public. Pride and Prejudice is a delightful novel, and the heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, was Jane Austen's darling,<sup>20</sup> an intelligent girl with a spirited wit and a keen appreciation of the ridiculous. Much as her creator enjoyed Elizabeth's refusal to be overawed by pompous rhetoric or daunted by a too strict interpretation of the rules of decorum, Jane Austen was conscious that some readers might feel Pride and Prejudice to be too frivolous.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Jenkins, p. 240.

<sup>20</sup>Chapman, Letters, p. 132.

<sup>21</sup>Chapman, Letters, p. 134 and p. 185.

One conjecture therefore, about the strongly differing tone of Mansfield Park is that it was written as an obligation to Jane Austen's powerful conscience. Her religious convictions were deeply held, although she disliked discussing them.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps Mansfield Park was written because Jane Austen felt that as a writer possessing some influence over the thoughts or actions of others, she owed it to her own sense of right to clarify for her less perceptive readers what her ironic wit in Pride and Prejudice might not have made clear--that right principles and Christian virtues are of paramount importance in the character of every individual.

It is interesting to note that her sister Cassandra, the one person closest to Jane Austen, preferred Mansfield Park to Pride and Prejudice. This surely indicates something both of Cassandra's character and the direction in which it may have subtly influenced her sister.<sup>23</sup>

Certainly Fanny Price is in complete contrast to Elizabeth Bennet. Elizabeth, though her principles are never in doubt (even Darcy does not question her personal virtue, only the reputation and sense of her family), is lively,

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<sup>22</sup>Jenkins, p. 188.

<sup>23</sup>Jenkins, p. 331.

witty, always humorous. She feels free to follow her good sense rather than rules of convention, as in the example of walking to Netherfield. Fanny Price is timid, quiet, with hardly enough spirit to comment on the weather, much less to venture a witticism. Fanny is quite unable to disregard her strict notions of propriety, even in the slightest degree, as is seen in the example of the amateur theatricals and the part of the cottager's wife.

There are some dissimilarities in the two elopements. Lydia Bennet and George Wickham, though completely wrong morally, are at least pledged to no other persons. Lydia brings disgrace to her family, but Lydia and Wickham's scandal is to a large degree mitigated by their marriage, and they, and the Bennet family, are able to proceed in a reasonably respectable manner.

Maria Rushmore injures not only her family but also to a much greater extent damages the pride and reputation of her husband. Henry Crawford, though not married, has been working assiduously to gain the hand of Fanny Price, and the Betrams are concerned about the effect of the elopement upon her. Their elopement, instead of being hushed up by a hasty marriage, ends instead in divorce and public disgrace. Fanny Price reflects also, in her dismay over the elopement, on the close ties of friendship that had connected the two

families. These minor differences are significant in contributing to the great difference in tone and treatment of the two elopements.

Other less spectacular examples of the unpleasant results of disregarding the rules of propriety can be seen. Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax's secret engagement results in unhappiness and social difficulties for each. Captain Wentworth's excessive intimacy with Louisa Musgrove creates more obstacles to his romance with Anne.

Despite the carefully structured rules of decorum which organized the manner in which men and women might associate, many of Jane Austen's women seem remarkably at ease in company with men. Elizabeth Bennet is breezy and sardonic; she treats Darcy as an equal in intelligence and wit, unabashed by his wealth and social position, much less by his masculinity. She severely wounds his pride in their first courting, even as he re-educates her prejudices, but at the conclusion of their romance continues even as she began. It is said that Darcy's young sister Georgina "often listened with astonishment bordering on alarm at her [Elizabeth's] sportive manner of talking to her brother" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 288).

Emma, with her supreme self-confidence, certainly shows no sign of being fettered by repressive proprieties.

She is on easy terms with Mr. Knightley, and does not hesitate to argue her views with enthusiasm. She is an accomplished hostess. She is even equal to repulsing a drunken suitor in an awkward tete-a-tete in a carriage, and feeling more anger than embarrassment. Any restrictions on her actions would seem to derive from her excessive emphasis upon her superior place in society, as in the case of the Cole's dinner party. "Nothing would tempt her to go . . . The Coles were very respectable in their way, but they ought to be taught that it was not for them to arrange the terms on which the superior families would visit them" (Emma, p. 138).

Anne Elliot feels an awkwardness in her reacquaintance with Captain Wentworth, but this is due to the unfortunate ending of their romance years before.

Catherine Morland, who comes closest to the ingenue of any of the heroines, is burdened, in her youth and social inexperience, with "all the civility and deference of the youthful female mind, fearful of hazarding an opinion of its own in opposition to that of a self-assured man" (Northanger Abbey, p. 51). A great deal is said in Northanger Abbey on the subject of the feminine intellect. Northanger Abbey was conceived as a burlesque and even after its later rewriting contains large elements of parody. It may suffer occasionally as a novel because of this, but brilliant bits of pure

satire can be found, as in the discussion of feminine intellect.

To come with a well-informed mind, is to come with an inability of administering to the vanity of others, which a sensible person would always wish to avoid. A woman, especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can.

The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author--and to her treatment of the subject I will only add in justice to men, that though to the larger and more trifling part of their sex, imbecility in females is a great enhancement of their personal charms, there is a portion of them too reasonable and too well informed themselves to desire anything more in women than ignorance. (Northanger Abbey, p. 108)

It is as well that much of this goes over the head of the youthful Catherine. One cannot think that Henry Tilney would have fared so well paired with Elizabeth Bennet or Emma Woodhouse.

More satire is furnished by Henry Tilney's speech to the two girls. "I will prove myself a man; no less by the generosity of my soul than the clearness of my head. I have no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves down to the comprehension of yours. Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute--neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit" (Northanger Abbey, p. 110).

To this tongue-in-cheek wit may be contrasted Mr. Knightley's straightforward declaration to Emma: "Men of sense, whatever you may choose to say, do not want silly

wives" (Emma, p. 46).

Fanny Price, who possesses some of Catherine's naivete and even less spirit, has the greatest difficulty in attempting social intercourse of any kind, and in dealing with her unwanted lover, Henry Crawford, is stricken almost dumb. Again it seems apparent that her own personality is the cause, and that the ease of relationships between men and women depended more on their individual personalities than on society's dictates. Considering the moral atmosphere of Jane Austen's age, this must surely speak highly of the spirit and intelligence of her women characters.

## Chapter V

### MARRIAGE AND THE ECONOMIC REALITY

Examining the relationships between men and women leads naturally to the subject of marriage, an all important institution to Jane Austen's women because of the economic and social structure of her time. There existed two distinct and separate functions of marriage. The first and most important function was to furnish a home, a provider, children to bestow one's affections upon, financial security, and social status. The second and relatively minor function of marriage was to provide a pleasant companion with whom one could share affection.

Marriage was, in a real sense, an occupation. What other choices lay before a young woman of gentle birth? To become a servant or prostitute would, in differing ways, have cast one beyond the pale of respectability. The only other occupation open to respectable middle class women was that of governess, a quasi-menial role that usually entailed a life of drudgery. If the reader sees a portrait of a governess in the best possible circumstances, that of Miss Taylor, cherished and valued by the family she serves, he also sees viv-

idly what a young lady might feel about going into such service. Jane Fairfax regards her future occupation with as much enthusiasm as abduction into white slavery. And when Miss Taylor becomes Mrs. Weston, even those who miss her the most must acknowledge her great good fortune.

Charlotte Lucas provides a good example of a girl who realizes clearly her position and the possible alternatives. "Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object, it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 93).

Emma, too, saw her more favoured situation and the possible alternatives very clearly. Being already in possession of all the natural advantages that marriage could bring--wealth, position, her own establishment--she could afford to marry only for love. "I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I ever to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing . . . And without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want;

consequence I do not want; I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (Emma, p. 60).

When Harriet protests that to be an old maid is so dreadful, the more perceptive Emma replies, "Never mind, Harriet, I shall not be a poor old maid, and it is poverty only which makes celibacy contemptible to a generous public! A single woman with a very narrow income must be a ridiculous, disagreeable old maid! The proper sport of boys and girls; but a single woman of good fortune is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anyone else!" (Emma, p. 61). Although marriage did bestow an increase in social status, as shown by Lydia Wickham's and Mrs. Elton's pleasure in their newly achieved precedence, financial position seems therefore to be even more important.

Although Jane Austen perceived so well the importance of marriage as an occupation and a means of gaining lifelong security, still it seems she could not approve of marriage without any genuine affection between the partners. Elizabeth Bennet, disturbed over Charlotte Lucas' engagement to Mr. Collins, protests, "My dear Jane, Mr. Collins is a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man; you know he is, as

well as I do; and you must feel, as well as I do, that the woman who marries him, cannot have a proper way of thinking. You shall not defend her, though it is Charlotte Lucas. You shall not, for the sake of one individual, change the meaning of principle and integrity, nor endeavor to persuade yourself or me, that selfishness is prudence, and insensibility of danger, security for happiness" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 102).

Jane, attempting to soothe her, has previously begged her to "be ready to believe, for everybody's sake, that she may feel something like regard and esteem for our cousin" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 102). Although Elizabeth cannot bring herself to believe any such thing, it seems apparent that for the appearance of respectability at least a semblance of affection was necessary. Jane Austen, writing to her niece Fanny on the subject of a most worthy suitor, still warned, "Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without affection."<sup>24</sup> And there is evidence that Jane Austen herself rejected an eligible suitor because she could not love him.<sup>25</sup>

The younger and more naive are the heroines, the more importance do they place on love in marriage and the less

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<sup>24</sup>Chapman, Letters, p. 175.

<sup>25</sup>R.W. Chapman, Jane Austen: Facts and Problems (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 121.

attention do they pay to the practical aspects. As Elizabeth Bennet says of her two youngest sisters, "They are young in the ways of the world, and not yet open to the mortifying conviction that handsome young men must have something to live on, as well as the plain" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 113). Marianne Dashwood, at the advanced age of sixteen, announces that "the more I see of the world, the more I am convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 19). And she reflects on the prospects of a woman of twenty-seven (Charlotte Lucas' age), who "can never hope to feel or inspire affection again; and if her home be uncomfortable or her fortune small . . . might bring herself to submit to the offices of a nurse, for the sake of the provision and security of a wife. In his marrying such a woman, therefore, there would be nothing unsuitable. It would be a compact of convenience, and the world would be satisfied. In my eyes it would be no marriage at all, but that would be nothing. To me it would seem only a commercial exchange, in which each wished to be benefited at the expense of the other" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 32).

Poor Marianne is painfully re-educated before the end of the novel. She discovers that Willoughby, who seemed to be the ideal lover, has not the bedrock of principle to build

her romance upon, and it crashes around her ears. It is the same Colonel Brandon who provoked her comments on the "compact of convenience" who eventually becomes her husband.

Catherine Morland, whose ideas of love and adventure are derived too strongly from Gothic romances, also receives an education in reality before the conclusion of Northanger Abbey. Isabella Thorpe, who sought first an entranced lover and then found he did not possess the financial status she sought, perceives clearly that wealth is more necessary to her happiness than affection, and is ready to discard him for a chance at bigger game.

Fanny Price, who is young and timid and possesses a comfortable home only by the grace of her relatives' favor, still refuses to accept a lover she abhors for the sake of the wealth, position, and security he would bring.

Anne Elliot, whose fortune is small and whose home life is not happy, yet refuses to marry Mr. Elliot, even though she would gain wealth, title, and have her own home restored to her. It is Mrs. Smith, her worldly-wise friend, who remarks that "When one lives in the world, a man or woman's marrying for money is too common to strike one as it ought" (Persuasion, p. 152).

There were many women who were ready to sacrifice every other consideration to gain a wealthy husband, even

though as Jane Austen dryly remarks in Mansfield Park, "There certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty women to deserve them" (Mansfield Park, p. 9). Lucy Steele demonstrates perfectly the use of scheming flattery and unrestrained self-interest in procuring a rich husband. "The whole of Lucy's behavior in the affair, and the prosperity which crowned it, therefore, may be held forth as a most encouraging instance of what an earnest, an unceasing attention to self-interest, however its progress may be apparently obstructed, will do in securing every advantage of fortune, with no other sacrifice than that of time and conscience" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 253). Mrs. Clay, in Persuasion, is another good example of the same type of woman.

Another problem is inextricably mingled with the discussion of marriage, since marriage was the only opportunity for financial gain open to respectable young ladies--the question of the attitude of Jane Austen's women toward finance. An intricate question it is, indeed, for as Elizabeth Bennet asks, "what is the difference in matrimonial affairs, between the mercenary and the prudent motive? Where does discretion end, and avarice begin?" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 115). On the one hand, as Catherine Morland declares, "to marry for money I think the wickedest thing in existence!"

(Northanger Abbey, p. 121). Fanny Price agrees that "how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless and how wicked it was, to marry without affection" (Mansfield Park, p. 216). On the other stands the case of Eleanor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars, who, at the conclusion of their courtship, "were brought together by mutual affection, with the warmest approbation of their real friends; their intimate knowledge of each other seemed to make their happiness certain--and they only wanted something to live upon . . . they were neither of them quite enough in love to think that three hundred and fifty pounds a year would supply them with the comforts of life" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 248).

It seems that some rational balance must be struck between the idealistic and impractical view that money is of no importance, and the completely cynical view that money is life's most important goal. Eleanor Dashwood comments realistically that wealth has much to do with happiness, and is abused by Marianne, who protests that only a competence is necessary. Eleanor replies, "Your competence and my wealth are very much alike, I dare say; and without them, as the world goes now, we shall both agree that every kind of external comfort must be wanting" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 67).

Isabella Thorpe declares romantically that "the smallest income in nature would be enough for me. Where

people are really attached, poverty itself is wealth: grandeur I detest: I would not settle in London for the universe. A cottage in some retired village would be ecstasy" (Northanger Abbey, p. 116). The insincerity of her words is clear when she discovers that her lover does indeed possess a small income, and she discards him summarily. Her impractical views reveal not only the shallowness of her heart but also the limitations of her common sense. Eleanor and Edward, deeply in love, are still aware of the necessity of a reasonable income.

Yet Jane Austen cannot countenance the completely cynical view expressed by Mary Crawford that "every thing is to be got with money" (Mansfield Park, p. 46), and "A large income is the best recipe for happiness I ever heard of" (Mansfield Park, p. 145). Mary Crawford's attitude toward wealth is obviously a part of her attitude toward marriage, so that when she first meets the two sons of the Bertram family, the eldest wild and unreliable but heir to title and wealth, the youngest intelligent and trustworthy but of little fortune, "She had felt an early presentiment that she should like the eldest best. She knew it was her way" (Mansfield Park, p. 38).

There is a striking contrast between the attitudes of two mothers toward money and marriage. Mrs. Dashwood, who is

intelligent, affectionate, and possesses sound principles, does not encourage the attentions of Edward Ferrars because of his mother's wealth, but is instead concerned only with her daughter's happiness (Sense and Sensibility, p. 17). The empty-headed and amoral Mrs. Bennet feels triumph over any daughter actually married, but her joy over the acquisition of each son-in-law is in direct proportion to the wealth and consequence of each (Pride and Prejudice, p. 281).

The wise heroines strive for both the sincere affection of their husbands and an income in proportion to their needs.

Marriage was a "preservative from want," but it was also an opportunity for love and domestic happiness. The worst evil Jane Austen could envisage in marriage seems to be marriage to a man who lacked the foundations of basic Christian morality--that would be "the worst and most irremediable of evils, a connection for life, with an unprincipled man" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 125). It is this fate that Marianne Dashwood narrowly avoids. But Jane Austen was also aware of the dangers of marriage between two incompatible persons. Elizabeth Bennet is painfully conscious of the impropriety of her father's conduct towards her mother, and the results of his cynical amusement toward and lack of involvement with his daughters. She "had never felt so strongly as

now, the disadvantages which must attend the children of so unsuitable a marriage, nor ever been so fully aware of the evils arising from so ill-judged a direction of talents; talents which rightly used, might at least have preserved the respectability of his daughters, even if incapable of enlarging the mind of his wife" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 176). All this had come about because "Her father, captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour which youth and beauty generally give, had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for ever; and all his views of domestic happiness were overthrown" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 175).

This seems to be a fairly common mistake, that of being misled by the beauty of the face to forget to discover the quality of the spirit and intellect beneath. In Sense and Sensibility, Mr. Palmer is seen in much the same predicament; "through some unaccountable bias in favour of beauty, he was the husband of a very silly woman--but she knew that this kind of blunder was too common for any sensible man to be lastingly hurt by it" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 80). Mr. Palmer, too, must be censured for his studied bad manners and habit of continually ignoring his wife.

Emma, also, when she fears that Mr. Knightly has

become fond of Harriet Smith, finds it all too possible to imagine. "Was it a new circumstance for a man of first-rate abilities to be captivated by very inferior powers? Was it new for one, perhaps too busy to seek, to be the prize of a girl who would seek him?" (Emma, p. 274).

If it were all too common for men to suffer the lack of domestic felicity because of their unwise choices, what was the fate of those women who voluntarily choose foolish or unpleasant men for the sake of their wealth?

Charlotte Lucas seems to have done reasonably well with the pompous Mr. Collins by arranging to spend as little time as possible with her husband, by centering her attention on "Her home and her housekeeping, her parish and her poultry, and all their dependent concerns" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 160). She does not seem to regret her choice. Elizabeth finds that "When Mr. Collins could be forgotten, there was really a great air of comfort throughout, and by Charlotte's evident enjoyment of it, Elizabeth supposed he must be often forgotten" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 118).

Other women did not fare so well. Mary Crawford, who feels that money is the best guarantee for marital bliss, considers marriage a gamble at the best. "Everybody is taken in at some period or other . . . In marriage especially . . . there is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken

in when they marry. Look where I will, I see that is so; and I feel that it must be so, when I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves" (Mansfield Park, p. 37).

Mary persists in her idea of money as the prime necessity for marital happiness, despite the example of her friend Mrs. Fraser, who was "a cold-hearted, vain woman, who has married entirely from convenience, and though evidently unhappy in her marriage, places her disappointment not to faults of judgment or temper, or disproportion of age, but to her being after all, less affluent than many of her acquaintances" (Mansfield Park, p. 281).

Maria Rushworth finds her wealthy and loveless marriage a prison she cannot bear, a situation foreseen in the episode of the iron gate (Mansfield Park, p. 72).

Henry Tilney presents a light-hearted definition of marriage when he compares marriage and country-dances.

I consider a country-dance as an emblem of marriage. Fidelity and complaisance are the principle duties of both; and those men who do not choose to dance or marry themselves, have no business with the partners or wives of their neighbors . . . in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal; that in both, it is an engagement between man and woman, formed for the advantage of each; and that when once entered into, they belong exclusively to one another till the moment of its dissolution; that it is their duty, each to endeavor to give the other no cause for wishing that he or she had bestowed themselves elsewhere, and their best interest to keep their own imaginations from wan-

dering towards the perfections of their neighbors, or fancying that they should have been better off with anyone else . . . In marriage, the man is supposed to provide for the support of the woman; the woman to make the home agreeable to the man; he is to purvey, and she is to smile. (Northanger Abbey, p. 77-78)

From this bit of satire the reader may turn to marriage as portrayed in its varying possibilities in the novels. Many marriages are presented in which the two principals merely suffer each other's presence, as the Bennets, or are united in mutual greed and selfishness, as the John Dashwoods. There are also the happy marriages--the Dashwoods, the Westons, the Harvilles, the Gardiners, the John Knightleys. One marriage often referred to as a model of what marriages might and should be is that of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, who share a strong, mutual affection, delight in each other's company, and awareness of equality of responsibility and talents. Anne Elliot enjoys observing their happiness, when riding in their gig, as she sees Mrs. Croft "by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand they neither fell into a rut, or ran foul of a dung-cart; and Anne saw it with some amusement at their style of driving, which she imagined no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs" (Persuasion, p. 73). Anne also observes them walking. "He was ordered to walk, to keep off the gout, and Mrs. Croft seemed to go shares with him in

everything, and to walk for her life, to do him good" (Persuasion, p. 128). Anne felt that "Knowing their feelings as she did, it was a most attractive picture of happiness to her. She always watched them as long as she could; delighted to fancy she understood what they might be talking of, as they walked along in happy independence, or equally delighted to see the Admiral's hearty shake of the hand when he encountered an old friend, and observe their eagerness of conversation when occasionally forming into a little knot of the navy, Mrs. Croft looking as intelligent and keen as any of the officers around her" (Persuasion, p. 128).

This was Jane Austen's ideal marriage--equality in affection, intellect, and interests, and it is an ideal that would be very acceptable to the reader today. If marriage as a provider of material comfort is at last beginning to disappear, marriage for love and happiness is not, and the modern reader can identify easily with Mrs. Croft's well justified happiness.

A further example can be seen in Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy, who continue after their marriage in the same equality of spirit. Their marriage educated his young sister Georgina as to what a marriage can and should be. "Georgina had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm

at her lively, sportative manner of talking to her brother. He who had always inspired in herself a respect, which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry. Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 288).

## Chapter VI

### WOMEN AND THE COMMUNITY

Jane Austen was very much aware of the strong and ever-present bonds that society inflicts upon the individual. The most consistently bleak presentation of society is seen in Sense and Sensibility. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood are surrounded by characters whose intelligence and virtue are both severely impaired. Yet Jane Austen makes clear that the community may not be ignored. There must be at least a tolerable respect for the opinions of one's neighbors. It is said that the Dashwoods "lived in so respectable a manner as to engage the general good opinion of their surrounding acquaintances" (Sense and Sensibility, p. 9). And Elizabeth Bennet is very conscious of her family's follies being revealed to their friends and neighbors. "To Elizabeth it appeared, that had her family made an agreement to expose themselves as much as they could during the evening, it would have been impossible for them to play their parts with more spirit, or finer success" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 97).

After the scandal of Maria Rushworth and Henry Crawford's elopement, Sir Thomas feels that to receive his daugh-

ter as usual at Mansfield Park would be an insult to the neighborhood, to expect it to notice her (Mansfield Park, p. 310).

This deference to the opinions of others is not to be taken too far, however, as is consistent with Jane Austen's belief that sound principles must be each person's inner guide. Eleanor Dashwood tells her sister, "I am guilty, I confess, of having often wished you to treat our acquaintance in general with greater attention; but when have I advised you to adopt their sentiments or conform to their judgement in serious matters?" (Sense and Sensibility, pp. 68-69).

Mr. Bennet remarks, with his usual detachment, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbors, and laugh at them in our turn?" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 270). While Eleanor is able to weigh her responsibility to the community sense of morality with the more important moral principles that she, as a Christian individual, possesses, Mr. Bennet carries his disregard of the community to an extreme, illustrating again his lack of involvement with others.

Jane Austen was very much aware of the interest with which the community as a whole regards every scrap of information about the private lives of individuals. It is said after Lydia Bennet and George Wickham are married:

The good news quickly spread through the house; and

with proportionate speed through the neighborhood. It was borne in the latter with decent philosophy. To be sure it would have been more for the advantage of conversation, had Miss Lydia Bennet come upon the town; or, as the happiest alternative, been secluded from the world, in some distant farm house. But there was much to be talked of, in marrying her; and the good-natured wished for her well-doing, which had proceeded before from all the spiteful old ladies in Meryton, lost but little of their spirit in this change of circumstances, because with such a husband, her misery was considered certain. (Pride and Prejudice, p. 228)

Elizabeth Bennet's remarks after the elopement show that while amiable relationships with the community may be the rule, she does not expect nor desire aid in family troubles such as these. She says of Lady Lucas, "She had better have stayed at home . . . perhaps she meant well, but, under such a misfortune as this, one cannot see too little of one's neighbors. Assistance is impossible; condolence, insufferable. Let them triumph over us at a distance, and be satisfied" (Pride and Prejudice, p. 216).

There are two instances of resentment over the relative immobility of woman's place in the community. Anne Elliot speaks poignantly of woman's inability to change her situation and forget her feelings in active pursuits. "We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You men are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions" (Persuasion, p. 175).

Emma also reflects on the unpleasantness of being "so absolutely fixed, in the same place" (Emma, p. 98), after Harriet's dreams of Mr. Elton are shattered by reality.

Jane Austen's heroines, even as Jane Austen herself,<sup>26</sup> are also conscious of their other obligations to the community, specifically, to the problems of the poor. "Emma was very compassionate; and the distress of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse" (Emma, p. 62). Fanny Price sews for the poor (Mansfield Park, p. 54). Anne Elliot has all the feeling of responsibility for and patronage of their estate that her father so lacks, and is the only one in the family to trouble herself to take leave of their more humble neighbors before their departure (Persuasion, p. 34).

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<sup>26</sup>Chapman, Letters, p. 22.

## Chapter VII

### CONCLUSION

A detailed examination of Jane Austen's feminine characters reveals the great variety of characterization found in her novels, the skill with which the subtle variations of character are drawn, and the validity of each character in terms of both human psychology and historical perspective. The relationships between women and other women, between women and men, and between women and the community are displayed with a clear perception of the complexity of human interactions and their effects upon the individual.

In developing the women of her novels, Jane Austen was true to the moral philosophy of her own age, and yet, so real are the emotions of her characters and the situations in which they find themselves, that the modern reader easily understands her fictional women and feels empathy for them. The realistic likenesses that Jane Austen drew impress the modern reader with their humanity, command his sympathy for their problems, and amuse him with their follies. Such accurate and detailed portraits must open the reader's eyes not

only to an understanding of Jane Austen's society but also to the ironies of life around him and to the contradictions within his own character. So complete was Jane Austen's knowledge of the absurdities of the human spirit and the complexities of the individual's inter-relationships with others that her novels are as pertinent, enlightening, and delightful today as when she first wrote them.

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