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## Sisterhood Articulates A New Definition Of Moral Female Identity: Jane Austen's Adaptation Of The Eighteenth-century Tradition

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SISTERHOOD ARTICULATES A NEW DEFINITION OF MORAL FEMALE  
IDENTITY: JANE AUSTEN'S ADAPTATION OF THE EIGHTEENTH-  
CENTURY TRADITION

by

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B.A. Stetson University, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Literary, Cultural, and Textual Studies  
in the Department of English  
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Major Professor: Anna Maria Jones

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## ABSTRACT

Writing at a moment of ideological crisis between individualism and hierarchical society, Jane Austen asserts a definition of moral behavior and female identity that mediates the two value systems. I argue that Austen most effectively articulates her belief in women's moral autonomy and social responsibility in her novels through her portrayal of sisterhood. Austen reshapes the stereotype of sisters and female friendships as dangerous found in her domestic novel predecessors. While recognizing women's social vulnerability, which endangers female friendship and turns it into a site of competition, Austen urges the morality of selflessly embracing sisterhood anyway. An Austen heroine must overcome sisterly rivalry if she is to achieve the moral strength Austen demands of her.

As *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) demonstrate, such rivalry reveals the flawed morality of both individualism and patrilineal society. I further argue that in these novels sisterhood articulates the internally motivated selflessness Austen makes her moral standard. Sisterhood not only indicates female morality for Austen, it also enables this character. Rejecting Rousseau's proposal of men shaping malleable female minds, Austen pronounces sisters to be the best moral guides. In *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Austen shows the failure of the man to educate our heroine and the success of his sister. In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen pinpoints the source of sisterly education's success in its feminine context of nurture, affection, intimacy, and subtlety.

With this portrait of sisterhood, Austen adheres to the moral authority inherent in Burkean philosophy while advocating individual responsibility, not external regulation, to choose selfless behavior. Austen further promotes gender equality by expressing women's moral autonomy, while supporting gender distinctions that privilege femininity. By offering such powerful, complex sister relationships, Austen transforms eighteenth-century literary thought about women, sisters, and morality.

This thesis is dedicated with deepest love and sincerest gratitude to those precious women in my life who have embodied the selflessness of sisterhood and the struggle for a moral identity that

Austen advocates.

To my mother, Meredith Ludwig Curtis, who, unlike an Austen mother, is wise, kind, and good.

You are the biggest human reason I pursue God's highest moral calling today and that I have a picture of the lovely feminine identity I desire to attain. Without you, I never could have written

or even begun this thesis.

To my beautiful, beloved sisters, Julianna Sheree Curtis, Jennifer Rose Curtis, and Sarah Joy Curtis, who taught me the value of sisterhood long before I ever discovered its advocate in Jane Austen. No woman ever had better sisters than I have. You have supported me through every heartache and pain, cheered me on in every joy and success, challenged me in every weakness.

You make me want to be the radiant, pure woman God wants me to be and you help make becoming her possible.

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teaching and guiding and being taught and guided.

I love you all unendingly.

Most significantly of all, I wish to dedicate this to the Author of sisterhood, of intimate relationships, and of Love itself, my God and Savior, Jesus Christ. You create and call us to a selfless moral standard even higher than Austen's because You enable us to walk in that character by Your salvation and grace. You created me and gave me life (and sisters!) and You redeemed me, making true moral life possible for the very first time because only through You can we become righteous.

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Many thanks to the multitude of scholars who have written and argued about Austen. I have not and probably could not read you all, but I am grateful to join such a well-established community of insightful scholarship.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

*E = Emma*

*MP = Mansfield Park*

*MW = Minor Works*

*NA = Northanger Abbey*

*P = Persuasion*

*P&P = Pride and Prejudice*

*S&S = Sense and Sensibility*

**CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**  
**TRANSFORMING STEREOTYPES OF SISTERHOOD: AUSTEN CASTS**  
**VISION FOR MORAL FEMALE IDENTITY IN HER**  
**CHANGING SOCIETY**

Jane Austen wrote her six major novels at the turn of the nineteenth century, a moment of ideological crisis. Belief in individual liberty, as espoused by theorists like Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, challenged the Burkean ideals of traditional hierarchical society at this time. Writing amidst the resulting conflict of individual versus communal values, Austen rethinks people's relationship to the social order in her novels. She articulates her resulting understanding of moral behavior through her heroines and particularly through sisterhood. As critics like Claudia Johnson and Marilyn Butler have shown, though Austen's novels may be restricted to the drawing room setting and the courtship plot, they nonetheless address the ideological questions of her day. Austen promotes heroines who demonstrate both independence and social obligation. Her heroines must show they possess the moral autonomy to make decisions based on rational reflection and to pursue marriage based on love rather than social concerns. But they must also exhibit selfless consideration for the interests and needs of others. I argue that the sister relationship, above all other relationships, epitomizes Austen's progressive view of female self-reliance along with her conservative view of social order and duty towards one's society.

With her depiction of sisterhood, Austen modifies the eighteenth-century literary representations of the family as a site of potential danger for women. While still acknowledging the threat that cruel, or simply thoughtless, fathers and brothers can pose, Austen also suggests

that the women in the family can be a source of emotional support. At the same time, Austen's novels recognize that choosing to value sisterhood has little, if any, material reward. While, as Jan Fergus argues, favoring a brother or parent might promise some financial benefit for a woman dependent on his support, sisters offer no such material gain (70–71). In fact, sisters present potential rivals in the arena which is a woman's one site of economic advancement: matrimony. Choosing to value sisterhood thus represents the selflessness Austen demands of her heroines and the independence she proposes them capable of expressing. Such a standard of morality opposes the idea of enlightened self-interest, while simultaneously it denies that the traditional Burkean authority structure grants identity to the individual.

I argue that sister relationships thus decenter even marriage as the primary relationship that enables Austen's heroines to mature and Austen to explore her own understanding of moral behavior and ideal social identity. In this introduction to my thesis, I will first situate my argument about sisterhood in Austen's novels within the growing conversation about Austen's perspective on social order and female agency and also within the smaller discussion of family relationships in Austen. Then I will analyze the eighteenth-century domestic novel portrait of sisters that underlies Austen's new vision. In a society shifting between the aristocracy and a new middle class, capitalist system, domestic novels affirm woman's significance in the new system. They grant her increased worth, but one primarily defined by her relationship with men. This places sisters outside the value system, frequently portraying them as threats. Austen also recognizes many of the dangers of sisters, particularly sisterly rivalry as I will discuss in Chapter Two of this thesis. Yet she suggests a moral benefit to be found in sisterhood by a heroine who values it. Austen proposes women's potential to morally educate other women and prepare them for successful companionate marriages, as I will further analyze in Chapter Three of this thesis.

How Austen transforms this eighteenth-century model of sisterhood reveals her definition of morality and female identity.

### **Critical Conversation**

#### **Review of the Literature**

Analyzing the role of sisterhood in Austen is a relatively new critical approach. For many decades after Austen's works were published, most critics interpreted literally her self-definition of her work as "the little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory on which I work with so fine a Brush, as produces little effect after much labor" (Austen *Letters* 323). Critics, even today, often interpret her novels as limited to domestic affairs and a strictly conventional perspective. Early criticism up until recently tended to a formalist analysis of Austen's prose style, character development, and invention of indirect discourse. In the mid-twentieth century, however, literary criticism of Austen began to re-envision her as a subversive force, working against the conservative model she depicted in her novel. D. W. Harding (1940) and Marvin Mudrick (1952) discover irony in Austen's conventional plots, enabling future critics to redefine her political views as socially progressive. Marilyn Butler's later *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1988), in contrast, positions Austen's novels as part of the conservative reaction against the French Revolution, opposing the subversive-Austen portrait. Yet Butler's work sets a precedent that undermines early images of an apolitical Austen. This new understanding of Jane Austen as ideologically aware has opened up political directions in Austen criticism. With the advent of such theoretical approaches, Marxist critics have analyzed Austen as either reinforcing the class hierarchy or subtly challenging it.<sup>1</sup> With Edward Said's essay "Jane Austen and Empire," a period of

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<sup>1</sup> Azerêdo offers one example of this in her analysis of film adaptations of *Emma*; she suggests that by Austen depicting this class distance as it is, the class hierarchy is ironized. Sally Palmer and Carol M. Dole similarly perform a Marxist analysis of the film adaptations of *Emma*.

postcolonial criticism addressing latent themes of imperialism and nation-building in Austen arose, peaking in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Current criticism has partially veered back to analysis of Austen's style, as seen, for example, in D.A. Miller's *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (2004), which broadens formalism with elements of queer theory.

In these past decades of politicized Austen criticism, scholars have diverged in their definition of Austen as traditionalist and as burgeoning radical. Harding and Mudrick portray a seething, subversive Austen, who satirizes the society she apparently promotes.<sup>3</sup> This portrait of covert radicalism hiding within Austen's conservative texts resonates with later critics, such as Claudia Johnson in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1990). Johnson asserts that Austen affirms a socially progressive worldview, but must disguise it so as not to appear aligned with radical Jacobins.<sup>4</sup> This perspective that Austen "consents to conservative myths, but only in order to possess them and ameliorate them from within" (Johnson 93) characterizes those who would paint Austen as politically radical. Other critics, like Marilyn Butler, however, describe a traditional writer who embraces the society she portrays.<sup>5</sup> While Harding, Mudrick, or Johnson would say Austen exclusively favored individualism and autonomy, Alistair M. Duckworth argues that Austen critiques the social order but still believes in society's "inherited code of conduct," viewing society as "the necessary context of individual action" (26, 72). Nancy

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<sup>2</sup> *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* compiles some of this decade of postcolonial analysis. Ferguson offers the perspective of an imperialist Austen, calling *Mansfield Park* "a Eurocentric, post-abolition narrative that . . . posits a world of humanitarian interactions between slave-owners and slaves" (118). Jon Mee, on the other hand, presents Austen's portrayal of slavery in this novel as part of her larger critique of patriotism.

<sup>3</sup> Mudrick describes her classic irony as a form of distance that critiques the "incongruities" of the "bourgeois world" (19).

<sup>4</sup> Thus, according to Johnson, her plots enact a conventional marriage scenario that consolidates the estate, but "instead of vindicating the status quo . . . [this] enables Austen to expose and explore those aspects of traditional institutions . . . which patently do not serve her heroines well" (xxiv).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Duckworth in *The Improvement of the Estate* (1971), who posits "a traditional, rather than a 'modern' or 'subversive' Austen" (32), who reinforces the social structure, or at least its cultural heritage (26).



Armstrong also affirms this concept of Austen balancing the idea of individualism with support for the stability of landed society (135–36). To understand Austen’s moral and social views requires deciphering how Austen strikes this balance. A similar tension surfaces in analyses of female identity in Austen.

Because Austen is a woman writer offering strong examples of feminine morality and education, feminist criticism may be the longest lived theoretical approach to Austen outside of formalism or New Criticism. At the forefront of re-envisioning Austen as a more political writer, Margaret Kirkham wrote the foundational feminist work in 1983, *Jane Austen, Feminism, and Fiction*, on Austen as a subversive feminist voice disguised within the conservative courtship novel. Since that point, feminist criticism has reviewed the question of whether Austen reinforces or challenges her society’s conservative views of women and marriage. Feminist views range from Austen as radical feminist to Austen as firm supporter of all aspects of the patriarchal system. One feminist approach revalues Austen’s role as a woman novelist as part of the larger ideological conversation within her literary period, just as Johnson and Butler have done.<sup>6</sup> Johnson defies assumptions that Austen’s gender limits her participation in current ideological concerns, saying these “do not credit her with any corollary capacity for independence” (xix). Other critics analyze the female agency and influence women display within Austen’s novels. Jon Mee, for example, shows how Austen affirms female patriotism and how this women’s movement participates in conservative nation-building while simultaneously subjectifying women.

Another, significant, feminist response to Austen is to decipher a protest to patriarchy within her work, usually by suggesting she cannot say what she means in her novels. Sandra M.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Fay, who seeks to recredit Austen as participating in the Romantic movement as effectively as her Romantic male contemporaries did.

Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that “Austen repeatedly demonstrates her alienation from the aggressively patriarchal tradition that constitute her Augustan inheritance” and define her as in rebellion against patriarchal forms throughout her novels (116).<sup>7</sup> Critics of these feminist analyses, like Mona Scheuermann and Julia Prewitt Brown, suggest that such assertions impose false perspectives on Austen, “distorting” her novels (Scheuermann 284). In response to the happy endings Austen grants through marriage, feminist scholars either seek to “recover” her work from its apparent conventionality or excuse it as enforced; otherwise they reject her as misrepresenting the extent of women’s powerlessness (Scheuermann 302). For critics like Scheuermann, these feminist responses refuse to permit Austen to accept the system and still recognize its dangers or to grant female autonomy along with traditional marriage.

I would suggest the potential validity of such critique: danger exists in assuming Austen cannot affirm her social structure even while criticizing its failures and urging female autonomy. Some feminist critics similarly suggest that Austen can question aspects of the heterosexual, patriarchal system, without desiring to reject it. Mary Poovey, for example, suggests that Austen seeks to reconcile the traditional structure with increased independence for women. She argues that Austen offers a “challenge to traditional values . . . from the inside,” seeking “to make propriety accommodate female desire” (172–73). This poses Austen as operating within the system but simultaneously seeking its reform to allow for increased female individualism. I argue that Austen does indeed make this compromise, opposing Poovey only to suggest that with sisterhood she actually achieves success in this goal. Through sisters Austen promotes new ideals of female identity; she challenges identification that is solely dependent on men through the

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<sup>7</sup> See also Merryn Williams and Claudia Johnson, for example. Williams suggests that Austen draws attention to societal restrictions on women and affirms female independence and rationality (48). Johnson argues that Austen critiques the entire patriarchal system because she “worries about the moral unreliability of patriarchal figures and . . . the social conventions which privilege the prerogatives of men at the cost of confining the choice of women” (26).

importance of sisterhood, yet affirms the compatibility of sisterhood and marriage. I assert that Austen retains the traditional values of social order and social responsibility and even of conventional family structure, yet simultaneously promotes an enhanced vision of female potential and value. Sisters highlight male abuses in Austen's patriarchal society and women's source of strength in each other.

The role of sister relationships in Austen's novels is often overlooked by critics. Feminist analyses which address Austen's female characters and their relationships frequently either ignore her heroines' sister relationships or view them as simply a side note to the marriage plot. In one of the first critical mentions of sisterhood in Austen, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss Austen using sisters to "hold out the hope that maturity can bring women consciousness of self as subject and object" (162). Yet Gilbert and Gubar's use of the term does not allude to women in relationship with each other in Austen's novels but to women as doubles who grant Austen a "duplicitous ability to speak" (183). Thus, their analysis of Austen's portrayal of female identity employs the language of sisterhood but does not actually address female friendship.<sup>8</sup> Feminist critic Susan Morgan analyzes the way Austen downplays women's dependence on men so that they can gain a personal moral identity. Yet she, too, does not focus on how the female characters' relationships with other women supplement this female independence.

The majority of critics who have looked at sisterhood have examined sisters as part of their larger analysis of family and sibling relationships in Austen or of sister relationships in literature in general. Glenda Hudson, in *Sibling Love and Incest*, explores especially the fraternal-like romances in several of Austen's novels, though she also recognizes the significance of sisterhood to Austen heroines' moral development in one of her chapters. A few critics—including Christine St. Peters, Susan Sniader Lanser, and Amy K. Levin—have particularly

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<sup>8</sup> Christine St. Peters discusses this deficiency in "Jane Austen's Creation of the Sister" (473).

focused on sisterhood in Austen. St. Peters and Lanser assert the primacy of sisterhood, suggesting that morality is determined in Austen by how a heroine treats her sister. Levin views Austen as depicting sisterhood negatively, as does Nina Auerbach, who analyzes the female community in *Pride and Prejudice* as “purgatorial” (Auerbach 47). I would argue against this perspective to assert that Austen’s negative portrayals of sisterhood always serve as foils to the heroine’s higher morality, revealing sisterhood’s difficulty in her society but never denying the high value she places on it.

Though analyses of sisterhood in Austen are limited, more criticism has been performed on the portrayals of sisters in nineteenth-century literature in general. Sisters in nineteenth-century literature are typically presented as nearly identical (Cohen 23–25), and Levin points to sisters’ innate fear of social redundancy in a society where their domestic training and matrimonial goals are identical (44). Sisters, Sarah Anne Brown explains, heighten the bitterness of losing in the competition for a man since no excuses for genetics or environment remain for the rejected sister to explain why she was not chosen. Many of these critics touch on Austen. Michael Cohen, for example, argues that Austen stands out from her contemporary literature for suggesting sisters can be confidantes instead of rivals only. Patricia Meyer Spacks compares Austen’s portrayal of sisters with that of two eighteenth-century novelists and suggests that Austen offers a more complex view than the good sister/bad sister dichotomy of this earlier century. Other critics, however, tend to generally include Austen in with the negative depictions of sisterhood in nineteenth-century literature, and little research explores sisterhood in eighteenth-century literature at all. My thesis exploring Austen’s adaptation of eighteenth-century literary representations of sisterhood fills a gap among this criticism. Further, my

connection of sisterhood in Austen to her views on social morality and female identity offers a new perspective in Austen scholarship.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this thesis, I combine the discussion of sisters and family relationships in Austen with the conversations about female identity and social order in her novels. The critical conversation I am entering about sisters in Austen is relatively small, and has almost exclusively been addressed through feminist theory. My approach to this topic will perform a close reading of her novels in order to attend to some of the concerns of feminist and cultural studies theory. I situate Austen's presentation of sisterhood in her cultural and literary context, deciphering through this how the morality and female identity that she promotes by means of sisterhood is a response to her culture. My analysis thus explores sisterhood as a reflection of views on female relationships and social structures in Austen's texts, as well as in her society. With this focus, my intensive attention to textual analysis incorporates elements of both feminism and cultural studies.

In analyzing Austen's portrayal of sisters and female identity, I utilize the concept of revaluing the feminine that is part of what Rosemarie Tong defines as "radical-cultural feminism" (56). According to Tong, this branch of feminism does not deny gender differences, and may even see them as biologically situated, but celebrates the feminine and affirms women relating to women. Radical-cultural feminism thus advocates the insertion of feminine qualities into culture rather than adopting masculine qualities and so privileging such masculine values (Tong 56–58). I draw from this concept in order to more clearly understand how Austen elevates women's roles by promoting femininity. Radical-cultural feminist theory can include a rejection of heterosexuality for female intimacy only, and this issue of homoeroticism inevitably arises in scholarship on female friendship. Yet Austen firmly rejects homoerotic elements in female

friendship, suggesting the benefits of platonic sisterhood in supplementing, and occasionally supplanting, marriage. Austen does not reject the value of male relationships and the masculine role in her heroines' lives. Nevertheless, she does assert that women's relationships to one another should not be overshadowed by these male ones. This form of feminist theory proves valuable to my analysis of sisterly relationships, forming a backdrop for my close reading of how her novels revalorize the feminine.

Though I do not perform a cultural studies analysis of Austen's novels in this thesis, I do build off of cultural studies' attention to social concerns and values from her time period. My focus, however, is more specifically the eighteenth-century literary context to which Austen responds. I respond to some of the interests of Nancy Armstrong and Ruth Perry about the social and economic contexts that affect a literary text's anxieties and values. Armstrong's and Perry's contextualization of family relationships and female identity in eighteenth-century literature offers me background to analyze how Austen defines morality and female identity. In *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Armstrong examines the construction of femininity through the domestic novel as a form of women gaining agency, showing how literature both affects and reflects culture. Perry's work, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship and Culture in English Literature and Culture 1748–1818*, demonstrates how literary representations reflect culture, showing how fears about family in eighteenth-century literature reveal cultural anxieties about the socioeconomic changes in society. As later sections in this chapter will show, Austen participates in both the literary/cultural interactions Armstrong and Perry analyze. I expand their analyses through my close-reading approach, allowing me to offer narrow, deeply-explored textual examples of the larger theories they present. I suggest that sociocultural analyses like Armstrong's and Perry's tend to offer more theory than in-depth textual examples. I seek to

supplement this by applying their broad theoretical conclusions to Austen's novels in a closer way. I do some minor cultural studies analysis by comparing Austen's depiction of moral female identity to the sociopolitical theories of Burke and Paine and Wollstonecraft. Yet my primary contribution to the field of cultural studies analysis of Austen is by expanding it with close reading of her novels rather than through additional sociocultural theory of my own.

As I examine how sisterhood presents a perspective of the social order and of female identity in Austen, I combine elements of both feminist analysis and cultural studies and incorporate them into my close-reading approach to her novels. My thesis recognizes Austen's cultural context and draws from theory that revalorizes the feminine as a mode of granting female agency. From this theoretical background, I then focus primarily on in-depth textual analysis to discern how Austen responds to her literary and cultural context to define moral female identity.

## **Literary and Cultural Contexts**

### **Ideologies in Crisis**

Austen wrote at a moment of social transition, in the midst of society moving from an aristocratic social hierarchy to an economically-mobile middle-class system. As I will later analyze, the domestic novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflects *and* creates this changing class structure. In its culture-creating, culturally-created role, the domestic novel, as Armstrong explains, helped the “modern individual to become an economic and psychological reality,” and that “modern individual was first and foremost a woman” (8). The development of female identity so crucial to Austen and her female literary predecessors relates inextricably to the rise of the middle class and the tumult of sociopolitical views that accompanied its development. Inevitably, countless social and political philosophies arose and conflicted at this

time of societal change. Most significant, perhaps, to understand the specific cultural context of Austen's novels, and their moral beliefs, is the flurry of ideological controversy surrounding the French Revolution. Edmund Burke's reaction in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* reveals a traditional worldview seeking to preserve the nobility and establishments of the past. Both Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine reflect the influence of Enlightenment thought in their radical rejoinders to Burke's *Reflections*, proclaiming individual rights for all humanity. While traditional and modern views of social order encompass a wide range of perspectives, I will look specifically here at the social vision offered by Burke and the individualist philosophy presented by Wollstonecraft and Paine as a background for Austen's own definition of morality.

In many ways, Edmund Burke's primary emphasis is to maintain the status quo. For Burke, the traditional social structure based on "hereditary succession" promotes order and grants stability (20). He argues for "A disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve" as the mark of a "good patriot, and a true politician" (133), rejecting all notions of "quarrelling with the establishments" (78). The establishment that Burke thinks it wisest to preserve is one founded on heredity and structured around inheritance. I will demonstrate in the next section how much this focus on inheritance endangered women and female relationships in Austen's culture.<sup>9</sup> Burke stresses the idea of heritage as the basis of human, or at least British, rights and freedoms themselves: he defends his government as "*an inheritance from our forefathers*" and defines our rights and freedoms as "*an entailed inheritance*" (27, 29, emphasis in original). Thus, in *Reflections*, Burke defends traditional monarchical government and the aristocratic system because they are part of our heritage. Because he grounds everything, even our human rights, in

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<sup>9</sup> Wollstonecraft points this out in her rebuttal, attacking Burke's family estate system for endangering female morals: "Girls are sacrificed to family convenience, or else marry to settle themselves in a superior rank" (22).



inheritance, Burke can defend the aristocracy, suggesting “nobility is a graceful ornament to the civil order” (117).

In fierce contrast to this, Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft both assert the “equal rights of man” which are divinely ordained, not granted by an inherited government (Paine pt. 4). For these thinkers, hierarchy assaults the essence of human equality, though for Burke it has merit simply for existing so long. Mary Wollstonecraft even argues that rank, “hereditary property—hereditary honours,” creates insincere human beings, “by making sentiments and opinions current in conversation that have no root in the heart . . . The man has been changed into an artificial monster by the station to which he has been born” (*Rights of Man* 8). While Burke sees these conventions and this structure of hereditary rank creating social stability, Wollstonecraft sees them as destructive of sincere morality. Thomas Paine further suggests that primogeniture, upon which the whole inheritance system is based, equals injustice: “With what ideas of justice and honour can that man enter a house of legislation, who absorbs in his own person the inheritance of a whole family of children or doles out to them some pitiful portion with the insolence of a gift?” (pt. 7). Whereas Burke sees one’s birth as sufficient to make inheriting status and wealth deserved, Paine implies here that individuals deserve *equal* benefits by right of birth and additional ones only for merit. Wollstonecraft posits this capitalist principle of a meritocracy to replace the aristocracy when she opposes inheritance with a man’s right “to enjoy the acquisitions which his talents and industry have acquired” (23–24). These Enlightenment thinkers urge equality and personal effort as the bases of social rights.

The primary points of disagreement between Burkean social order and the liberalism of Paine or Wollstonecraft are not solely hierarchy versus equality, or inheritance versus individual efforts. On these issues, Austen’s focus on individual responsibility and personal choice, even for

women, places her firmly in line with Paine and Wollstonecraft's views. But another significant conflict between these ideologies complicates her alliance. This is the issue of interdependence and traditional authority versus independence and self-government. Protesting Burke's "contract . . . between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born," Paine asserts that the dead do not possess the right to dictate to the living, that instead "laws . . . derive their force from the consent of the living" (Burke 82, Paine pt. 1). While Burke creates intricate human connections and believes in the intergenerational dependence of society, Paine demands each individual's right to make his or her own choices, to consent or not as each will. The liberal individualism of Wollstonecraft and Paine places great priority on an individual's desire and interests. Wollstonecraft argues that "private interest has produced public good" (35).

Burke disagrees with Paine and Wollstonecraft over how much an individual's right to act is curtailed by society's interests. As I will demonstrate, particularly in Chapter Two of this thesis, this is an important issue for Austen. She navigates the dilemma of where self should end and others' concerns begin and arrives at a moral standard of internally motivated selflessness. For Paine, an individual's rights extend as far as his or her abilities: "Natural rights . . . are all those in which the Power to execute is as perfect in the individual as the right itself" (Paine pt. 4). This suggests that if one can do something, entirely on his or her own, one has the right to choose to do so. In contrast to this, Burke argues that "the restraints on men . . . are to be reckoned among their rights," that society entails on human beings an obligation to submit their own interests to the interests of others. Of course, as we have seen, these prevailing interests for Burke seem to primarily be those of the ruling class and of the demands of primogeniture. Nevertheless, Burke's explanation offers a valuable counterpoint to Wollstonecraft and Paine's individualism:

One of the first motives of civil society, and which becomes one of its fundamental rules, is, *that no man should be judge in his own case*. By this each person has at once divested himself of the first fundamental right of uncovenanted man, that is, to judge for himself, and to assert his own cause. He abdicates all right to be his own governor. (50)

This abdication of self-rule is not supported by Wollstonecraft and Paine, for whom self-government is a grounding principle. Wollstonecraft defiantly argues for the value of “bold rebellion and insidious innovation” (35). Austen, thus, navigates individualism’s rebellion against “implicit submission to authority” and Burkean surrender of individual rights for the interests of society (Wollstonecraft 13).

I will show how Austen’s definition of morality rejects aspects of both these social philosophies. Austen proposes an absolute moral authority and a demand for selfless consideration of others that does not fully fit the individualism we see in Wollstonecraft and Paine. Yet, she also defines this moral authority and selflessness outside of the foundation of hierarchy and inheritance that form the basis of Burkean social thought. Similarly, Austen challenges both traditional beliefs about gender embodied in Burke, and Wollstonecraft’s perspective offered in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Wollstonecraft challenges Burke’s gender distinctions by asserting women’s moral equality: “Let woman share the rights and she will emulate the virtues of man” (294). Yet she simultaneously continues Burke’s privileging of masculinity. Just as Burke defines liberty and morality as moral—“manly, moral, regulated liberty” and “austere and masculine morality” (7, 32)—so Wollstonecraft makes manliness a compliment and effeminacy an insult, urging Burke to “feel like a man” and linking “effeminacy” to “idiotism” (*Rights of Man* 20, 24). Austen defies them both, presenting women’s

equal moral autonomy and advocating the superiority of femininity. Creating these new definitions through sisterhood, Austen similarly challenges a literary tradition as well. Though she may partially follow the social and gender views of her immediate female novelist predecessors, she dramatically changes how they use sisterhood to portray those views.

### **Sisters in Eighteenth-Century Literature: The Mold Austen Recasts**

Jane Austen's novels and their depiction of sisterhood derive from (and transform) a developing literary history. Even though her fame has far outstripped that of her forbears, Austen consciously joins the eighteenth-century tradition of female-authored domestic novels. She specifically references Fanny Burney and Maria Edgeworth's novels in her first novel, *Northanger Abbey*. Refusing to "adopt that ungenerous and impolitic custom so common with novel writers, of degrading by their contemptuous censure the very performances, to the number of which they are themselves adding" (NA 23), Austen instead praises Burney's *Cecilia* and *Camilla* and Edgeworth's *Belinda* as the epitome of what is good in the tradition she "adds" to. With classic Austen satire, she exclaims, "It is only Cecilia, or Camilla, or Belinda; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humor are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (24). Though Austen thoroughly satirizes the overly sentimental heroines and the stereotypical plot of the gothic novel in *Northanger Abbey*, she honors another kind of novel here.

For Austen, the novels of Burney and Edgeworth represent "the greatest powers of the mind" as they capture "human nature" and vividly "convey" it. These novels she so admires participate in the domestic novel tradition, where literary texts finally delve into the concerns and anxieties and "human nature" of women. Nancy Armstrong argues that the domestic novel

granted women literary subjectivity as it redefined identity in psychological, rather than political, terms. The domestic novel places human value in an individual's "qualities of mind" rather than in their status in a patrilineal system, granting increased value to the domestic and emotional realms being assigned to women (Armstrong 4). With her own exquisite characterizations, Austen, too, affirms the value of the individual's psyche over their social status, while similarly sharing the domestic novel's focus on female identity.

Austen joins a literary world where writers like Frances Burney or Maria Edgeworth simultaneously reiterate *and* reevaluate societal stereotypes about women and their value. The primarily female authors of domestic novels demonstrate the perilous situations in which society places women and the female vulnerability this creates. Yet as these novels depict their heroines navigating their way to security and agency, they almost never present sister relationships as part of that journey and rarely even portray close female friendships. Women frequently appear as potential competition to one another or as threats to the heroine's reputation or character. Though these novels prioritize morally educating women, they do not represent women as potential moral educators of each other. I argue, then, that as Austen joins this literary tradition, she challenges its perception of sisterhood by asserting the value of the sister relationship because, for her, it represents moral worth and enables female autonomy.

By looking specifically at Burney's *Camilla* (1796) and Edgeworth's *Belinda* (1801), and connecting them to predecessors like Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* (1788) or Burney's earlier *Evelina* (1778), I hope to define the specific literary history of sisterhood to which Austen consciously responds. As I argue, this eighteenth-century tradition almost entirely excludes sisterhood and frequently eliminates intimate female friendships as well, though their presence slowly increases prior to Austen. While Samuel Richardson's inaugural domestic novel, *Pamela*

(1740), almost entirely excludes women's relationships with women, Smith and Edgeworth introduce close female friendships. Burney demonstrates this transition through her novels, as female friendships appear more prominently in her later *Camilla* than in *Evelina*. Such a progression paves the way for Austen to revise the role of sisterhood in women's identity, though Austen's transformation is nonetheless revolutionary. Though female friendships may increasingly appear, I argue that the underlying view of sisterhood (or merely women in relationship with other women) remains practically unchanged. Their exclusion of female relationships or portrayal of them as threatening, particularly sisterhood, reveals the hidden insecurities women feel towards women and the societal reasons for these fears. By analyzing these female fears of sisterhood, and their source, as shown in these novels, I can demonstrate that Austen recognizes the reasons for such fears yet responds with a moral standard advocating that her heroines embrace sisterhood anyway.

Whereas *Belinda* includes a tumultuous close relationship between two women and *Camilla* presents restricted sister relationships and negative intimate female friendships in the heroine's life, earlier domestic novels include no such relationships at all. Setting the tone for other novels to follow, Richardson's *Pamela* offers its eponymous heroine little chance to bond with other women. Pamela's story revolves entirely around her relationships with the various men who would destroy or protect her virtue: her father, Mr. B., Mr. Williams, Mr. Longman, John. Though Armstrong suggests *Pamela* offers us "a female self who exists outside and prior to the relationships under the male's control," thus acknowledging woman's agency (113), the absence of female friendships here implies that the female agency that counts in this society can only come through male relationships. Other women have little of value to offer the heroine. Similarly, Burney's first novel, *Evelina*, reduces close female friendship to little more than a

narrative device. Though Evelina addresses her “sweet Maria” (254) and “dear friend” (173), her letters to Maria include minimal affection or confidence in comparison to her letters to her guardian, Mr. Villars. When Evelina most needs female guidance at her first ball, Maria and her mother, Mrs. Mirvan, offer none. Pursuing the attentions of eligible bachelors distracts Maria from helping her friend. This absence of female support in the early domestic novel indicates the crucial concerns of women in this society. As their anxieties center strongly on paternal inheritance, fraternal protection, and marital security, perhaps it is little wonder that female relationships are of small concern. Sisters apparently do not offer women a sufficient means of survival and security.

This absence of any level of female friendship in the early domestic novel highlights the growing presence of women’s relationships in *Camilla* or *Belinda*. Yet actual sisters still remain sidelined in these novels. I suggest that this is because similar anxieties about women exist here: Camilla’s and Belinda’s female friendships continually offer either jealous competition or damage to the heroine’s reputation. If, as critics have suggested, being sisters heightens the sense of redundancy women feel and thus their sense of competition, then sisterly contact must be minimized to protect our heroine from defeat or moral failure. Thus, Belinda’s sisters are never physically present in Edgeworth’s novel, only referenced as examples of Mrs. Stanhope’s (Belinda’s aunt’s) successful yet morally-bankrupt matchmaking skills. Thus, Burney’s *Camilla* grants its heroine two sisters who are present in the novels, yet limits their intimacy through separation. Camilla grows up with her uncle, Sir Hugh, physically separated from her older sister, Lavinia, and emotionally distanced from her younger sister, Eugenia, who is being intensely educated by their uncle. For all their affection, Lavinia and Eugenia do not share the confidences of their sister. Burney seems to suggest, through the competition or corruption *other*

women present to Camilla in this novel, the danger she averts by distancing her heroine from her sisters.

I suggest that Edgeworth clarifies through her few references to Belinda's sisters one of the specific reasons sisters are feared by Burney and her domestic novel predecessors. Halfway through the novel, Belinda learns from her aunt of the failure of her sisters' marriages—"your sister Tollemache . . . is going to be parted from her husband and basely throws all the blame upon me. But 'tis the same with all of you" (214). Though she "regret[s] . . . having grievously offended her aunt," she demonstrates little sorrow for her sisters' misfortunes (215). These sisters do not represent emotional intimacy for Belinda and seem to mean little to her. The other, earlier, reference to them suggests why Belinda avoids any bond with them. Several gentlemen criticize Belinda's sisters as part of their description of their aunt's conniving matchmaking skills: "There's no less than six of her nieces, whom she has *got off* within these past four winters. Not one of 'em now, that has not made a catch-match" (24). As they continue to exclaim over the excellent matches Mrs. Stanhope made for these young women despite their lack of charms, Belinda grows enraged. Yet it is not their insult to her sisters that infuriates her but their inclusion of her among her sisters. The intimacy of sisterhood makes them a more serious threat to her reputation. Her sisters represent only what Belinda does not want to become. As I demonstrate in this thesis, particularly in chapter two, Austen recognizes the potential danger of sisterhood but forces her heroines to face it and overcome.

Burney herself indicates another threat found in female friendships which sisterhood exacerbates, shown through Camilla's sister-like relationship with Indiana. While Camilla does not grow up close to either of her sisters, she is raised alongside her cousin Indiana, and thus these two spend more of the novel together than Camilla does with her own sisters. Indiana



continually feels threatened by attention Camilla receives from any young man, particularly Edgar Mandlebert, whom she desires solely for his money and estate. Camilla does not enter into the competition Indiana creates between the two, but she suffers the consequences of Indiana's jealousy. This spiteful jealousy provokes Miss Margland to accuse Camilla: "You cannot but be sensible . . . that you have seduced Mr. Mandlebert from your cousin; you cannot but see he takes hardly the slightest notice of her, from the pains you are at to make him admire nobody but yourself" (166). Fearing such an appearance, Camilla retreats from Edgar. Camilla and Indiana's shared situation and social circle position them as rivals, in the same way two sisters' shared situation would. Burney's only proffered solution is the emotional distance Camilla places between herself and Indiana.

Burney and Edgeworth thus reject sisterhood because it exacerbates the dangers the domestic novel sees in female friendships. In spite of depicting more female friendships than we see in earlier eighteenth-century novels, *Camilla* and *Belinda* clearly present the threat the domestic novel finds in relationships between women. The danger of jealous women competing with each other for male attention surfaces repeatedly. Though Camilla never threatens her close female friends, Mrs. Arlbery and Mrs. Berlinton, with competition due to her hero worship of them, they feel threatened by each other as each vies for the largest following of admiring young men. We see the petulance and triumph or bitter retreat repeated again and again in these novels, exemplified by Mrs. Arlbery's response to a dual set of rivals: "Mrs. Arlbery . . . seeing herself again, from the arrival of Lady Alithea Selmore, without any distinguished party, that lady drawing into her circle all people of any consequence not already attracted by Mrs. Berlinton, grew sick of the ball and the rooms, and impatient to return home" (468). Mrs. Ashwood, in Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline*, responds similarly when Emmeline attracts more attention from her

male circle than she does: “Mrs. Ashwood being the whole evening out of humour; and being no longer able to command it, answered peevishly” and then retired (115). Women appear easily threatened by other women in these novels. Though our heroines always possess the moral character to remain above such pettiness, their inability to connect relationally with other women is always justified by the jealousy inherent in such friendships.

A specific scene in Edgeworth’s *Belinda* pinpoints particular societal anxieties that create this type of jealousy and competition that Burney’s *Camilla*, or Smith’s *Emmeline*, portrays. Lady Delacour reacts with an outrageous display of intense jealousy when she believes Belinda intends to steal her despised, but wealthy, husband from her. Edgeworth describes this “passion of jealousy” as “the jealousy of power” (203). We can see the source of such “jealousy of power” through analyzing Lady Delacour’s succeeding irrational accusations: “You know perfectly to *manage* a friend . . . Your calculations are better than mine. The poor mad wife would be in your way, would yet stand between you and the fond object of your secret soul—a coronet!” (206). As Lady Delacour’s obsessive rantings reveal, the root of her and so many other female characters’ jealousy is fear, fear of another woman’s power outweighing her own. Believing she is soon to die, Lady Delacour panics to think of Belinda claiming the only social identity she now possesses as wife of a baronet. Marriage offers women social status and financial security; simultaneously, the number of eligible men who can offer such security is low. Along with this reality, as Merryyn Williams explains, men still have more financial and political rights in marriage than their wives do, and a wife’s property belongs to her husband (Williams 6). Marriage is thus a high-stakes market for women, a serious and costly gamble. This heightens the danger, and thus fear and jealousy, women face of another woman stealing a potential husband, or in Lady Delacour’s case, taking over a widowed one. Lady Delacour fears being

outdone by another woman exerting the greatest power women have in her society, which she herself asserts masterfully: manipulation. Thus women friends of Camilla's, or Belinda's or Evelina's or Emmeline's, mistrust each other and often the heroine. They jealously compete, fearing that they will lose their identity to another woman's power.

Beyond competition or jealousy from other women, female friendships pose the danger of corrupting a heroine's reputation, or even her character, in eighteenth-century domestic novels. We see this threat surface in both *Camilla* and *Belinda*, and I will use related examples from *Evelina* and *Emmeline* to help clarify why exactly feminine reputations are so fragile. While Camilla never enters any serious competition with the close female friends Burney allows her to develop, we do see Mrs. Berlinton and Mrs. Arlbery jeopardize Camilla's reputation in multiple ways. Both these female friends behave carelessly towards society's moral standards, Mrs. Berlinton, with her gambling addiction and secret lover, and Mrs. Arlbery, with her shallow passion for "ton" or social charm (463). Under the influence of Mrs. Arlbery, Camilla spends money frivolously and amasses debt. Through Mrs. Arlbery and Mrs. Berlinton's connections, Camilla becomes entangled with Mrs. Mittin. This individual indebts our heroine to dangerous creditors, who finally throw Camilla's father into jail, shame her family, and lead to her near death. Camilla's character ultimately withstands corruption in this novel, though her reputation suffers more seriously, and only the Tyrold family's solid character and financial prudence and Edgar's heroic rescue redeem Camilla from ruin. Burney reminds us that woman's social reputation is incredibly fragile.

Edgeworth reiterates the fragility of women's reputation in *Belinda* through Virginia's experience when suspected of being Clarence Hervey's mistress. This novel shows us how quickly and on what little grounds women can lose their social standing. Lady Boucher declares

of poor innocent Virginia, “We shall see, ma’am, that it will turn out, as I told you, that miss Rachael, or Virginia, or whatever he pleases to call her, has been what I said; and as I said, nobody will visit her, not a soul: fifty people I can count, who have declared to me they’ve made up their minds; and my own’s made up” (457). At this point, it really matters little whether Virginia is guilty of that of which she is accused or not; all that counts is whether “they’ve made up their minds.” Though here we see that sexual activity in relationships with men most typically destroys a woman’s reputation, *Belinda* also demonstrates the clear eighteenth-century warning that relationships with women can taint merely by association without any shared activity at all. Belinda herself must struggle to disassociate herself from the characters of her aunt Stanhope and her sisters that precede her. Clarence Hervey, for example, protests marrying her because, “do you think I could be taken in by one of the Stanhope school? Do you think I don’t see as plainly as any of you that Belinda Portman’s a composition of art and affectation?” (26). Nothing in Belinda’s character provokes such an accusation, but her aunt’s reputation overrides her own character.

Burney, particularly, repeatedly analyzes this eighteenth-century theme of women tainting other women’s reputation because of the accepted social belief in guilt by association. Just as men treat Camilla poorly when she is in Mrs. Mittin’s company, so Burney shows her first heroine, Evelina, in a similar situation. When Evelina is walking with her rough, lower-class female cousins, “a large party of gentlemen, apparently very riotous” mistake them for prostitutes and threaten sexual assault in which “one of them, rudely, seizing hold of me, said I was a pretty little creature” (197). Burney suggests here the significance of appearance in this society to how people, particularly men, feel free to treat women. A woman’s social status and appearance indicate virtue and qualify the treatment she “deserves.” *Evelina* suggests that

appearances are in fact misleading, as its heroine attempts to evade an officer who mistakes her for a prostitute, “marching fiercely up to me, said, ‘You are a sweet, pretty creature and I enlist you in my service,’” and ends up joining the company of two prostitutes she mistakes for ladies (234). Burney reminds us that appearances do not always truly represent a woman’s character, but that this does not keep them from determining her reputation.

Women’s greatest concern for their reputation in these eighteenth-century novels, as we can see, relates to their sexuality. Any hint of scandal relating to sexual misconduct, such as Virginia accused of being Hervey’s mistress in *Belinda* or Evelina appearing with prostitutes, risks permanently scarring women’s reputation. For this reason, association with women suspected of sexual misconduct makes a heroine vulnerable herself. We see this in Smith’s *Emmeline*, when Emmeline chooses to befriend the pregnant Lady Adelina and is suspected by Delamere of having an illegitimate child herself. This fear often limits the potential of female friendship in eighteenth-century novels, as the female reputation remains too fragile to withstand such contact.

Austen’s domestic novel predecessors reveal the basis of women’s vulnerable reputations to be found in their Burkean society’s obsession with inheritance and legitimacy. The female reputation is so susceptible to danger because men and women in this society live by a sexual double standard, intrinsically connected to inheritance concerns.<sup>10</sup> After all, while *Belinda*’s Virginia would have lost all social standing if proven Clarence Hervey’s mistress, he would remain unscathed. Though Burney’s Camilla endangers her reputation, and almost loses Edgar

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<sup>10</sup> Rousseau defends this emphasis on female reputation rather than on their actual moral behavior alone, explaining that, “Thus it is not enough that a wife should be faithful; her husband, along with his friends and neighbors, must believe in her fidelity” (Book V). For social reasons, appearances matter, he explains. Earlier he has defended the sexual double standard itself: “No doubt every breach of faith is wrong, and every faithless husband, who robs his wife of the sole reward of the stern duties of her sex, is cruel and unjust; but the faithless wife is worse; she destroys the family and breaks the laws of nature; . . . her crime is not infidelity but treason” (Book V).

forever, simply by letting Sir Sedley Clarendel pay her brother's debt, said brother, Lionel, may confidently carry on an affair with a married woman without suffering any social consequences. Similarly, in *Emmeline*, Lady Adelina's life will be ruined if her illegitimate child is discovered, but Godolphin can pretend the child is his own illegitimate son without fear: "and he would take it to his own house, and call it a son of his own; a precaution that would throw an over obscurity over the truth which would hardly ever be removed, when none were particularly interested to remove it" (278). In this society, a woman's sexual virtue entirely determines her claim to social recognition, yet men may openly admit their libertine sexual behavior and excite no "interest." Lady Adelina's situation reveals why this unbalance exists: women bear the responsibility of protecting the inheritance through legitimate heirs.<sup>11</sup>

The sexual double standard thus stems entirely from legitimacy concerns, making women's reputations vulnerable. Because Lady Adelina's sister-in-law, Mrs. Bancraft, wishes to receive her brother's inheritance, she eagerly ferrets out an affair, desirous of exposing any illegitimate heirs that might result. Lady Adelina recognizes this danger she faces: "Could I have supported the contempt of the world, to which it was evidently the interest of Mrs. Bancraft to expose me," she begins (230), reminding us that women can expose as well as contaminate other women. Social fear, punishment, and guilt surround women's extramarital or premarital sexual activity only, not extending to men, because women might introduce illegitimate heirs into the family and take the inheritance away from the patriarchal bloodline. Thus penitence in these domestic novels often reflects social concerns for legitimacy more than moral distress. Lady Adelina, for example, refuses to marry Fitz-Edward once she is free because "Were the marriage

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<sup>11</sup> Williams similarly makes note of this reason for this sexual double standard, pointing to a quote from the "debate on the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857," in which the Lord Chancellor explained, "the adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife"(qtd. in Williams 29).

you solicit to take place, and to be followed by a family, could I bear that my William, the delight and support of my life, should be as an alien in his father's house" (459). She cannot accept that only her oldest son would remain outside the social bounds of legitimacy.

As these novels seek to show, the values of this social structure, with its emphasis on lineal inheritance and the empty appearances of status, create a highly vulnerable female reputation and make women susceptible to male injustice and aggression. Cruel or unjust father-figures like Emmeline's uncle, Lord Montreville, and Evelina's father, Sir John Belmont, can deny these heroines legitimacy and an inheritance. Male figures' power causes even mere thoughtlessness to endanger our heroines, as Burney's *Camilla* most forcefully shows. Sir Hugh's thoughtless presumption results in Eugenia's pox scars and limp, as well as causing the majority of the relational mishaps in the novel. Lionel's carelessness as a brother means he often implicates Camilla, and his other sisters, in socially inappropriate situations. Lionel toys with matters that are not lighthearted in a society where a woman's entire social identity rests in her reputation. For heroines in this precarious position, authors like Burney or Smith or Edgeworth seem to promote the reformation of male figures rather than proposing support from female friends. After all, though Emmeline shares one of the closest female friendships we see in eighteenth-century domestic novels, she and her married friend, Mrs. Stafford, can never offer each other material support due to their social situations. Emmeline's brother-in-law, Lord Westhaven, must intervene to help Emmeline's friend. Disbelieving in the potential for support from female friendships, the domestic novel prior to Austen seeks stronger male relationships for its heroines.

This literary anxiety about reforming men who fail their female relatives reflects a changing familial system, related to the social shifts we have discussed. Ruth Perry analyzes the

sociohistorical context of this literary trend, in which a man's protection of his sisters becomes "a moral litmus test in eighteenth-century literature" ("Brotherly Love"). As Perry explains, the eighteenth century saw a shift from emphasizing consanguineous ties to emphasizing conjugal ones.<sup>12</sup> This led to a higher emphasis on wives and mothers than on daughters and sisters, endangering many single women who relied on brothers for financial support and protection but had no legal means of demanding it. Fergus describes the growing eighteenth-century anxiety about sibling rivalry, surfacing in fatherly advice which encourages daughters to love brothers who may well be untrustworthy. Burney, Edgeworth, and others like Smith, whom we have looked at, reflect this anxiety in their portrayal of women's endangered condition and respond by proposing better men.

This domestic novel tradition upon which Austen builds denies the potential of women to adequately protect each other in such a dangerous world and only gradually suggests their potential to aid each other's moral development. As I discussed earlier, *Pamela* and *Evelina* do not present their heroines with womanly advice from Pamela's mother or Mrs. and Miss Mirvan when it would have profited them. Mrs. Tyrold does appear in *Camilla* as a wise, supportive figure, yet her role in the novel remains sidelined. Instead figures in Burney's novels like *Evelina*'s foster-father Mr. Villars or *Camilla*'s friend Edgar Mandlebert are offered as primary moral guides to the heroine. The role of sisterhood and female friendship does progress prior to Austen works, as we see Maria Edgeworth introduce the potential for a woman to morally mentor another woman in Belinda's relationship with Lady Delacour. When Belinda seeks to

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<sup>12</sup>Perry uses the term "consanguinean" throughout her scholarly work, *Novel Relations*, but according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, consanguinean applies to blood relation through the father versus uterine, a blood relation through the mother. "Consanguineal" is another term applied to the blood family relationship one has with parents and siblings, but is less frequently used. "Consanguineous" is the term most popular in the *OED* and the only of the three terms used in *Webster's Dictionary*; for this reason I have chosen to use it here except when I refer specifically to the paternal line..



reform Lady Delacour, Clarence Hervey's heartily approves: "It is tacitly understood by the public, that every lady goes bail for the character of her female friends. If lady Delacour had been so fortunate as to meet with such a friend as miss Portman in her early life, what a different woman she would have been" (166). While Clarence may believe it "tacitly understood" that all women rush to the rescue of a female friend, the other domestic novel examples we have seen do not reflect such a sentiment.

Edgeworth, in fact, has introduced a new possibility in the domestic novel's presentation of female friendship, one which Austen will dramatically enlarge upon. Belinda takes an unusual risk, in the literary tradition at least, by endangering her own reputation to help salvage another woman's character. Edgeworth suggests that women can educate one another if they overcome their frailty and failings. Yet even Edgeworth emphasizes the dangers as much as the potential for women's friendship, and still completely fears actual sisterhood. Austen transforms Edgeworth's beginning by advocating that women embrace their dangerous sister and posing women as not only possible mentors, but as the *best* moral mentors.

### **Sisterhood as Strength in Austen**

Austen transforms the sister role because she holds a different moral viewpoint in her response to the same social dangers for women to which Burney and Edgeworth react. As we have seen, novels like *Camilla* and *Belinda*, along with their predecessors like *Evelina* or *Emmeline*, depict female friendships, and most especially sisters, as the source of rivalry and competition and ruin to one's reputation, as well as simply an insufficient site of support. Austen, instead, pinpoints the source of female rivalry and competition in the moral flaws of these women's society. I argue that she demands of her heroines a moral standard of selflessness that springs from their own internal motivation to do right and care about others rather than from

external social authority. She not only suggests that women *can* and *should* embrace sisterhood as a moral choice, but in so doing she argues for women's potential to help each other, thus indicating a higher view of women's capacity and granting an elevated female identity.

Eighteenth-century domestic novelists like Burney and Edgeworth, along with Austen, respond to the transition between social orders that we have discussed, each of which denies women the freedom of sisterhood, or limits a desire for it. This society still follows Burke's hierarchical social structure, asserting the primacy of heritage, inheritance, and legitimacy. Such primacy, as we have seen, poses potential dangers to women and inflicts stringent requirements on their reputations to safeguard the lineage. At the same time, the rising middle class and its philosophy, as expressed by Enlightenment thinkers, promotes self-interest and social mobility in opposition to the aristocratic hierarchy. Such liberal individualism encourages competition and de-emphasizes the consanguineous family. The domestic novel embodies much of this modern thought, while still reminding us that heroines must abide by the old order's value if they are to survive socially and not become Lady Adelina or Virginia.

The values of Wollstonecraft's or Paine's individualism encourage sisterhood nearly as little as the old inheritance system does, resulting in *Camillas* and *Belindas* that promote women's agency without advocating female friendship. Armstrong describes how the domestic novel embodies the modern, middle-class system. She argues that it offers "a private domain of culture . . . overseen by women" which thus empowers women politically and enacts the new Enlightenment order, allowing women to "free themselves of the status distinctions organizing the old society" (98). This personal autonomy depends largely, however, on enlightened self-interest, and since women offer little advantage or protection to one another, the newly shaping morality discourages female friendship. Ruth Perry explains that "the individualistic drive for

economic independence” and shift towards conjugal family away from the patrilineal structure (12) meant “women lost power in their natal families” (36). Thus, the new order also entails a move away from the consanguineous family, further discouraging the sister relationship. Ultimately, as I argue Austen’s moral stance on sisterhood demonstrates, the new order’s focus on self-interest encourages women to protect their reputation and matrimonial interests by denying sisterhood, just as the traditional estate-order required. Austen responds to the same dilemma that Burney and Edgeworth, and their predecessors face: women’s social vulnerability. But her response asserts women’s strength through female, not solely patrilineal, relationships and so denies the traditional order, while she encourages the self-denial of valuing sister relationships which offer little financial benefit to her heroines and so challenges the modern order.

Though Austen depicts the same female cultural concerns that her predecessors do, she atypically affirms sisterly bonding as a source of strength within women’s often powerless position. Female dependence on brothers or husbands for support creates a dangerous situation for impoverished single women in Austen’s novels, such as the destitute Dashwood sisters in *Sense and Sensibility*, just as it does in the novels of Burney and Edgeworth. Austen shows herself just as aware of the fraternal and paternal failure to provide adequate support and protection to women. Yet rather than passionately proposing a better masculine ideal, as the novels we have seen do, Austen represents the significant source of strength women find in one another. She focuses on women’s potential for emotional and moral support, even when they are unable to offer financial or social assistance. In doing so, she affirms Burke’s moral value of self-abnegation for the sake of society and family, while still affirming the domestic novel’s

modern ideal of value through emotional, rational qualities rather than through birth and rank. At the same time, she presents us with a broadened view of female potential.

Building off of Edgeworth's female mentor in *Belinda*, Austen further proposes the capacity of women to morally educate other women and the necessity that they do so. She firmly asserts women's rational, moral abilities in a way that resounds with the moral, educational proto-feminist ideals of Mary Wollstonecraft and Maria Edgeworth. Unlike Burney's naïve and even foolish Camilla, who must be protected by others' moral discernment in spite of her good heart, Austen's heroines begin their novels with a certain level of mental and moral maturity, and the clear capacity to further develop such maturity. Even such an immature heroine as Catherine Morland or such a self-centered one as Emma proves capable of learning from her mistakes. Austen heroines are moral beings; as Lionel Trilling explains: "Emma has a moral life the way a man has a moral life" (x). As such, these heroines resonate more with Edgeworth's *Belinda*, with her detached rationality, than with Burney's heroines.

Yet while *Belinda* advances the literary view of women by portraying a rational heroine and women's capacity to mentor each other, Edgeworth nonetheless disavows the possibility of sisterly affection within the family. By promoting sisterhood within the family, Austen even further challenges her social and literary environment with the morality and familial value required of sisterhood. Standing at the end of the eighteenth-century, Austen directly precedes the rise of Victorian literature, with its domestic female ideal of the Angel in the House.<sup>13</sup> With the parody of her juvenile novel, *Love and Freindship*, and the satiric portrait of Isabella Thorpe's character in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen critiques the melodramatic, emotional female friendships of eighteenth-century novels, particularly the gothic novels and novels of sensibility. Where we have seen female friendship in the domestic novel, such as Lady Adelina's and

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<sup>13</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 19–27, and Virginia Woolf, pp. 226–38.

Emmeline's, it is often accompanied by excessive swooning and emotion. *Emmeline* presents one of the few positive sister-like relationships in the domestic novel tradition, with Lady Adelina and Emmeline sharing a tender friendship that is joined to sisterhood by Godolphin's marriage to Emmeline. Yet the extreme sensibility of Lady Adelina, and emotional susceptibility of Emmeline, reminds the reader that in spite of Lady Adelina's tender affection, her relationship still holds certain dangers for Emmeline and lacks much potential for mutual support. Austen's satiric treatment of such emotional friendships implies an insincerity inherent in these characters and relationships and leads to her transition toward the sincerity of familial relationships and sisterhood.

With this movement, Austen moves toward the Victorian idealization of the family and domestic intimacy as part of her proposal for female moral identity. In Victorian literature, the false and sometimes dangerous emotional excess of exogamous female relationships of eighteenth-century literature is rejected, and domestic familial intimacy is heralded in its place. As Glenda Hudson explains, the family becomes in Victorian literature a "refuge from the debasement of the changing world" (5). Yet Austen refuses to idealize the domestic circle, maintaining the eighteenth-century anxiety about women's insecurity in their family in a male-dominated economic society. Austen's novels thus exist in between themes and concerns of the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility and Victorian domestic ideology.

Austen proposes the benefit of domestic, familial, and feminine qualities in creating the most lasting form of moral development in her heroines. In this way, she privileges the feminine nature of sisters educating one another in opposition to the model of male tutoring we see in so many of the eighteenth-century domestic novels. Instead of asserting the need for a better masculine ideal as Burney does, Austen demands a feminine ideal in the sister or sister figure to

nurture her heroine. With this, Austen partially foreshadows themes of Victorian literature, which reflect and create women's social realities as well. Despite the strong social deterrents to female solidarity, sociohistorical studies of nineteenth-century society in Britain and the United States both depict fiercely devoted female friendships. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Carol Lasser have both explored this phenomenon, pointing out that not only did sisters develop deep emotional attachments to each other, but that women patterned their female friendships after such sister bonds. In this society, women share a domestic world that men know little to nothing about. Moreover, restrictions on male and female emotional and social intimacy (Smith-Rosenberg 11) create an environment where "the supportive network of the female world was of utmost importance," with "the sister bond at the center of that" (Hudson 65). Female friendships and sister relationships offered women an outlet for physical and emotional affection, an assurance of empathetic understanding due to their shared experiences, and a foundation of emotional security. Austen privileges these feminine characteristics of affection, empathy, emotion, and relational security as of highest value for the moral development of her female characters. In doing so, Austen challenges the eighteenth-century literary pattern of female education by superior male hands. She evokes the developing model of women as society's moral center and guide that predominates Victorian literature.

Yet even as Austen's claim participates in a trend that will develop in Victorian culture, she simultaneously challenges aspects of that future culture. While Victorian society idealized women who valued domestic relationships, competition for marriage opportunities still offered women their only hope of survival and means of social identity. Thus female characters exhort readers to be good daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, but find sisterhood still difficult. Victorian literature demonstrates a sense of competition inherent in sisterly intimacy, as sisters

are positioned against one another as similar yet different (Cohen 23–25). Their similarity leads to a sisterly fear of becoming interchangeable and redundant (Levin 43). I argue that Victorian novels expose its society's contradictory attitude toward women that demands a domestic ideal of them, yet evokes competition between sisters and female friends.<sup>14</sup> These conflicting demands stem from social emphasis on women's identity development solely through marriage and male figures. Nonetheless, sisterhood allows Victorian literature to challenge such contradictions.

Thus partially foreshadowing future cultural values of sisterhood, Austen transforms eighteenth-century literary portraits of sisterhood. As we have seen, eighteenth-century literature subordinates all female relationships, and particularly sisterhood, to the heroine's relationships with men. In contrast, Austen posits the primacy of sisterhood and other women's roles in her heroines' self-development. In Austen, sisters offer a source of female support from within the often dangerous family and an opportunity for women to reveal the genuine selflessness Austen values. Her pivotal stance does not ignore the feminine cultural anxieties so inherent in eighteenth-century domestic novels about the threat of the family from empowered but unkind male members or competitive sisters. Yet Austen also refuses to ignore the potential for familial intimacy that Victorian literature would later evoke. Instead, Austen adapts eighteenth-century depictions with her own understanding of morality and female identity. She presents a moral imperative of sisterhood in a perilous society.

### **Chapter Outline of Thesis**

In my second chapter, I explore the issues of sisterly rivalry in Austen's novels and demonstrate its roots in competition for a man. Demonstrating the differences between earlier

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<sup>14</sup> See Amy K. Levin, Sarah Anne Browns, and Michael A. Cohen, who analyze how and why various Victorian novels create troubled portraits of sisterhood. Michael Cohen specifically examines the complicated sister relationships in Charles Dickens's, Sir Walter Scott's, and Wilkie Collins's novels, along with George Meredith's *Rhoda Fleming*, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

domestic novels' portrayal of sisterly rivalry and Austen's, I particularly look at two novels that emphasize the chaos caused to social and familial structures by competition between sisters. In *Mansfield Park*, Maria and Julia Bertram's relationship almost entirely disrupts the social stability within the novel, and in *Pride and Prejudice*, the conflicts between the Bennet sisters nearly bring the family to social ruin. Rivalrous sister pairs surface in other Austen novels, but *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park* are the two novels in which Austen most seems to affirm the estate system. Thus, I analyze how Austen ratifies and yet critiques the traditional inheritance-based order and demonstrate how sisterly rivalry for Austen represents the worst of the old ideology and of the new one. I further compare Maria and Julia's rivalry with the more moral heroine of *Mansfield Park* and compare Elizabeth Bennet and Lydia's actions amidst their competition to define the moral standard Austen holds for her heroines. I look at how perspectives on marriage reveal the moral underpinnings of each social philosophy and how those moral perspectives surface in the character's treatment of sisterhood. Thus, I argue that valuing sisterhood becomes a symbol of the selfless morality that Austen advocates.

My third chapter argues that Austen rejects Rousseau's model of male mentors shaping young female minds and morality, which tutoring pattern we see perpetuated within the eighteenth-century domestic novel. Instead, Austen proposes a new model as the most effective means to achieve female moral growth: sisters educating one another. I look at Austen's two earliest novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, where I believe her focus on women developing a mature moral identity is least obscured. I argue that in *Northanger Abbey* Austen demonstrates the failure of the male tutor model through Henry Tilney's attempts to develop the naïve heroine's ability to judge critically. I assert that Henry's efforts preserve his sense of superiority and undermine her growth, which I suggest is only truly enabled by Henry's



sister, Eleanor. I then look at *Sense and Sensibility* as the novel where Austen fully displays the potential of sisterly education. I analyze how Marianne and Elinor help each other to mature morally in order to discern the characteristics of this relationship that make it a beneficial context for growth. I argue that Austen presents the feminine nature of their mentorship as its chief advantage, particularly their affection, their nurturing sympathy, and their subtle rather than direct approach in instruction. Thus, Austen privileges feminine qualities as directly related to moral growth, asserting women's moral autonomy even as she reiterates gender distinctions.

My concluding chapter explores how Austen's transformation of the eighteenth-century domestic novel's view of sisterhood opens up new possibilities for female identity in literature. I argue that Austen made future representations of close female and sister relationships possible in Victorian novels. In the process, she created the potential for more complex female characters. I argue that Austen's radical portrayal of sisterhood challenges us as critics to reinterpret Victorian female characters in terms of their context of sister relationships. Austen's use of sisters reminds us of the impressive moral effort required to embrace sisterhood, encouraging us to appreciate deeper layers of strength than we assume to be within affectionate, domestic Victorian characters, assumed to be images of "the Angel in the House." Sisterhood, according to Austen, affirms the value of femininity and the morality of selflessness, yet also entails diversity in female identity. I suggest that sisterhood functions as the perfect vehicle to enlarge our literary concept of women's identity and moral potential.

## **CHAPTER TWO: “SISTERLY AFFECTION” OR “RIVALRY, TREACHERY BETWEEN SISTERS!”: OVERCOMING THE DANGERS OF SISTERHOOD IN AUSTEN**

### **Introduction**

“‘You quite shock me by what you say of Penelope’—said Emma. ‘Could a sister do such a thing?—Rivalry, Treachery between sisters!’” (*MW* 254). Emma Watson expresses a touching naïveté concerning sisterhood. She clearly does not know her own sisters whom she returns to after an extended separation in Jane Austen’s unfinished novel, *The Watsons*. In contrast to them, her character throughout this brief sketch reveals a refined moral and intellectual sense not possessed by her immediate family. She could be, and perhaps is, the moral voice of Austen herself.

Yet to assume, as Merryn Williams does, that Emma Watson thus represents Austen’s own shock at sisterly rivalry would fully misunderstand Austen’s realism. Williams asserts, “‘Sisterly affection’ and ‘delicacy of mind’—these are touchstones for Jane Austen. It always seemed to her particularly shocking when two sisters quarreled over a man” (48). Emma Watson shares Austen’s moral standard that surpasses that of her competing sisters, yet unlike Austen, she lacks discernment about human nature’s typical failure to meet that standard. Austen certainly presents a moral imperative of sisterhood, but she does so in full cognizance of how much the patrilineal structure of her society endangers such relational value. The “rivalry” and “treachery” between sisters that permeates the worlds of *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Pride and*

*Prejudice* (1813) demonstrate Austen's awareness of the sisterly rivalry enforced by both the old and new social orders of her day.

As both *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* indicate, rivalry between sisters and the ultimate rejection of sisterhood are the natural result of both the traditional inheritance-based system and the rising liberal individualism. More than any of her other novels, these two most clearly show the two social philosophies colliding. *Mansfield Park* presents a dark portrait of this conflict, where sisterly competition successfully disrupts all social order. *Pride and Prejudice*, conversely, offers Austen's "light and bright and sparkling" vision of these clashing political systems, where the heroine surmounts rivalry to embrace sisterhood and create a happy marriage from the best of both social structures, merging Elizabeth Bennet's individualism and Darcy's old-order stability (*Letters* 203).

Austen uses sisterhood and the rivalry both systems engender in both novels to suggest the moral failings of each social order, revealing the self-centeredness and greed inherent in both individualist self-government and authoritative hierarchy. As Austen demonstrates, each equally serves to pit women against one another and undermine female solidarity. The excesses of the traditional social beliefs are perpetuated in the new ones: both inhibit true selflessness and endanger female relationships. In response, Austen proposes a definite moral authority, which undermines individualist belief in complete independence. Yet this morality must be chosen based on an individual's personal desire rather than external regulation, which defies traditional focus on the authority of the establishment. For Austen, sincere sisterly affection represents the only legitimate form of internally motivated selflessness and thus epitomizes her moral system. Her heroines must make a personal choice to reject rivalry with their sister. I argue that through these novels Austen defends moral authority and social responsibility, in opposition to

individualism, but that she unseats the conventional sites of moral authority that were based on gender and class distinctions.

I further suggest that how Austen views women's reasons for marriage in these novels clarifies her moral code, embodied in sisterhood, as it mediates the old and new social orders. In both novels, she recognizes the way both the values of a rising middle-class system and of the old estate-bound system urge women to marry for social status. Yet in both, she condemns either choice as immoral and destructive, incapable of supporting the selflessness of sisterhood. Austen's own realistic awareness of social reasons for marriage contrasts sharply with the "shock" of her innocent heroine, Emma Watson. Emma's naïveté about sisterly rivalry coincides with her ingenuousness about marriage, displayed when she declares: "To be so bent on Marriage—to pursue a Man merely for the sake of a situation—is a sort of thing that shocks me; I cannot understand it" (*MW* 255). Just as she does with sisterly rivalry, Austen does not condone marrying for money, in fact she heartily condemns it throughout her novels. Yet this behavior certainly does not "shock" her, however amazed Emma Watson may be. Austen can indicate the social logic of characters like Charlotte Lucas marrying Mr. Collins solely to secure an establishment in *Pride and Prejudice*, or Maria Bertram finding a sense of identity in marrying the odious Rushworth for his estate in *Mansfield Park*. Austen recognizes the reality women in her society face: marry or face destitution or becoming a family burden. Yet while Austen does not mirror Emma Watson's shock at this, she argues powerfully for marriages that reflect the same moral values that she demonstrates as inherent in sisterhood.

### **Scholars on Sisterly Rivalry and Social Order in Austen**

My argument that Austen urges a moral system based on internally motivated selfless choices in opposition to external regulation corresponds to Armstrong's analysis of the rising

domestic novel and its redefinition of femininity. Armstrong discusses the revaluation of women based on their internal character, linking it to the capitalist move away from the estate system: “from a concept of quality based on birth to a quantity of income” (84). Armstrong’s idea of the domestic novel displacing female virtue from social status to actual internal character (or, for males, to income) resonates with what I here argue is Austen’s emphasis on individual moral autonomy. Armstrong connects this female internal virtue specifically to the merit-based liberalism of the rising middle-class. She argues that “female virtue” is portrayed in the domestic novel as a “rationale for a form of economic behavior that became known as the doctrine of enlightened self-interest” and that it allows women to embody “the middle-class norms of femininity” (89, 91). I would argue that Austen’s proposal of an internally-motivated morality partially rejects, rather than unreservedly supports, the “doctrine of enlightened self-interest” Armstrong refers to, though I agree that Austen also rejects Burke’s traditional hierarchy. And while Armstrong suggests that female virtue corresponds to male income, I agree with Carol Wyville’s assertion that Austen equally applies her strict moral standards to men and women alike in her novels (148). Her system of internal virtue operates across genders.

Though I may connect Austen’s moral system less closely to the entire philosophy behind middle-class individualism, my argument nonetheless owes a debt to Armstrong’s analysis. Yet while Armstrong relates female identity to internal morality in Austen’s time period, she does not connect this identity transformation to sister relationships. I believe Austen explicitly does. Scholars who have examined sister relationships in the same literary period that Armstrong analyzes frequently do not connect the sisters’ rivalry to a discussion of social philosophies. Yet Austen, I argue, clearly links sisterly rivalry in her novels to the conflicting beliefs about hereditary authority and independent self-government. Those critics who have specifically

addressed Austen's treatment of sisters and their rivalry, present most particularly in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Mansfield Park*, continually misunderstand Austen's inherent critique of the social beliefs that endanger sisterhood.

As I noted earlier, in Chapter 1, critics have analyzed the competition between sisters that dominates nineteenth-century literature and vary in their opinion of how fully Austen shares this view of sisters.<sup>15</sup> Nina Auerbach argues that the division between sisters that prevails so particularly in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* indicates Austen's negative perspective of sisterhood. She suggests that in *Mansfield Park* the female community is merely a "shadow of cultural reality" that requires a male presence to acquire substance (46). She further argues that the female community of the Bennet sisters in *Pride and Prejudice* "is dispersed with relief in the solidity of marriage" (55). Auerbach implies that sisterhood is superficial and subordinate in these novels. Claudia Johnson similarly asserts that in *Pride and Prejudice*, "Austen does not extensively consider female friendships as an important alternative or even supplement to the marital relationship" (92).<sup>16</sup> While rightfully recognizing the negative potential Austen shows in sisterhood, such criticism does not grasp the social critique Austen makes through this portrayal.

*Mansfield Park* presents Austen's most negative portrait of sisterhood, as critics have recognized, yet I would suggest that scholars misunderstand the significance of what Austen does with sisters in this novel: creating a moral standard. Critics like Susan Lanser and Glenda

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<sup>15</sup> Amy K. Levin concludes that in Austen, as well as in all of nineteenth-century literature, "the world of heterosexual romance makes as little space for female friendship as it does for sisterly bonding" (52). Conversely, Susan Sniader Lanser argues that "A good woman, for Austen, is a good sister" (54), and Michael Cohen distinguishes Austen from prior novelists because she "asserts universal sisterhood" (112).

<sup>16</sup> Deborah Kaplan similarly claims that in *Pride and Prejudice*, "female friendships perpetuate a man-centered worldview" in contrast to Austen's personal letters which promote a "female-centered consciousness" (81). While she sees Austen's letters "representing female friendship itself as a satisfying emotional *alternative* to heterosexual relationships" she strongly argues Austen's novels do not (85).

Hudson have noted Fanny's sisterless isolation throughout the novel.<sup>17</sup> Others point to the "vicious rivalry" between the Bertram sisters (Cohen 117). Two perspectives surface regarding this rivalry and the way it deprives Fanny of a sister in the novel: those who minimize the ugliness of this rivalry and those who use it to indicate Austen's rejection of sisterhood.<sup>18</sup> Yet few recognize that Austen paints such a genuinely negative portrait in order to reveal the social hazards that must be overcome to embrace sisterhood. Moreover, no critics have thoroughly analyzed the moral system that Austen creates from her portrait of sisterhood. Although Jacqueline M. Erwin defines Austen's morality similarly to how I do, as "respect for and service to the psychological needs of others" (145), and relates that to the Ward sisters, she fails to recognize that sisterhood itself embodies this moral system in the novel.<sup>19</sup>

Though scholars have not yet noted the role of sisterhood in revealing Austen's views of morality and social order in *Mansfield Park*, they have connected the role of family to Austen's social views. Their confusion reveals how complex Austen's portrayal of social structure is; I argue that this is because she criticizes both the estate system and individualism for moral failure. Critics have primarily focused on Fanny Price's marriage to her cousin, Edmund Bertram, at the novel's end and what this endogamous marriage says about the traditional estate system, with widely varying interpretations. Hudson, for example, argues that "The marriage of Fanny and Edmund exemplifies Austen's defence of the traditional system" (42), while Johnson

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<sup>17</sup> Glenda Hudson comments that Fanny "has no female ally, no intimate ties with a sister to sympathize with her sadness" (88) and Susan Lanser explains that "For most of the novel Fanny appears to be sisterless" (62).

<sup>18</sup> Ruth Perry, for example, suggests the Bertram sisters rivalry is but an incident in an otherwise close relationship (109), while Amy Levin asserts that "their behavior serves as an inverse example of the ideal of sisterhood" (49).

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, neither Patricia Meyers Spacks and Susan Morgan, who analyze the morality of Maria's adultery in this novel, address the role of sisterhood and rivalry in determining the morality of her actions. Spacks suggests Maria's sexual misconduct "makes space for action" (142), while Morgan sees it rather as Maria's denial of agency by placing her life in Henry Crawford's hands. Though they explore morality and female agency here, neither addresses the significant concern of the sister relationship in defining what is moral.

asserts that this marriage “savors of incest” and thus implies Austen’s negative response to the “insularity” of tradition (116).<sup>20</sup> Such confusion over what Austen means by this marriage (and whether she views it positively or negatively) reflects the controversy among critics about Austen’s view of social order here—whether she promotes a conservative or a progressive one. And rightly so. Out of all Austen’s novels, *Mansfield Park* offers the most complex treatment of the estate, appearing to ratify it yet also to be troubled by it. Critics split sharply in seeing this novel as Austen’s defense of the traditional estate system or her critique of it. Alistair Duckworth, for example, suggests that this novel represents Austen’s clearest attack on the “radical attitude toward cultural heritage” and thus affirms the traditional order (54). Yet Claudia Johnson argues that Austen subverts, rather than ratifies, the traditional estate: “Austen’s enterprise in *Mansfield Park* is to turn the conservative myth sour” (97).<sup>21</sup>

Little agreement is found among critics in determining whether Austen promotes the new self-government ideals or the traditional inheritance-based society. Yet the source of this conflict resonates with my own argument about what Austen rejects and keeps of each order, embodied I believe through sisterhood. Intriguingly, those who argue for a subversive Austen emphasize how she defines social structure, while those who assert a conservative Austen focus on her traditional moral values more than her preference for the traditional gentry structure.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that these two perspectives can coexist; Austen critiques aspects of the old estate system, while

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<sup>20</sup> Ruth Perry responds to Hudson with a third view that mediates Johnson’s and Hudson’s perspectives. Perry suggests that such an emphasis on consanguineous bonds “is conservative with regard to class, mobility, and social change but it advantages women with respect to gender politics and sexual power” (124).

<sup>21</sup> Johnson further argues that while *Pride and Prejudice* more obviously enforces an individualistic ideology, “if *Mansfield Park* appear to let conservative ideologies have it their way, it is only to give them the chance to show how little, rather than how much, they can do, and so to oblige them to discredit themselves with their own voices” (120).

<sup>22</sup> Marilyn Butler, for example, focuses entirely on the sincerity of Austen’s portrayal of Fanny’s conservative moral values, asserting that in this novel “Christianity . . . requires the individual to adopt a role of social utility within an ordered social framework” (242). For her, as for other conservative-Austen critics, Austen’s promotion of the traditional order is entirely for its traditional morals, rather than its hierarchical social framework.



defending traditional moral order with absolutes and authority and a sense of social responsibility. As I will argue, Austen rejects in both this novel and in *Pride and Prejudice* the external regulation of choosing selflessness and social duty that the traditional system demanded. Yet she still promotes the morality of such choices.

As my analysis will show, Austen offers us a portrait of social order in *Pride and Prejudice* that is almost as complex as it is in *Mansfield Park*. I find Duckworth's comparison of the two beneficial to understand this shared, yet quite different, complexity. As Duckworth explains, *Mansfield Park* represents the suspicious, negative face of both traditional establishments and modern self-government, while *Pride and Prejudice* presents the positive aspects of each, allowing for a satisfying marriage of the two (37–38). Thus, these two novels both present a balance between these two models of social interaction; *Mansfield Park* by criticizing both models and *Pride and Prejudice* by affirming both. Most critics disagree with this view, presenting the two novels as opposing viewpoints with the latter offering the triumph of individualism and the former the triumph of the traditional estate. Yet I suggest that Austen makes the same judgment about the old and new social orders in both novels, in spite of their apparent differences, offering us an optimistic view in one and a far more dismal view in the other. Recognizing their identical messages, though presented with differing levels of optimism, helps us understand the role and treatment of sisterly rivalry in the two novels.

Unlike *Mansfield Park*, *Pride and Prejudice* leaves room for both positive and negative interpretations of sisterhood as it exists in the novel. Lydia Bennet and Charlotte Lucas both pursue marriage at the expense of sisterhood in this novel, leading to perspectives like those mentioned earlier of Auerbach, Johnson, and Kaplan asserting Austen portrays sisters negatively here. Of course, Jane and Elizabeth share a deeply intimate bond of tender affection. This leads

to the complete opposite critical interpretation, as seen in Knuth's assertion that intimate friendship with other women is a "touchstone" in this novel (104).<sup>23</sup> Again, critics oversimplify Austen's portrayal. Rather than asserting that this novel either depicts the beauty of sisterhood or undermines sisterhood completely, I will show how Austen demonstrates her heroine tempted by and overcoming sisterly rivalry. With Elizabeth Bennet's successful triumph over rivalry, I argue Austen reflects her more optimistic response to the social failure that causes such conflict.

Though this connection between sisters' rivalry and social order is not made by any of these critics, and connections to morality are more limited than with *Mansfield Park*, controversy rages among Austen scholars over what Austen says about social structure here. Many critics, as Marilyn Butler points out, view *Pride and Prejudice* as Austen's most progressive novel, perceiving it as "a heroine who champions individualism against the old social order" (203). Yet perspectives remain divided. Surprisingly, both proponents of a conservative Austen and critics positing a radical Austen most strongly qualify their claims about this novel. Claudia Johnson, for example, from the subversive-Austen group, suggests that of all Austen's novels *Pride and Prejudice* most accommodates the traditional hierarchy, though demanding room in it for individualism. Duckworth, however, representing the anti-Jacobin Austen critics, suggests that Austen does not necessarily accept "the given rightness of the social *status quo*" but she does depict in this novel "Elizabeth's acquisition of a social morality grounded in traditional ideas of conduct" (132).<sup>24</sup> According to scholars like Duckworth, Austen pursues the grounding and order of a moral authority system with social responsibility to others but without the passionate

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<sup>23</sup> Toni McNaron also notes the close sister bond between Jane and Elizabeth and suggests that Austen compares that to Lydia's behavior. McNaron argues that sisters are the "subtext" of this novel and that Austen manipulates the ending to bring about the double marriage in such a way that "the continuation of the primary bond between sisters is in no way jeopardized by conventional marriages" (6, 7).

<sup>24</sup> Butler points to the strong critiques of her society's emphasis on money and status, advocating the rising middle-class ethos of positing virtue in the individual rather than in one's rank (Butler 213).

adherence to traditional rank.<sup>25</sup> As Alison Searle suggests, Austen critiques both the old and new social systems for their moral paucity.<sup>26</sup> I will argue that Austen offers in place of both orders a moral system embodied in the ideals of sisterhood.

As with *Mansfield Park*, the role of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* has much to say about Austen's perspective on the morality of these the inheritance-focused system and the independent values of the rising middle-class. While the traditional value of marrying to consolidate the estate and preserve economic stability is offered by Charlotte Lucas, Lady Catherine, and Mrs. Bennet and roundly rejected by our heroine, so too is rejected the sexually-driven marriage of Lydia and Wickham that flouts all social convention with apparent individualism. Marvin Mudrick recognizes Austen's rejection, suggesting that "marriages made by sex—as well as those made by economics—represent, for the free individual, an abdication of choice, an irremedial self-degradation and defeat" in this novel (Mudrick 115). Thus, for Mudrick, Lydia's brand of self-government does not truly represent individualistic agency, though I will argue that Austen's stance here suggests she limits her endorsement of individualism. Along with Johanna M. Smith, I argue that Austen's approved marriage between Elizabeth and Darcy may challenge the "the structure of status by birth" but such shifting of class distinctions is "not revolutionary, but reformist" (68). Through marriage, Austen challenges traditional hierarchy and individualism, using sisterhood to trace her preferred moral code.

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<sup>25</sup> Butler suggests that Austen's moral here is not social individualism but a call to humility: "we have no innate worth, either of social status or abilities. We have to earn our right to consideration by respect for others and continuous watchfulness of ourselves" (206). She argues that moral order and an authority system must be preserved in Austen's ideal world.

<sup>26</sup> Searle suggests that this novel embodies a Biblical "moral perspective" and "*telos*" (17) and promotes a vision where "The magnanimity and rectitude of the aristocrat is insufficient. Principle must be linked to practice, and action must be informed by love" (26).

## **Sociohistorical Background on Sisterhood and Marriage**

To understand how Austen's treatment of marriage in both *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* indicates her position on Burkean and Enlightenment social ideals requires understanding the changing role of marriage in her society. During the eighteenth century, a restructuring of the model for marriage was taking place from one based on the issue of power transfer and on the social contract to one based on affection (Stone 217). Thus, this companionate model of marriage, marriage based on desire as Lydia's or Elizabeth's is, represents the values of individualism. Conversely, the traditional system viewed marriage as a means to consolidate the estate and preserve the family lineage and inheritance. Moreover, as Perry notes, the eighteenth century also saw the transition from emphasizing consanguineous bonds to emphasizing the conjugal family. This relocates women's traditional social role in continuing the lineage and preserving the family inheritance from her consanguinean family, as inheritor, to her conjugal family, as creator of heirs. Thus, marriage is reaffirmed as a site to preserve the traditional social order's patrilineal goals.

At the same time, such a shift in emphasis from the consanguineous to the conjugal family presents a social imperative for women to marry that recasts them as rivals. In a society that now "defines a woman's worth by her marriage," obtaining a husband becomes more significant for a woman to gain a personal identity (Spacks 141). As previously noted in Chapter 1, nineteenth-century literature presents a continual theme of women's fear of redundancy and being interchangeable and thus their need to compete for an identity (Levin 43). The fierce competition among women for a man is exacerbated in this time period by the shortage of men: "meeting the economic imperative to find a husband was made all the more difficult because of the decrease in the number of available men owing to the wars on the Continent" (Hudson 67).

This increased social need to compete, and amplified fear, leads to what Perry sees as Austen's contrast of "conjugal loyalty with loyalty to a wider network of consanguineal kin" with consideration for one's blood relatives "coming to be seen as the heart and soul of proper feeling" (142). Thus, sisterhood entails the selflessness inherent in Austen's moral system.

The natural result of this social structure, which dictates marriage alone as an identity for women, is just such sisterly rivalry as eighteenth-century literature frequently depicts. We see an example of this ugliness in Burney's *Evelina*, which we looked at earlier. Burney introduces her readers to a rivalrous sister pair during Evelina's visit with her vulgar cousins. There, the elder sister, Miss Branghton, "took an opportunity to tell me"—the cousin she has just met—"in a whisper, that the young man I saw was a lover of her sister's . . . though, for her part, she would ten times rather die an old maid, than marry any person but a gentleman" (171). Very little later, "Miss Polly contrived to tell *her* story. She assured me, with much tittering, that her sister was in a great fright lest she should be married first, 'So I make her believe that I will . . . for I dearly love to plague her'" (171). Polly's unkindness to her sister and eagerness to humiliate her by marrying first is only matched by her sister's vindictive scorn. Both sisters are eager to prove to Evelina through their marital pursuits that they possess greater value than their sister; Miss Polly by winning a man's attention first and Miss Branghton by asserting her higher standards for a suitor. The Branghton sisters show the clear roots of their unkind competition in the fact that they identify themselves socially through marriage and sex.

These sisters' behavior suitably disgusts Evelina, not only for its disloyalty but also for its impropriety in sharing this information to a near-stranger. In her letter, Evelina declares, "This extreme want of affection, and good-nature, increased the distaste I already felt for these unamiable sisters; and a confidence so entirely unsolicited and unnecessary, manifested equally

their folly and their want of decency” (172). Perhaps it is little wonder, then, that the eighteenth-century novelists we examined avoid placing their heroine in the danger of becoming such a sister. The Branghtons represent the typical pattern of sisterly rivalry: competition over the attentions of the same man, selfish delight by the victor and bitter vindictiveness from the loser, and impropriety in displaying their attitude towards others. The eighteenth-century domestic novel helps its heroine avoid such unattractive behavior by protecting her from sisterhood. As we have seen, these heroines often do not have sisters or are not close to their sisters. Yet Austen does not allow her heroines this easy escape. An Austen heroine must struggle through the challenges and pitfalls of sister relationships. By learning to navigate sisterhood with all of its dangers and come to value her sister, the heroine comes to embody the moral system Austen promotes. The characters who succumb to sisterly rivalry reveal the exact moral failings of each social system that Austen rejects.

### **Mansfield Park**

#### **Rivalry Between Sisters Reflects Social and Moral Chaos in *Mansfield Park***

Only in *Mansfield Park* does Austen allow the rivalry between two sisters to so dominate the novel that it nearly upstages her heroine, Fanny Price. Such an aggressive presence of sisterly competition reflects this novel’s pessimism towards both social orders presented. Typically, unsupportive or rivalrous sister pairs are consigned to the outskirts of an Austen novel, surfacing as minor characters only. We see the Miss Steeles and the Miss Musgroves backbite and compete, but it remains on the edge of our consciousness in these novels. Yet Maria and Julia Bertram’s fierce competition for the attention—and, they hope, marriage offer—of Henry Crawford drives much of the novel’s plot. Ultimately, Fanny’s own story is affected by it, and she avoids the desire or need to marry Henry, as well as gaining Sir Thomas Bertram’s respect,

because of their actions. Such discomfiting emphasis on sisterly rivalry is appropriate for Austen's treatment of the shifting social system that displays the dismal condition of both the old and the new social orders. Neither promises much hope for sisterhood here.

Austen continually reminds us in this novel of the moral failings of both rising self-government and the traditional estate. Presenting a discouraging ambivalence, *Mansfield Park* seems neither to reject nor to ratify the estate. Protecting Mansfield Park from dangerous outside influences is a goal not only of the lord of the manor, but also of the novel's moral characters, Fanny and Edmund. And as Glenda Hudson points out, the incestuous marriage of these two cousins at the novel's end serves to preserve the family from outsiders (42). Yet, at the same time, their marriage does not reinstate them at Mansfield Park, but off to the side in Edmund's parsonage, Thornton Lacey, though "within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park" (*MP* 468). Edmund and Fanny will not produce heirs for the estate, but they will rely on its traditional patronage system. Does this affirm or critique the traditional inheritance structure?

Even if we can ascertain that Fanny and Edmund ratify or reject the Mansfield estate, the novel does not give us a simple certainty that their perception is the right one. We cannot easily find our site of moral authority in the novel; it has been displaced and certainly does not reside with the estate's patriarch. Edmund and Fanny serve as the strongest sources of reason and moral insight, yet their trustworthiness is destabilized because Edmund develops Fanny's moral sense yet proves himself deficient in his own employment of it. As the narrator explains, he "encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment" (52) and has "formed her mind" so that "he had a good chance of her thinking like him" (91). Yet the moral standards he has imparted to her begin to depart from him: "there began now to be some danger of dissimilarity, for he was in a line of admiration of Miss Crawford which might lead him where Fanny could not follow" (91).

Despite his high ideals, Edmund proves himself weak and inconsistent when it comes to his affections, never more so than when he abandons his standards about the play and acts in it himself for Mary Crawford's sake. As Fanny realizes, "Edmund so inconsistent. Was he not deceiving himself? Was he not wrong? Alas! It was all Miss Crawford's doing" (176). Yet a moral compass so easily swayed offers little true value. With Edmund's failure, Austen once again upsets traditional patriarchal views of where moral authority resides.

Fanny offers the clearest consistent moral voice in this novel, suggesting that the moral values of the patrilineal system are not best upheld by its high-ranking members. Yet Fanny wins little favor within or outside her novel.<sup>27</sup> And it remains difficult to determine if she represents the voice of the traditional estate or not, as she cannot seem to find a place to call home. Fanny is displaced both at the Mansfield estate and in her old, poor family home at Portsmouth. At Mansfield she is constantly made to "remember that she is not a *Miss Bertram*" (42), yet Portsmouth, when she returns, "was all disappointment . . . in almost every respect, the very reverse of what she could have wished" (390). We cannot easily determine if Fanny and her morality belong to the traditional estate, though they certainly do not belong elsewhere. Certainly Fanny holds more devotedly to the traditional religious values and the domestic ideology than the estate's bona fide members do. Through this displacement, Austen clarifies that moral authority will not be found in its traditional seats—not in the patriarch, nor in his estate.

In spite of guarding the tradition of the estate, or at least of its values, the novel displays a growing sense that something rotten exists at its core. Austen highlights many of the dark

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<sup>27</sup> Countless critics have argued that Fanny is an unlikable heroine or found her wanting. C. S. Lewis defends Fanny against "the charge of being a prig" but admits that "I am far from suggesting that she is a successful heroine" and suggests "Fanny Price fail[s] . . . by insipidity" (366). Bernard J. Paris asserts, "she is, in truth, a prig" (49), and Lionel Trilling declares, "Nobody, I believe, has ever found it possible to like the heroine of *Mansfield Park*. Fanny Price is overtly virtuous and consciously virtuous" (212). Fanny's lack of attraction leads some readers to suspect she is not held up for admiration at all: Stuart Tave argues that her qualities "are not given to us for admiration. They are defects she must bear as best she can" (qtd. in Morgan *Characters and Perception* 155).



undertones of her society, referencing the slave trade and its accompaniment by “such a dead silence” within the conversation of sweet Fanny Price, highlighting the incongruity (214). Sir Thomas Bertram shows himself to be neither a tyrant who will be discarded nor a benevolent landowner who will be commended, but rather a well-meaning yet harsh and domineering patriarch who survives in his reign. The ugly faces of the estate surface and then are submerged again in this novel. As Sir Thomas finally realizes about his daughters and their upbringing and we might further apply to his societal system in general, “Something must have been wanting *within*” (459). The appearances and regulation of this system have not created inner morality in any of its members, a failure that resonates in how they treat sisterhood.

Yet modern individualism as this novel represents it offers only more empty appearances rather than supplying the something wanting within the traditional estate. Modern, vivacious, sexual Henry and Mary Crawford bring only pain to the Bertram family, leading to Maria’s adultery, Julia’s elopement, and Edmund’s broken heart. The often-mentioned plans of improvement to the various estates in the novel appear in a destructive light that would remove all traces of tradition, religion, and natural beauty from them. Austen may even suggest that these improvements replace the attention of owners like Rushworth and Henry Crawford to their estate and the poor in its community, demonstrating further their “neglect of their duties as landowners” as part of empty claims of modernity (Hudson 42). In “improving” the estate, they have only removed all that was solid and valuable in it, while leaving its most negative features. Edmund thus firmly rejects Henry’s modernizing plans for Thornton Lacey. Mary’s responding reminder of Henry’s previous plans to improve Sotherton only recalls to the reader and to Fanny the painful jealousy Henry evoked there between Maria and Julia Bertram instead of accomplishing anything beneficial: “Only think how useful he was at Sotherton! . . . what was

done there is not to be told” (*MP* 256). Indeed it is not; propriety prefers to pretend the flirtation that occurred there never existed now that Maria has married Sotherton’s owner, Mr. Rushworth. That Sotherton trip offers the perfect example of how the Crawford’s individualism engenders the Bertram sisters’ rivalry.

Both young women have become attracted to the charming Henry Crawford by the trip to Sotherton, though Maria’s engagement leads Julia to expect Henry to become her rightful property. Nevertheless, Maria finds herself bitterly vexed when Julia rides in the front of the barouche box with Henry on the way to the Sotherton estate: “For the first seven miles Miss Bertram had very little real comfort; her prospect always ended in Mr. Crawford and her sister sitting side by side full of conversation and merriment; and to see only his expressive profile as he turned with a smile to Julia, or to catch the laugh of the other was a perpetual source of irritation” (106). For her part, Julia feels no compassion for her sister’s discomfort, and when Henry later begins to flirt with Maria at the Sotherton estate, Julia inwardly seethes, seeking to instigate trouble for them with the clueless Mr. Rushworth.

Throughout this entire incident, we readers can see the conflict within Maria between the modern independence of Henry Crawford and the traditional estate represented by Rushworth. As the narrator explains, “When they came within the influence of Sotherton associations, it was better for Miss Bertram, who might be said to have two strings in her bow. She had Rushworth-feelings and Crawford-feelings, and in the vicinity of Sotherton the former had considerable effect. Mr. Rushworth’s consequence was hers” (106). Maria remains pulled between the desire for traditional consequence through a marriage of status to gain an estate and the longing for an individualistic marriage based on personal desire alone as exemplified by Henry Crawford. In

either situation, though, Austen clearly shows that little room is left for sisterly affection. Both the patrilineal and the self-governing values evoke these sisters' desire to compete and conquer.

### **The Roots of Sisterly Competition in Modern Individualism**

Henry Crawford and his sister Mary along with him certainly bring a spirit of sexual conquest and competition with them. Though preserving the lineage-focused desire to marry for status, both feel no need to respect traditional authority structures, or moral codes, and pursue individual gain with sole attention to "private interest" at the cost of all others' interests. In spite of being warned repeatedly by his married sister of Maria's engagement to Rushworth, Henry has no qualms in toying with either sister's heart: "He did not want them to die of love; but with sense and temper which ought to have made him judge and feel better, he allowed himself great latitude on such points" (72). His sister Mary clearly calls him a breaker of hearts and the "most horrible flirt that can be imagined" (71). He does not take his flirtation as seriously as the Bertram sisters do; yet he does take seriously the intention to conquer hearts in his path, inciting both his pursuit of Fanny—he "cannot be satisfied without Fanny Price, without making a small hole in Fanny Price's heart" (242)—and of the married Maria. Women's hearts are a prize he must win, and then will willingly discard. His desire is not to secure his future lineage through a prosperous marriage, but to prove himself by gaining all the "property" he can.

If women's hearts are trophies for Henry, the capture of a man is equally a "triumph" for his sister, who encourages Fanny to marry him for the thrill of victory, "the glory of fixing one who has been shot at by so many; of having it in one's power to pay off the debts of one's sex! Oh, I am sure it is not in woman's nature to refuse such a triumph" (366). For Mary and Henry Crawford, romance and marriage are a game and the thrill of winning over others is the highest goal. Their competition partially reflects liberalism's focus on achieving by effort and merit

rather than birth. Such individualism does not encourage female solidarity. Though Mary admonishes Fanny to marry Henry for the triumph of “pay[ing] off the debts of one’s sex” and includes a recognition that he is a “sad flirt” (366), her words and actions do not ultimately suggest the goal to triumph for her sex against the man who has wronged them. The highest thrill in this conquest seems rather to be a triumph of self against all those other women. Certainly Fanny feels that this victory would be such, and she persists in being troubled by “a man who sports with any woman’s feelings” because “there may be a great deal more suffered than a stander-by can judge of” (366). She cannot ignore the pain he has caused her almost-sisters or that her “triumph” might cause them either.

That Henry Crawford, and the rivalry between sisters he provokes, represent the modern social philosophy of individualism is not only revealed by his focus on self-interested gain over social establishment. He further demonstrates his modern role by his (and his sister’s) rejection of traditional authority structure. We see this in his and Mary’s reaction to traditional religious customs, as well as in the way Maria and Julia’s attraction to him hinges on their desire for independence from paternal authority. When the Bertrams and Crawfords visit the Rushworth estate, they enter the chapel, which “was formerly in constant use both morning and evening. Prayers were always read in it by the domestic chaplain, within the memory of many. But the late Mr. Rushworth left it off” (111). Mary’s responds, with a knowing smile to Edmund, “Every generation has its improvements” (111). Henry proves less outspoken against the traditional forms of worship, but he later admits to Fanny even though trying to impress her with his serious principles that “Our liturgy . . . has beauties, which not even a careless, slovenly style of reading can destroy . . . For myself, at least, I must confess being not always so attentive as I might be” because he pays more attention to the elocution style of the liturgy than its religious significance

(345). Perhaps more subtle, Henry's opinions nonetheless recall Mary's earlier ideas. When Fanny strongly disagrees with Mary about the chapel's use, arguing that "the custom should not have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times," Mary protests that it only "force[d] all the poor housemaids and footmen to leave business and pleasure, and say their prayers here twice a day" while the master and mistress are "inventing excuses themselves for staying away" (111). Mary points to the superficial appearances of such a custom, responding with the urge to discard it entirely, including the religion undergirding it. Conversely, Fanny urges a return to internal religious observance and value. In this desire to abolish the entire traditional cultural structure, as well as the traditional class structure, Henry and Mary Crawford echo hints of revolutionary Jacobin thought.

Similarly, Henry and Mary's lack a level of respect for their own familial authority structure that Edmund and Fanny cannot condone. As Edmund admits to Fanny, though with sympathy, Mary "ought not to have spoken of her uncle as she did" (90). It is little wonder, then, that to the minds of the Bertram sisters Henry offers independence from the authority of their own family. For both these girls, their flirtation with Henry, and their later defiant adultery and elopement, represents the possibility for freedom from their conventional lives. Both Maria and Julia Bertram desperately want freedom. The scene at the gate at Sotherton when Maria jumps the fence with Henry instead of waiting for Rushworth to return with the key represents her desperation to escape the restrictions of propriety. Maria expresses this desperation to Henry Crawford: "But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said" (123). Her escape with Henry here, and later, proves destructive to others, leading to Julia's and Rushworth's injured feelings.

Both Maria and Julia indicate a desire to escape the restraint of their paternal home through marriage, either an individualist, desire-based marriage with Henry or one fulfilling the goals of the traditional estate structure with Rushworth or Yates. For both sisters, the restrictive regulations of their home only evoke the desire to rebel. When Maria chooses to marry Rushworth, the narrator notes, “Independence was more needful than ever; the want of it at Mansfield more sensibly felt. She was less and less able to endure the restraint which her father imposed” (217). Though less forward than Maria, Julia also desires the modern self-government Henry embodies, though she will accept a more traditional marital choice if it offers her an escape. It is her fear of parental restraint that fosters her elopement with Yates; when her sister runs off with Henry, “her increased dread of her father and of home, on that event—imagining its certain consequence to herself would be greater severity and restraint—made her hastily resolve on avoiding such immediate horrors at all risks” (462). Both sisters perceive their freedom to be gained through marriage only, and each is willing to sacrifice sisterly regard to obtain it. Henry Crawford’s individualism is no more effective at nurturing sisterly affection than Sir Thomas’s authority is.

Though Maria and Julia each seek power by conquering Henry’s affections, their actions ultimately show not agency but the surrender of agency. Austen presents their self-centered rivalry to win the glories of either independence (and sexual freedom) or estate-based prestige as self-destructive. By sacrificing the other to gain her own goal, each sister sacrifices any personal autonomy she might have possessed. Henry’s flirtatious games that toy with them are enough to determine their emotions, their relationships with each other and others, and even their future, including Maria’s decision to marry Rushworth and Julia’s to elope with Yates. Susan Morgan suggests that Maria’s power play for Henry demonstrates her unwillingness “to take her life into

her own hands” and her need for Henry to “brighten her dull sense of her own value” (*Sisters in Time* 47). Maria will marry Rushworth without love, until she imagines Henry will make her an offer of marriage. When he shows that, for all his avowals and flirtations, his “hand and heart were alike motionless and passive now!” (*MP* 210), she chooses to go through with her empty marriage, telling herself that “Henry Crawford had destroyed her happiness, but . . . he should not destroy her credit, her appearance, her prosperity, too” (217). Though Maria is convinced that she is not “giving Crawford the triumph of governing her actions” (217), he ultimately still does.

Maria cannot make a choice that precludes marriage or sacrifices prestige because she fears losing any potential value and identity. In spite of the sense of agency that following her desires, rather than the demands of social establishment, offers her, this apparent self-government still places her identity in social status rather than in her personal character. Ultimately, Maria’s triumphal gain of Henry leads to “disappointment and wretchedness” that “rendered her temper so bad, and her feelings for him so like hatred, as to make them for while each other’s punishment, and then induce a voluntary separation” (459). Henry has nothing to offer Maria or Julia, nothing genuine. Their pursuit of him demonstrates their inability to choose the solidity of a sincere and selfless relationship with their sister and of a personal moral identity. I would argue that Austen implies both social orders demand this sacrifice, revealing their moral deficiency.

### **The Roots of Sisterly Competition in the Traditional Social Order**

Though Henry Crawford cultivates the Bertram sisters’ rivalry, he does not introduce its presence. The novel clearly suggests that Henry, and individualism, alone is not at fault in the bitter struggle that ensues among sisters. The tone of matrimony as conquest, and as one that

may cost sisterly solidarity, is set by the novel's opening scene. Three sisters appear here, the oldest of whom, "Miss Maria Ward of Huntingdon, . . . had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram" (35). From the first sentence, this novel reveals that marriage in this world is a sort of conquest in a game where the stakes are quite high and involve being "raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income" or being "obliged to attach herself to the Rev. Mr. Norris . . . with scarcely any private fortune" (35). Though society expects a benefit to Lady Bertram's younger sisters from this marriage, matrimony ultimately seems rather to divide them. Marrying for a social establishment may imply consideration for one's society, but it certainly entails no selfless regard for others. While Sir Thomas does help the poorer Mrs. Norris, her position of sponging dependence seems neither to nurture nor stem from sisterly regard, and the youngest sister's marriage causes "an absolute breach between the sisters" (35). Contrary to such marriages as Elinor's and Marianne's or Jane's and Elizabeth's in other Austen novels, marriage from the opening of this novel does not cement but rather breaches sisterly relationships. This lack of sisterly concern, marriage at the expense of sisterhood, is a theme perpetuated in Lady Bertram's daughters. Something truly is "wanting *within*" these sisters, and within the nature of their society. Its concern for social establishment is the form only of concern for others; one cares for others only to care for oneself.

As critics have noted, the emphasis in hierarchical society on attaining status through marriage places heavy pressure on women to differentiate themselves. Since women's identity exists only through their status, and thus almost always through their marriage, it tends to remain vulnerable to disappearing. Women's fear of social redundancy and interchangeability, as Levin mentions (43-44), augments their competitive tension. This troubling urgency surfaces in *Mansfield Park* most forcefully through Mary Crawford's description at one point of the three



sisters Edmund stays with. Fearful herself of losing Edmund's affections to one of these sisters who may possess equal beauty and talent on the harp as she does, Mary pinpoints the sameness yet drive for difference in her guess of what they are like: "for one knows, without being told, exactly what they are—all very accomplished and pleasing and *one* very pretty. There is a beauty in every family. —It is a regular thing" (*MP* 296). "One knows, without being told, . . . It is a regular thing" that all are much alike, with one standing strikingly out, each likely wishing to be that one. Mary Crawford pinpoints the situation she shares with these women, each woman trying desperately to be the distinguished one so that she might gain a social identity, and thus the only identity for which she can hope.

The social expectation of female interchangeability is highlighted when Henry is informed that he likes Julia Bertram best because she is the available sister. Obviously, her identity as someone to be liked exists only in her social identity as single, not in any distinguishing features of his own. Even Henry's choice of Maria seems to be more due to her social identity as engaged than to her personal value to him. Though he comes to favor Maria, his flirtation with both suggests that either Bertram sister will do for his present convenience. The Bertram sisters' interchangeability evokes the kind of response the Musgrove girls receive in *Persuasion*: unsure which girl Captain Wentworth prefers (since he flirts with both), his brother-in-law comments, "He certainly means to have one or other of those two girls . . . but there is no saying which . . . . And very nice young ladies they both are; I hardly know one from the other" (*P* 120–21). Though Henry suggests that he differentiates between the two Bertram sisters' personalities when he explains his choice of Maria for Agatha in the play as a compliment to Julia's more comic personality which impedes the necessary "solemnity" (*MP* 155), Julia herself realizes that he distinguishes between herself and her sister not because they appear so distinct in

personality but because he prefers Maria. When an identity only comes from one's social status or a gentleman's preference, it is little wonder that these sisters feel justified in sacrificing each other to gain a man or an establishment, or both.

Austen lays much of the blame of this sisterly disregard at the feet of the dominating lord of the manor and his system of education. For all his imposition of restrictions, he has not enabled his daughters to develop a personal moral identity, but has only encouraged an identity through status. In explaining why Julia fared better than her sister, the narrator asserts that "Her temper was naturally the easiest of the two, her feelings, though quick, were more controllable; and education had not given her so very hurtful a degree of self-consequence" (461). Austen pinpoints the failure of the hierarchical values of consequence and rank in creating these sisters' self-destruction. As Sir Thomas comes to realize, he had not inculcated into his daughters any inner guide or personal adoption of "principle, active principle" but had only "increased the evil by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence, so as to make their real disposition unknown to him" (459). The implication seems to be that the traditional patrilineal system values only appearances—position and prestige—and only offers external regulation that Austen suggests has no lasting value in instilling self-restraint. Her answer does not seem to be to throw off those moral values, but to go deeper than trying to create them through outward regulation.

### **Sisterly Rivalry in Contrast to the Moral Heroine's Value of Sisterhood**

Maria and Julia Bertram's self-destructive sacrifice of sisterhood for the sake of either the modern or traditional calls to marriage contrasts sharply with the moral value of sisterhood found in Fanny Price. Austen demonstrates Fanny's value of family relationships and of sisters as something honorable. Fanny possesses a personal moral value of family and sisterhood that is not imposed on her, but is perhaps even fostered in her by her deprivation. Julia and Maria's

casual discarding of their sister bond differs piercingly from Fanny, who longs for a sister and a family and is denied one throughout the novel. Torn from her childhood home while still a little girl, Fanny never fully recovers a sense of family until the novel's end when Edmund recognizes her as "my only sister—my only comfort now" (443) and Sir Thomas Bertram decides that "Fanny was indeed the daughter that he wanted" (467). Fanny doubly loses the only close sister she ever had, a loss that is hidden within the novel as if of little consequence: "Fanny in those early days had preferred her [Mary] to Susan; and when the news of her death had at last reached Mansfield, had for a short time been quite afflicted.—The sight of Betsey brought the image of little Mary back again, but she would not have pained her mother by alluding to her for the world" (387). Though sisterhood is denied Fanny, she nonetheless treasures it, demonstrating a moral identity that strongly contrasts with her morally deficient cousins who treat sisterhood lightly.

From early childhood, Maria and Julia have demonstrated through their rejection of Fanny as a potential sister-figure that they value sisterhood less highly than their own exalted sense of self-worth. Fanny is only good for pointing out to Mamma and Aunt Norris how different she is—"so odd and so stupid" (49)—from themselves, who are quickly complimented by Mrs. Norris as "ever so forward and clever" (49). The value of mutual and affectionate sisterhood is already subordinated to the value of promoting their own good qualities; they often keep Fanny low in order to maintain themselves higher. They only reiterate this attitude toward sisterhood with their later casual betrayal of sisterhood, or even more casual reconciliation when the source of their rivalry abandons them both: "Since rivalry between the sisters had ceased, they had been gradually recovering much of their former good understanding; and were at least sufficiently friends to make each of them exceedingly glad to be with the other at such a time"

(219). Rather than suggesting their appreciation of each other, such a statement indicates the way that these sisters use each other for their own purposes with little value for the other's needs. As we have seen, this sisterly depreciation develops from their prestige-emphasizing education, but is just as much encouraged by the individualistic modern Crawfords.

Mary Crawford appears in a negative light for her own betrayal of sisterhood. Austen depicts her clearly using Fanny to get close to Edmund, particularly in the letter-writing between the two that disappears once Fanny is no longer near Edmund. Criticized by Austen as an untrustworthy female friend—"for Miss Crawford, complaisant as a sister, was careless as a woman and a friend" (270)—Mary manipulates the woman to get the man. Her carelessness towards the sister bond represents the larger social ill that Austen defines throughout this novel. Austen's novel may not offer a clear decision about defining the ideal social order (in fact, this novel hints darkly that it may not exist), but she clearly asserts that anything that leads to betraying sisterhood cannot be acceptable. At one point in the novel, Mary Crawford is playing cards and, making a risky move, declares, "There, I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. . . . If I lose the game it shall not be from lack of striving for it" (254). The narrator notes, "The game was her's [sic], and it only did not pay her for what she had given to secure it" (254). Similarly, Maria and Julia sacrifice their sister bond for the sake of conquest and triumph with Henry. Yet their triumph does not pay for what they have "given to secure it." Their victory does not compensate for their loss of sisterhood, and Austen assures us that such costly triumph, expected of both the old and new social orders, never will.

## *Pride and Prejudice*

### **Overcoming Competition to Embrace Sisterhood**

In *Pride and Prejudice*, as I have previously noted, Austen offers a more optimistic projection for the shifting social structure of her day. Correspondingly, she presents a hopeful portrait of a heroine who overcomes her own tendency toward a competitive struggle to attain a loving sister relationship. Austen suggests that her heroine may discover the best of both landed society and individualism by embracing the moral system she reveals, one displayed in sisterhood. Though Austen offers a more positive prognosis for the outbreak of sisterly rivalry in *Pride and Prejudice*, she demonstrates the same source of such rivalry: in the worst of both Burkean and Enlightenment social thought. Both individualism and traditional hierarchy lose sight of the internally motivated selflessness that Austen requires. And both dictate that a woman's identity comes through chasing a man.

Though Elizabeth does not wantonly pursue officers and male attention the way that her younger sisters do—of whom even her father “coolly observed, ‘From all that I can collect by your manner of talking, you must be two of the silliest girls in the country’” (*P&P* 66)—she does become slightly competitive with her younger sister for the attentions of Wickham. Her affection for Wickham is itself representative of her yet-immature discernment at this stage in the novel. She later discovers “the indelicacy of putting himself forward as he had” when he told her of his complaint against Darcy (225). Elizabeth's descent into competitive feelings for Lydia thus seems to represent a remnant of juvenile emotions. Our heroine looks forward with an adolescent crush-like enthusiasm to seeing Wickham: “Elizabeth thought with pleasure of dancing a great deal with Mr. Wickham . . . and meant to dance half the evening with Mr. Wickham” (120). Though she never directly competes to gain Wickham's attention as the Bertram sisters did with

Henry, Elizabeth's attitude reflects feelings of competition. The narrator employs free indirect discourse when Wickham sits by Elizabeth and Lydia to depict Elizabeth's perspective: "At first there seemed danger of Lydia's engrossing him entirely, for she was a most determined talker" (110). Though Lydia's penchant for cards saves Wickham's attention for Elizabeth, her initial "engrossing" of his attention makes Elizabeth feel threatened.

In the world of *Pride and Prejudice*, every trace of female competition revolves around marriage or men. Mrs. Bennet and Mrs. Lucas constantly jab at each other "nicely" about their competition to have the first married daughter, with Lady Lucas finally carrying the honors. Competition between women, and especially sisters, for male attention specifically, is so engrained in this society that Mr. Bennet assumes it to affect Elizabeth in relation to her sister, Jane: "You will hardly bear to be long outdone by Jane. Now is your time. Here are officers enough at Meryton to disappoint all the young ladies in the county" (167). Though Mr. Bennet speaks with his typical irony here, and we can assume that he does not genuinely think Elizabeth envies her sister for being jilted, he nonetheless presumes upon a principle of sisters fearing to be outdone by each other. The site of this fear of each other as a threat, or desire to defeat the other, occurs most frequently in marriage. Lydia constantly revels in her moments of outshining her sister, but never more so than when she becomes the first Bennet sister married. Her sisters are pained to see "Lydia, with anxious parade, walk up to her mother's right hand, and hear her say to her eldest sister, 'Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman,'" and Lydia enjoys their displacement (322). Marriage raises her socially above her sister, offering a more secure identity.

As we have seen in *Mansfield Park's* instances of female rivalry, the threat of being interchangeable exists as the background of much of the jealousy and gloating in *Pride and*

*Prejudice*. From Austen's opening sentence of this novel, she presents the interchangeable social role women in this novel possess:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters. (43)

Though all the families compete with each other for the economic advantage of “capturing” this gentleman, their “rightful property,” with a truly mercenary mindset, it matters little to them which of their daughters makes this connection—“some one or other of their daughters.” In many ways, this recalls Lévi-Strauss's and Gayle Rubin's discussion of “the exchange of women” in which, as Rubin explains, “As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization” (174). While this idea is more complex than I shall treat here, I would suggest that Austen implies the mindset of such a social and economic “exchange of women” inherent in this society. The individual identity of the young woman is inconsequential; what matters is her role as “the gift” to cement social status and economic well-being (Rubin 174).

Mr. Collins' courtship mode exactly epitomizes this mindset, revealing that it is held by the suitor as well as by the woman's family. He comes to Longbourn with the intention of marrying one of the Bennet daughters to compensate for inheriting the entailed estate; he plans to marry them for their social identity, not for their personal one. When Mrs. Bennet informs him that Jane is likely to be soon engaged, “Mr. Collins had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire. Elizabeth, equally next to

Jane in birth and beauty, succeeded her of course” (*P&P* 105). These two sisters hold little value in their personal self to Mr. Collins; he sees them only in terms of their social role (birth) and physical attraction (beauty).

This sense of being interchangeable is exacerbated by the comparison evoked through the favoritism fostered in the Bennet family. Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Bennet each have their favorite daughters, which rather negatively than positively affects those daughters. The negative effect on Lydia of her mother’s preference is fairly obvious in the novel: “Lydia was a stout, well-grown girl of fifteen, with a fine complexion and good-humoured countenance; a favourite with her mother, whose affection had brought her into public at an early age” (82). Mrs. Bennet spoils Lydia, leading to her nearly socially ruinous elopement with Wickham. Jane is also Mrs. Bennet’s favorite child (perhaps a statement on Mrs. Bennet’s personal inconsistency)—“Wickham, Lydia, were all forgotten. Jane was beyond competition her favourite child” (350). Though she does not become morally deficient as Lydia does, one cannot help but wonder if her passive nature has been created by her need to be compliant with her dominating mother.

Elizabeth on the other hand is her father’s favorite; he declares of his daughters that “They have none of them much to recommend them . . . they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (45). Because she is “grateful for his affectionate treatment of herself,” Elizabeth overlooks his cynical, detached treatment of others that even allows him to “expos[e] his wife to the contempt of her own children” (250, 251). I suspect that this fosters in Elizabeth her own tendency to prejudicial early judgments. Moreover, this parental favoritism minimizes Kitty and Mary to mere caricatures—the passive, silly sister and the boring intellectual one—who strive to create identities for themselves when denied one through parental favor. Such parental favoritism creates a sense of comparison among



the daughters, surfacing most forcefully in Lydia's constant comparison edged with competition: "I am not afraid; for though I am the youngest, I'm the tallest" (47).

The presence of so many sisters increases the chance of multiple women fearing redundancy and competing over the same man, yet Austen firmly opposes the idea of preventing rivalry by removing the rival. In her pronouncement, she clearly indicates why the conventional establishment offers no greater morality than individual desire alone does. When Lady Catherine protests the Bennet family having five daughters "out at once," she posits its unsuitability in that it breaks social code, potentially creating competition for the older sisters from the younger ones and thus hindering the goal of establishing the family line: "What, all five out at once? Very odd! . . . The younger ones out before the elder are married!" (191). Yet Elizabeth responds that "I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early. . . . And to be kept out on *such* a motive!—I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind" (191). Austen suggests that minimizing the competitive threat from younger sisters will not sufficiently prevent sisterly rivalry and disunity and will in fact inhibit "sisterly affection." Rather than thus implying that competition does not cause the absence of sisterly intimacy, Austen asserts that rivalry over men is an issue but the solution is not the external regulation of limiting who can be "out" and who can't. Austen's key is an internal motivation to value sisterhood instead. I suggest that this relates to Austen's theory about social order. Austen promotes moral order, including absolute authority, but not to be maintained through strict social hierarchy as much as through the internal motivation of personal responsibility. As I will show further, Austen demonstrates throughout this novel how both self-governing independence and

estate-bound hierarchy discourage that personal moral responsibility best displayed for Austen in sisterhood.

### **Elizabeth and Lydia: Sisterhood versus Selfishness**

Marriage thus becomes a way, as I have previously demonstrated, of triumphing over one's sisters and developing a distinct personal identity. Lydia most fully embodies this quest for triumph when she lords it over her sisters about being married, telling them when she leaves, "But you know married women have never much time for writing. My sisters may write to *me*. They will have nothing else to do" (334). Lydia's competition and gloating with her sisters reflects an overall insensitivity to her sisters' feelings. When Jane and Elizabeth return from their trip, Lydia comments to them, "I was in great hopes that one of you would have got a husband before your came back. Jane will be quite an old maid soon, I declare. She is almost three and twenty! Lord, how ashamed I should be of not being married before three and twenty!" (237). Lydia has no sense of concern for her sister's feelings, which would have been particularly tender on this subject having just lost her fond hopes of a future with Bingley. Later, Lydia displays complete unconcern for the sister whom she is supposedly closest to. When she is chosen to go to Brighton, to flirt with the officers, instead of Kitty, she pays little attention to how wounded Kitty may feel at this rejection: "Wholly inattentive to her sister's feelings, Lydia flew about the house in restless ecstasy, calling for everyone's congratulations, and laughing and talking with more violence than ever; whilst the luckless Kitty continued in the parlor repining at her fate in terms as unreasonable as her accent was peevish" (245). Lydia's selfish attitude towards her sister coincides with a restlessness and "violence" that may indicate the connection Austen makes between sisterhood and social order. As a sister who discards sisterhood casually,

Lydia's emotional state conveys a sense of unrootedness and even of anarchy. Austen offers little positive feedback on such a lifestyle.

In contrast to Lydia, Elizabeth does value the feelings of her sister. She continually expresses sincere tenderness and compassion towards Jane, from her first "wild" walk to care for Jane while she is sick at Bingley's estate. As Darcy later defends her to herself, "Was there no good in your affectionate behaviour to Jane, while she was ill at Netherfield?" (378). Her initial rejection of Darcy stems partially from her outrage at his interference in the romance between her sister and Bingley: "do you think that any consideration would tempt me to accept the man, who has been the means of ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister?" (212). Concern for Jane's unhappiness often interrupts Elizabeth's own concern for self. She forgets her own troubles in seeking to decipher the depression Jane selflessly tries to hide: "She was engaged one day as she walked, in re-perusing Jane's last letter, and dwelling on some passages which proved that Jane had not written in spirits" (205). Later, she and Jane share as much concern for each other's discomfort as their own when Bingley and Darcy visit: "Each felt for the other, and of course for themselves" (337).

Elizabeth's sisterly kindness is not limited to Jane, but a sense of selflessness even surfaces towards her thoughtless sister Lydia. When she discovers Lydia's premarital relationship, she fears the irreparable damage it will do to herself and her sisters, yet the narrator comments, "But self, though it would intrude, could not engross her. Lydia—the humiliation, the misery, she was bringing on them all, soon swallowed every care" (288). This mindset perhaps registers more selfishness than the narrator seems to realize; Elizabeth is concerned for her fate and her sisters in this thought. Yet she does display concern for Lydia's ruined future throughout the chapters that follow, and the narrator here at least reveals a moral standard of selflessness

that is expected of the heroine, even when she does not as fully meet it as she imagines. Later, Elizabeth has matured to a more selfless attitude toward this youngest sister when she smooths things over with Wickham: “unwilling, for her sister’s sake, to provoke him, she only said in reply, with a good-humoured smile, ‘Come, Mr. Wickham, we are brother and sister, you know. Do not let us quarrel about the past. In future, I hope we shall be always of one mind’” (333). Such consideration demonstrates that Elizabeth has, in fact, matured in her capacity as a selfless sister.

This novel indeed depicts for us the trajectory of Elizabeth’s development of deeper sister relationships. Charlotte Lucas is initially presented as “Elizabeth’s intimate friend” (56); though she is close to Jane, Charlotte appears to be closer. Yet when Charlotte disillusioned Elizabeth by engaging herself to Mr. Collins, “Her disappointment in Charlotte made her turn with fonder regard to her sister, of whose rectitude and delicacy she was sure her opinion could never be shaken” (157). Elizabeth’s transition from an exogamous female friendship to emotional intimacy with her sister suggests a movement towards the greater rootedness of family. Sisterhood presents the stability of a secure social establishment; sisters know each other and are less likely to disappoint. By the novel’s end, the two sisters are happily established in landed estates; moreover, they settle in near proximity to each other: “and Jane and Elizabeth, in addition to every other source of happiness, were within thirty miles of each other” (382). In *Pride and Prejudice*, sisterhood seems to represent the order and rootedness of a stable social system, though it is one granting far more mobility to women and the middle class than the original inheritance-based estate did.

Elizabeth’s growing appreciation for sisterhood, and increased sense of responsibility and stability in it, coincide with what Duckworth sees as her maturation beyond pure individualism.

Duckworth suggests that “Only when Elizabeth recognizes that individualism must find its social limits, and Darcy concedes that tradition without individual energy is empty form, can the novel reach its eminently satisfactory conclusion” (118). Perhaps nowhere more than in observing Lydia’s marriage does Elizabeth realize that self-actualization without consideration of others creates havoc.

### **Marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*: Two Perspectives Compared**

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen offers us the perspectives on marriage proposed by the traditional estate-establishment view and by the individualistic mindset. Charlotte Lucas and Lady Catherine represent the intentions and values of the former social order: for them, marriage is about preserving a lineage and, thus, an inheritance and forming “an establishment” (*P&P* 151). The goal seems self-preservation, particularly in the sense of the gentry and aristocracy preserving their own line and family and economic status. For Charlotte, marriage is perhaps for less lofty an objective than maintaining a noble line, but she does seek it for the sake of safeguarding her own well-being, as well as that of her family. Charlotte does not deceive herself into thinking she truly loves Mr. Collins, but as the narrator asserts, “Miss Lucas, who accepted him solely from the pure and disinterested desire of an establishment, cared not how soon that establishment were gained” (151). Though Elizabeth expresses horror at her friend’s choice, the narrator describes the reality that motivated Charlotte’s choice: “Without thinking highly of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want” (152). The Bennet sisters’ own financial situation, their father’s estate being entailed away from them leaving them to face destitution when he should

die, reaffirms the seriousness of women's economic situation which motivates Charlotte's choice.

While Charlotte's perspective on marriage may not at first appear to reflect the priorities of the traditional estate to protect an inheritance or preserve a family line, her choice actually reflects a significant weight of social responsibility. The narrator implies that Charlotte marries not only for her own happiness, but for her family's: "The whole family in short were properly overjoyed on the occasion. The younger girls formed hopes of *coming out* a year or two sooner than they might otherwise have done; and the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte's dying an old maid" (152). Within this social system, Charlotte's sisters are prohibited from becoming her competition and Charlotte's brothers dread the financial responsibility of her never marrying. Her family does not desire the social obligation of expressing financial or emotional concern for Charlotte's needs. It is externally regulated and not internally chosen. Thus, because her family does not wish for this duty, Charlotte *needs* to marry and "gain an establishment" for their sake as much as for her own.

Lady Catherine represents even more clearly the motives that drive marriage in traditional landed society. Her plans for her daughter and nephew's marriage contain no thought of their own personal desire in love. Marriage, for her, is about uniting equal ranks and preserving the order of social hierarchy. She protests the horror of Elizabeth marrying her nephew: "While in their cradle, we planned their union: and now, at the moment when the wishes of both sisters would be accomplished, in their marriage, to be prevented by a woman of inferior birth, of no importance in the world, and wholly unallied to the family! Do you pay no regard to the wishes of his friends? . . . Are you lost to every feeling of propriety and delicacy?" (356). Though presented in the name of sisterhood here, Lady Catherine's wishes are anything

but in line with Austen's moral understanding of valuing one's sister. Her wishes proffer preserving the family name under the guise of sisterly affection; such affection is subordinate to the goals of patrilineal structure. For Lady Catherine and her worldview, "propriety and delicacy" are entirely about pleasing the desires of those with the most power and social status, not about any other moral standard. She feels individuals like Elizabeth should value "the wishes of his friends" and consider the feelings and goals of his social circle, in stark contrast to Elizabeth's independent spirit. Against the desires of individualism, she offers social obligation. Yet her concept of social responsibility has no basis in any genuine consideration for others or in an absolute moral standard. Rather it is based entirely on serving the whims of those higher in social status.

In Lady Catherine's worldview, then, the highest moral good is preserving the sanctity of her social status. The purpose of marriage is to guard "the same noble line," as she explains to Elizabeth:

My daughter and my nephew are formed for each other. They are descended on the maternal side, from the same noble line; and, on the father's, from respectable, honourable, and ancient, though untitled families. Their fortune on both sides is splendid. They are destined for each other by the voice of every member of their respective houses; and what is to divide them? The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections, or fortune? (357)

In this social order, "family, connections, or fortune" are the distinguishing marks of personal value and the "houses" of the nobility the gods who grant such value. Elizabeth's response protests a fierce measure of individualism against this: "I am only resolved to act in that manner, which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness, without reference to *you*, or to any

person so wholly unconnected with me” (359). Near the end of the novel, having matured at this point, Elizabeth can be taken as Austen’s viewpoint here, rejecting the motives of traditional hierarchy.

When she responds to Charlotte’s purpose in marriage, Elizabeth suggests such motives do not just deny personal happiness but morality itself: “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” (165). Intriguingly, Elizabeth frames this protest against marrying only for social reasons in anti-individualist rhetoric. She argues that “the meaning of principle and integrity” cannot be changed “for the sake of one individual.” The clear implication is that “social obligations” can be just as self-centered and individual-focused as more clearly individualistic motives. Elizabeth suggests a higher moral standard of right that requires greater concern for personal happiness and marital compatibility than to financial security. She implies that love for another must be the genuine motive for matrimony, yet her assertion hints that this is not pure individualism, not solely for an individual’s desires but for a higher standard of absolute moral principles that govern all humanity. Her suggestion indeed bears traces of a moral authority that denies a relativistic form of individualism.

Elizabeth’s definition here of what marriage should and should not be reverberates through the latter part of the novel as Lydia’s marriage based solely on desire appears as completely unacceptable morally. When Lydia elopes with Wickham, she causes everyone around her to suffer the consequences of her choices. In his typical pompous, self-centered way, Mr. Collins shares his gratitude, with Mr. Bennet no less, that he is not involved in the suffering that Lydia’s actions inevitably impose upon her relations and friends:



They [Lady Catherine and her daughter] agree with me in apprehending that this false step in one daughter, will be injurious to the fortunes of all the others, for who, as Lady Catherine herself condescendingly says, will connect themselves with such a family. And this consideration leads me to reflect with augmented satisfaction on a certain event of last November, for had it been otherwise, I must have been involved in all your sorrow and disgrace. (305)

Lydia's elopement, and premarital cohabitation with Wickham, damage not only her own but her sisters' reputations as well. She irremediably ruins her family's attraction as a connection. Not only her sisters, but Mr. Bennet, who must search for them in London, and the Gardiners, who also must search for the hiding couple, and Darcy, who pays off Wickham so that he will marry Lydia, all pay the price of Lydia's marital choice and manner. The selfishness of Lydia's choice grants little favor to marriages made based solely on personal desire and affection. Lydia does hold great affection for Wickham, though the narrator holds little hope of it being fairly returned: "Wickham's affection for Lydia, was just what Elizabeth had expected to find it; not equal to Lydia's for him. . . . Lydia was exceedingly fond of him. He was her dear Wickham on every occasion" (323). Clearly, affection is insufficient as a motive for marriage in Austen's world; some kind of consideration of others beyond the couple who will be affected must be taken. Resonating with Mr. and Mrs. Bennet's marriage based on sexual desire alone—"Her father captivated by youth and beauty . . . had married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her" (250), Lydia and Wickham's affection suggests itself to actually be selfishly motivated. They love each other, if Wickham can be imagined to love at all, solely for what the other offers them; Austen suggests this holds little promise for true happiness.

## **A New Moral System and a New Social Order**

At the same time Austen presents the immorality of Lydia's behavior, she also proposes the moral deficiency of the estate and its traditional values. Mr. Collins's conventional response to the elopement, caring solely for the effect of the marriage on the family's social connections, displays an equal amount of selfishness to Lydia's own. His concern for social appearance reveals just as little genuine compassion for others' suffering. Mary Bennet's philosophical response, though evoking sisterhood, similarly portrays itself as devoid of something intrinsic to Austen's moral system: "This is a most unfortunate affair; and will probably be much talked of. But we must stem the tide of malice, and pour into the wounded bosoms of each other, the balm of sisterly consolation" (298). As Austen comments, "Mary . . . continued to console herself with such kind of moral extractions from the evil before them" (298). It is not that Austen does not advocate "the balm of sisterly consolation" in this moment; Jane and Elizabeth certainly enact that in the surrounding scenes. And it is not that Austen does not decry Lydia's actions as immoral. She offers us little room to side with Lydia's loose morals and self-centered complaints. And Lydia and Wickham's shamelessness evokes no honor from Austen, when, upon their arrival, Elizabeth "blushed, and Jane blushed; but the cheeks of the two who caused their confusion, suffered no variation of colour" (321). It is not that Mary's moral stance is wrong in Austen's world, it is that Mary presents nothing but empty platitudes void of compassion and human empathy. She talks of sisterly consolation, but does not offer it as Jane and Elizabeth do to one another. Mary and Mr. Collins represent all in the traditional societal mindset opposing Lydia's individualism that Austen also rejects: empty appearances and external regulation without any sincerity in selflessness of heart and action. It is the latter Austen

offers to us in place of both marriage for social status and marriage for individual desire. It is sisters who can find and create this morality.

Both Lydia and sisters like Mary Bennet and Charlotte Lucas present equal amounts of selfishness that inhibits sisterhood, in spite of representing two widely diverging worldviews. Elizabeth's developing perspective seems to reflect Austen's own message in this novel, and it represents a balance between expecting social responsibility consideration of others in her marriage choice and individual independence. In both cases, the extremes devalue sisterhood. In her marriage based on "securing an establishment," Charlotte exhibits a preference for whom Elizabeth shall marry based on furthering that establishment of her own rather than on Elizabeth's happiness. Eager to make a match for her beloved friend, Charlotte weighs the options between Elizabeth's marrying the charming, kind Colonel Fitzwilliam or Mr. Darcy, at a moment before Darcy has won Elizabeth's heart and the reader's. Noting Charlotte's plans, the narrator explains, "In her kind schemes for Elizabeth, she sometimes planned her marrying Colonel Fitzwilliam. He was beyond comparison the pleasantest man; . . . but, to counterbalance these advantages, Mr. Darcy had considerable patronage in the church, and his cousin could have none at all" (204). Just like Mary Bennet and her uncompassionate "balm," Charlotte's goals that reflect the traditional establishment urge her to sacrifice sister-like affection for Elizabeth to the furtherance of her social status. Elizabeth's independent refusal to marry based on social status or "any person so wholly unconnected with me" as Lady Catherine in place of acting in the "manner which will, in my own opinion, constitute my happiness" defies such a system (359).

At the same time, Elizabeth does consider the effect on her family of her marriage choice, and Austen asserts the importance of this. Presented throughout the novel as a superior character and "an amiable, intelligent, elegant woman" (168), Mrs. Gardiner suggests the imprudence to

Elizabeth of developing a relationship with Wickham: “Do not involve yourself, or endeavor to involve him in an affection which the want of fortune would make so very imprudent. . . . Your father would depend on *your* resolution and good conduct, I am sure” (172). Shallow as this may sound to modern ears, Mrs. Gardiner’s advice reminds Elizabeth that her family cannot support her in a marriage but that she must help provide for them. For all her independent streak, Elizabeth will fiercely condemn “Thoughtlessness, want of attention to other people’s feelings, and want of resolution” (166). While Elizabeth vows to act in a way that “constitutes her own happiness,” her choice will never come at the cost of compassion for her sisters as Lydia’s does. Lydia has no concern for “the humiliation, the misery, she was bringing on them all,” as Elizabeth laments (288). Lydia has never demonstrated any sort of consideration for her sisters’ feelings or desires, particularly when they come into conflict with her own. Such self-interest is not for Elizabeth to emulate.

In positing a morality that exists outside of either the estate system or individualism and is reflected in sisterhood, Austen presents a new social order that shares characteristics of the conflicting conservative and radical views. Rooted in the social responsibility and commitment of sisterhood, Elizabeth concludes this novel securely established on the landed estate of Pemberley. Yet her presence there as a not-quite social equal to Darcy suggests that the old status system is being undone by Austen. For the traditional mindset of Lady Catherine, the stain of Elizabeth’s presence cannot be removed: “Heaven and earth!—of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?” (358). Austen clearly suggests that the hereditary placement of morality within breeding, one’s lineage, does not hold true. Lady Catherine displays herself as rude and domineering. As she explains to Elizabeth, “I have not been used to submit to any person’s whims. I have not been in the habit of brooking disappointment” (357).

Elizabeth feels little compulsion based on this to bend to Lady Catherine's demands. In spite of Mr. Collins' fawning over his patroness, Elizabeth recognizes her poor manners and she and the narrator feel "the impertinence of her questions" (189). Even Darcy himself, for all his family pride in status, "looked a little ashamed of his aunt's ill-breeding" (198). Such a phrase undermines the entire point of lineage; if Lady Catherine's careful protection of their family line still leaves her "ill-bred" than there is little that such "breeding" can apparently do. And she is herself an "ill-breeder" as her sickly and pathetic daughter Anne shows. Austen hints that this patrilineal emphasis on producing heirs and preserving status ultimately self-destructs. In response, Austen protects the stability of a social system—no anarchy is proposed in this novel—but with the infusion of the middle-class individualist ethos of Elizabeth Bennet.

In the conclusion of this novel, Austen suggests the marriage of these two social systems, through her juxtaposition of the Gardiners and Lady Catherine. The last sentences focuses on Elizabeth's middle-class aunt and uncle: "With the Gardiners, they were always on the most intimate of terms. . . . by bringing her into Derbyshire, [they] had been the means of uniting them" (385). This choice emphasizes the middle class the Gardiners represent, Mr. Gardiner being "a man who lived by trade" (168), and reminds us that Austen overturns traditional social views that those of lower social status are lower in morals and manners. Instead Mr. Gardiner "was a sensible, gentlemanlike man, greatly superior to his sister as well by nature as by education. . . . so well-bred and agreeable," and his good-breeding contrasts implicitly with Lady Catherine's ill-breeding as a member of the aristocracy. Such embodiments of traditional moral values combined with a preference for internal qualities over social status create the perfect companions for our happy heroine and hero in Austen's world. Moreover, by gesturing to the Gardiners' role in uniting Elizabeth and Darcy, Austen actually connects them to Lady

Catherine. After all, Elizabeth and Darcy “were indebted to their present good understanding to the efforts of his aunt . . . unluckily for her ladyship, its effect had been exactly contrariwise” (366). Austen implies the balance she brings between the values of the middle-class and the estate, of traditional social hierarchy and individualism. Elizabeth becomes rooted in a family estate, but never adopts the lineal prejudice held by Lady Catherine.

Elizabeth’s female independence contrasts distinctly with that of Lady Catherine, reflecting the difference between individualism, here moderated by selflessness, and aristocratic arrogance. Both women share a confident expression of their views. Just as Lady Catherine “deliver[s] her opinion on every subject in so decisive a manner as proved that she was not used to have her judgment controverted” (189), Elizabeth too speaks her mind freely enough to admit to Darcy, “you know enough of my *frankness* to believe me capable of *that*. After abusing you so abominably to your face, I could have no scruples in abusing you to all your relations” (367). Yet Lady Catherine believes herself endowed with this right to domineer others due to her social status and rank. Elizabeth, on the contrary, expresses her independence, which she comes to temper with humility, in spite of her status and because of her own sense of her personal value. She embodies that new mindset finding value in one’s inner self rather than in one’s social and political self. At the same time, Elizabeth refuses to sacrifice the stability of social responsibility for her own independence, and her value of sisterhood shows that the value of her inner self increases with a moral standard of selflessness.

### **Conclusion**

Through the darkness of *Mansfield Park* and the sparkle of *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen reveals the moral failings of each social system, as neither injects genuine selfless concern into the hearts of its proponents. In place of both, Austen proposes a new social order, or at least a

moral system, that embodies the moral authority and absolutes of the traditional estate but the personal responsibility and choice of self-governing individualism, that requires the social responsibility of the former and the independence of the latter. Sisterhood conveys that moral system, and sisterly rivalry defines the moral flaws that impede it. Of course, this raises an important question concerning Austen's final novel. *Persuasion* (1818), Austen's most socially progressive novel, seems to imply an absolute acceptance of middle-class, individualist ethos.<sup>28</sup> Out of all Austen's novels, this Austen heroine most fully abandons the estate; Anne Elliot's moral marital choice entails rejecting Mr. Elliot, who would have reinstated her as lady of Kellynch Hall, to marry the unlanded naval officer, Captain Wentworth. Does *Persuasion*, then, contradict Austen's proposal of the dangers of individualist society toward sisterhood, and by implication morality?

I would argue, instead, that *Persuasion* simply more clearly delineates the difference between what of the arising new social system Austen commends and what she rejects. The middle-class Musgrove family represents a measure of sisterly affection that Anne Elliot's gentry family does not possess, and Anne "envied them nothing but that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters" (*P* 78). Yet these sisters also devolve into selfish competition with each other for the attentions of Captain Wentworth. Captain Wentworth even encourages such competition when he tells his sister, "here I am, Sophia, quite ready to make a foolish match. Any body between fifteen and thirty may have me for asking. A little beauty, and

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<sup>28</sup> Scholars asserting a conservative and a radical Austen alike suggest that in this novel exist Austen's most socially progressive undertones. Johnson argues that *Persuasion* only continues Austen's socially progressive position, but more explicitly: "if in *Persuasion* the landed classes have not lost their power, they have lost their prestige and their moral authority for the heroine" (145). From a conservative position, however, Butler agrees that *Persuasion* "comes as near to social criticism as anything she ever wrote" but views it as a "conservative social comment" that promotes the conservative morals of the middle class (284, 285).

a few smiles, and a few compliments to the navy, and I am a lost man” (96). Perhaps it is logical that the naval officers and middle-class Musgroves would be more open in relationships since they are less bound by structure and traditional hierarchy. At the same time, their meritocracy system encourages competition as they don't obtain a living by being born into it but by working for it. Austen may affirm the class freedom and economic structure of this system, but she critiques the moral values it creates.

It intrigues me that in this novel where Austen most gives up on the estate, she also denies Anne, more fully than any other heroine, the possibility of forming a sister relationship. If the benefit of the estate is that it offers roots and social ties to individuals, even more effectively offered by sisterhood, then Anne loses such a deep sororal connection. In fact, the very nature of the navy is mobility; ocean waters are the intrinsic opposite of stability. Anne loses some of that security with the traditional social order, embodied by her loss of sisterhood. At the same time, she preserves the moral values of this traditional estate system even as she abandons its social structure, demonstrated by her selfless devotion to her sisters and other female friends. Through *Persuasion*, as much as her other novels, Austen urges the rootedness and selflessness of sisterhood. She commands her heroines not to define identity by their social status nor morality by those ranking higher in the hierarchy, nor to disregard others in their pursuit of individual desire at the expense of morality. Instead, they must choose moral selflessness from disinterested internal motivation. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in embracing one's sister.



**CHAPTER THREE:  
“HAS MY SISTER A PLEASANT MODE OF INSTRUCTION?”:  
SISTERLY AFFECTION AS MORAL EDUCATION IN AUSTEN**

**Introduction**

In *Northanger Abbey*, Austen’s earliest written (though last published) novel, our heroine, Catherine Morland, exclaims to Henry Tilney, “I have just learnt to love a hyacinth. . . . Your sister taught me; I cannot tell how” (127). In response, Henry compliments this new appreciation, with typical Henry (and Austen) irony, adding, “The mere habit of learning to love is the thing; and a teachableness of disposition in a young lady is a great blessing.—Has my sister a pleasant mode of instruction?” (127). Indeed, Eleanor Tilney, Catherine’s replacement sister in this novel, does have a pleasant mode of instruction, far preferable to Henry’s humorously intended yet still condescending mode. It is this quality of female “teaching” which occurs relationally, and so subtly that we “cannot tell how” it happens, that Austen commends as a worthy benefit of sisterhood. Though Austen presents the perils facing sisterhood, imposed by the morality of the old and new social orders, she repeatedly points out its deep value. Not only can women find comfort and emotional nurture through their sisters, but in an Austen novel sisters also offer a better source of moral education to each other than men ever can.

With the edge of irony, and even satire, that characterizes most of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen’s narrator declares:

in justice to men, . . . though to the larger and more trifling part of the sex,  
imbecility in females is a great enhancement to their personal charms, there is a

portion of them too reasonable and too well-informed themselves to desire anything more in a woman than ignorance. But Catherine did not know . . . that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man. (81)

Perhaps intending to exaggerate, Austen nonetheless reminds us that male egos in her society have learned to enjoy female ignorance. In both *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, where the sister relationship nearly eclipses the dual romances, many of the “larger part” of men appear who pose danger to the heroines and threaten their moral autonomy. We find cruel dominating fathers like General Tilney and coldhearted, greedy brothers like John Dashwood, who likely prefer mindless women unable to question their actions. Yet even among the heroes, like Henry Tilney or Colonel Brandon, Austen offers men who somewhat enjoy the naïveté and romantic illusions of their beloveds. In contrast, the sisters or sister-figures, like Elinor Dashwood and Eleanor Tilney, desire only the full maturity of their sisters’ morality and discernment. As Elinor explains to Colonel Brandon, “There are inconveniences attending such feelings as Marianne’s, which all the charms of enthusiasm and ignorance of the world cannot atone for. . . . a better acquaintance with the world is what I look forward to as her greatest possible advantage” (*S&S* 43). Unlike the heroes (and villains) in these novels, sisters have no ego-boosting interest in preserving the other’s ignorance. Sincere Austen sisters believe each other capable of moral maturing and pursue such growth with selfless diligence.

As my previous analysis of Austen’s portrayal of sisterly rivalry shows, choosing to value sisterhood at all is itself a first step in moral growth. Such a choice represents the moral code of social interaction Austen proposes in place of traditional hierarchy and individualist self-government. Beyond demonstrating morality, however, sisterhood nurtures moral, intellectual,

and social growth in Austen's world in a unique way that men cannot, with clear anti-Rousseauian implications. While earlier domestic novels like *Camilla* had tended to imply the danger of influence coded as feminine, Austen suggests that the most successful female education occurs in a feminine context. Though nearly every Austen novel depicts this phenomenon, I believe that her earliest novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, most obviously present the primacy of sisterhood and female education. I argue that, in her portrayal of sisters' moral education, Austen ruptures those gender codes which simultaneously characterize women as men's moral inferiors and hold them to a higher moral standard (with graver consequences for failure than men face). At the same time, she reinforces other gender distinctions in a way that privileges femininity. I will show how Austen proposes a feminine form of moral education that is influential rather than directive and founded in a relational and domestic context. With this proposal, Austen defies the convention of masculine moral supremacy, demonstrating repeatedly that sisters offer emotional support in response to the ways men in this patrilineal system fail them. Most specifically for Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood, the Austen heroine develops what Austen views as true maturity through the support of her sister or sister-figure. In the process, Austen redefines morality and female identity.

### **Scholarly Opinions on Female Moral Agency and Austen**

Placing Austen in context with early proto-feminists like Mary Astell and Mary Wollstonecraft, Margaret Kirkham argues for a feminist Austen because her novels "are concerned with establishing the moral equality of men and women and the proper status of individual women as accountable beings" (3). Kirkham views Austen's moral perspective as part of the liberal Enlightenment thought that I have argued she only partially accepts: "Jane Austen's heroines . . . are all exemplary of the first claim of Enlightenment feminism: that women share

the same moral nature as men, ought to share the same moral status, and exercise the same responsibility for their own conduct” (84). I argue that Austen critiques the pursuit of self-government by Enlightenment thinkers, like Wollstonecraft or Paine, when it rejects the social interdependence Burke advocated. Yet her novels do emphasize individual responsibility, particularly women’s. Thus, for Kirkham, Austen’s interest in creating moral heroines represents a promotion of female equality. Conversely, Mary Poovey suggests that morality struggles with passion in Austen’s novels, particularly in *Sense and Sensibility*; Poovey defines Marianne’s desires as her “assertive subjectivity” that Austen stifles as an “amoral force,” implying that Austen’s morality hinders female autonomy (189, 190).

In between these two positions lies Armstrong’s more nuanced argument that Austen, and the domestic novel in general, helps women gain a form of political agency by professedly disavowing the political and asserting value in the moral and domestic sphere.<sup>29</sup> Armstrong suggests that “domestic fiction unfolded the operations of human desire as if they were independent of political history” creating “the illusion that desire was entirely subjective and therefore essentially different from the politically encodable forms of behavior to which desire gave rise” (9). By suggesting desire’s separation from politics, the domestic novel makes gender, along with psychological qualities and behavior, superior to individuals’ political rank and economic status.<sup>30</sup> Thus, emphasis on morality is part of a task to reiterate, and even create, gender roles in domestic novels, but this new emphasis simultaneously enables political agency.

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<sup>29</sup> See also David Kaufmann, who argues that the propriety advanced by *Sense and Sensibility* represents a domestic ideology and “civic jurisprudential tradition” of liberty rather than a politico-economic autonomy (396). Nevertheless, he sees in that substitution a still-present measure of “emancipatory potential” for the disempowered even if it does not restructure the political system (385).

<sup>30</sup> As Armstrong explains, by recognizing “feminine objects . . . by their relative emotional qualities,” domestic fiction’s “gendered field of information contested a dominant political order which depended, among other things, on representing women as economic and political objects” (15).

Austen participates in this domestic novel project that Armstrong discusses, offering her heroines subjectivity *through* morality by granting them moral autonomy. Yet my argument also distinguishes Austen from earlier domestic fiction, particularly in the way she privileges the feminine as she participates in affirming gender roles. While Armstrong explains that the domestic novel enlarges women's influence through domesticity, I argue that those novelists prior to Austen still privilege masculine ideals as the salvation for the heroine and masculine morality as superior. Austen offers female agency through femininity and suggests the quality and strength of female morality, which I suggest is as uncharacteristic of her domestic novel predecessors as sisterhood is.

For many critics, my choice to exemplify Austen's portrayal of female moral agency via sisterhood with *Northanger Abbey* (1818) and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) would be questionable. Despite their publication dates, these novels were both written in their early forms (*Susan* and *Elinor and Marianne* respectively) between 1795 and 1800.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps because of this early date of composition, critics tends to patronize these two novels as Austen's most immature, suggesting *Northanger Abbey*, with its similarities to her juvenilia, is still undeveloped and *Sense and Sensibility* is overly didactic.<sup>32</sup> Alistair Duckworth, for example, asserts the immaturity of *Northanger Abbey*, suggesting that "Jane Austen fails structurally and thematically" with this novel and that we must go by her "intentions" here (92).<sup>33</sup> Representing a common critique, Marilyn Butler argues that "by its very nature *Sense and Sensibility* is unremittingly didactic"

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<sup>31</sup> From "A Chronology of Jane Austen" in the 2004 Oxford edition of *Sense and Sensibility*, pp. xlvi–xlix. Surprisingly, for all its resonances with her early satire, Austen's *Northanger Abbey* was likely written about three years after the early version of *Sense and Sensibility*.

<sup>32</sup> Kirkham suggests that Austen uses flawed "schemas" in these earlier novels—the burlesque plot of "the early folly of the heroine" in *Northanger Abbey* and the moralistic sister pairing in *Sense and Sensibility* (85).

<sup>33</sup> See also Marilyn Butler and Marvin Mudrick, to name only a few.

and that, besides *Northanger Abbey*, “all Jane Austen’s other novels are more sophisticated in conception” (182).<sup>34</sup> The implication seems to be that due to one novel’s immaturity and the other’s didacticism, they are both aesthetic failures and do not represent Austen’s mature abilities. While I recognize that these are perhaps less subtle than her later novels, I find this to be a benefit in my particular analysis. I argue that Austen’s later novels accomplish her goals more obliquely (read “femininely” per Poovey [42]), focusing more on romantic development, while these earlier ones are more obvious in their emphasis on female moral development and on women’s role in this development. Because of this, I find them more, not less, profitable for analysis. In these earlier novels, Austen is less concerned at this point with the larger social order questions we have been discussing and instead looks very narrowly at an individual’s personal relationship with society, particularly when that individual is female.

At its most simplified interpretation, *Northanger Abbey* is read as a satire or burlesque of the Gothic, a novel about a heroine maturing out her romantic fancies, as Kirkham suggests (88).<sup>35</sup> Yet even Kirkham tempers that explanation by arguing that Catherine Morland’s fancies link to reality more than the supposedly wiser Henry Tilney’s ideas do (89). On the opposite end of the spectrum, Claudia Johnson asserts that Austen promotes the Gothic as partial truth through this novel, showing how it serves as a means of female resistance to repression and thus prepares Catherine to resist authority with her own judgment (39–40). However critics may interpret Austen’s treatment of the Gothic here, all unanimously agree that this novel depicts our naïve

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<sup>34</sup> Many other critics accuse this novel of overly overt didacticism. For example, Alistair Duckworth argues that Austen is still developing her novelistic ability to portray her “social and ethical attitudes” here (84). See also Merike Tamm and Julie A. Shaffer, who each argue against the traditional didactic interpretations as overly simplified.

<sup>35</sup> Nick Pici asserts that *Northanger Abbey* is about disillusioning both the reader, and Catherine of her Gothic fantasies (39–40).

heroine maturing and growing.<sup>36</sup> As Sheila J. Kindred explains, this novel is “about the initiation and education of a young woman on the threshold of a complex adult world” and about her gaining autonomy “in thought and action” (196, 197). How much Catherine needs to grow and mature, and how accurate Henry Tilney’s perspective is or how integral it is to her growth is a bit more debatable.

Critics often read Henry’s ironic insight as “good sense,” clear judgment, and ability to evaluate critically and Catherine’s perspective as naïveté, “childish confusion,” or a lack of confidence in her own ideas (Butler 179, Kirkham 90, Kindred 200). Yet a few suggest that Henry’s sense does not always supersede Catherine’s intuition. With many scholars recognizing that Catherine’s “instinctive morality of sentiment” which intuits accurately but lacks critical judgment (Schaub par. 5), we arrive at the question of whether Austen vindicates Henry’s rationality or Catherine’s instinct in this novel. Butler fiercely denies that Austen affirms Catherine’s perspective, suggesting that Henry is always proved right (179).<sup>37</sup> In strong contrast, George Justice suggests that Catherine’s good nature and sincerity reforms Henry’s “self-indulgent wit” (194). Certainly Henry can often discern people’s real motives in a way that trusting Catherine cannot, but Catherine unerringly senses the truth and acts on well-formed moral principles even when she cannot yet fully reason out and defend her feelings.<sup>38</sup> As Melissa Schaub explains, Catherine needs to grow in discernment, though her morality is sound (par. 7). Though Henry possesses a social sense that Catherine can learn from, her moral principles meet Austen’s approbation as much as or more than Henry’s do.

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<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Joseph Weisenfarth, Dawes Chillman, Melissa Schaub, Marilyn Butler, Claudia Johnson, and Avrom Fleishman, to name a few.

<sup>37</sup> Alistair Duckworth similarly argues that Catherine needs to develop a stronger moral sense in this novel (94).

<sup>38</sup> See Chillman 46. See also Elvira Casal, who argues that Catherine has good sense but inadequate knowledge and must learn to act on her principles (149).

Recognizing Henry's potential lack of discernment at points, raises the question of whether he is Catherine's guide to moral and intellectual maturity. Kindred suggests that Catherine, at the end of the novel, is "able to think and act autonomously . . . because her 'training' with Henry is beginning to pay off" (205). While critics like Kirkham or Schaub point to Henry's incomplete discernment, even they accept him as her guide to discernment.<sup>39</sup> Paula Marantz Cohen even explicitly argues that Austen imitates the male teacher ideal of Rousseau with Henry as tutor (216, 225). In strong contrast, Johnson argues against the benefit of Henry as a teacher, suggesting that he "does not know everything" and that his bantering too often imposes silence on Catherine and assumes her inferiority (39).<sup>40</sup> While Henry's words may, and even should, be taken as more tongue-in-cheek than they appear, Henry often has the effect of undermining rather than bolstering Catherine's self-confidence. If, as Kindred argues, Catherine's greatest problem in using judgment is not the ability to reason but a lack of self-confidence in her reasoning (200), then I deny Henry's ability to help her overcome that. Instead, Catherine's greatest aid to intellectual maturing comes from Henry's sister, who becomes Catherine's sister-figure, Eleanor Tilney.

I argue that Henry's most egregious errors in discernment occur due to his incomplete understanding of the threat women face in his society, limiting his effect as a guide to Catherine. Claudia Johnson points to "the beginning of [Catherine's] detachment from Tilney's judgment and her awareness of its partiality" as a point of maturity for her (47). This is because, as Johnson explains, Catherine's "sensitivity the lessons [gothic novels] afford far surpasses the capacity of her tutor, because her position of powerlessness and dependency gives her a different

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<sup>39</sup> Duckworth, for example, argues that "Henry's function as a teacher is limited but important" (97).

<sup>40</sup> Fleishmann, too, points out that Henry is limited in his knowledge (661).



perspective on the status quo” (Johnson 39).<sup>41</sup> Henry cannot fully comprehend the female situation, leading him to make claims Austen ironizes and to even deny Catherine her subjectivity.<sup>42</sup> I suggest that Henry’s sister, Eleanor, shares the experience of “powerlessness and dependency” and from this can offer Catherine instruction built on mutuality. Though critics have largely ignored Eleanor Tilney’s role as Catherine’s moral and intellectual guide, scholars have noticed the moral/intellectual discernment Catherine exhibits by choosing Eleanor’s friendship over Isabella’s. Christine St. Peters suggests that “her discovery of the right kind of friend, who in Austen’s vision, will be transmuted into a sister” offers “the best indication of [Catherine’s] entry into adulthood” (477). Catherine develops discrimination by selecting the more sincere female friend; I will argue that this relationship not only reveals but also enables Catherine’s growth in moral judgment.

In contrast to Catherine, who leaves her family in *Northanger Abbey* and must find a sister-figure, Elinor and Marianne already have a sister in each other in *Sense and Sensibility*, but must learn to appreciate the full potential of that relationship for personal growth. Many critics in the past have examined this relationship strictly in the didactic terms of a pairing of polar opposite qualities, overlooking the significance of Elinor and Marianne’s relationship as a genuine emotional bond. For them, Elinor and Marianne become mere personifications of Sense and Sensibility; Gilbert Ryle, for example, argues: “Elinor too often and Marianne sometimes

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<sup>41</sup> Eleanor Ty discusses how the Gothic novel represents female vulnerability. She suggests that its emphasis on female abductions and rescue “feminizes” women, suggesting their vulnerability (249), though I would argue that the Gothic novel only reveals that sense of powerlessness, it does not create it.

<sup>42</sup> Judith Wylie makes a fascinating argument against this, suggesting that Henry *does* understand the powerless female situation because his father’s dominance has feminized him and that this allows him to teach Catherine femininity (141). We do see Henry experience similar repression, but I argue that he still lacks full knowledge of women’s experience that hinders him in “teaching” or even fully understanding Catherine.

collapse into two-dimensional samples of abstract types” (Ryle 107).<sup>43</sup> A few critics, however, do explore the primacy of these sisters’ emotional relationship. Glenda Hudson, for example, argues that the parallel plots of the two sisters emphasize their bond (76).<sup>44</sup> Critics like St. Peters comment on the emotional depth of the sisters’ relationship, noting that “the one trustworthy element of Elinor and Marianne’s lives is their devoted affection to each other and their sense of mutual responsibility to the other in their respective troubles” (479). Out of all Austen’s novels, sisterhood most dramatically takes precedence over marriage in this one: Edmund Wilson notes that the emotion that is “most poignant, most deeply felt by the reader” in this novel, in fact “the most passionate thing in Austen’s fiction,” is the love between the two sisters (qtd. in Hudson 79).<sup>45</sup> Those who recognize the relational focus in this novel seem to ignore the moral emphasis, missing what I argue is Austen’s primary point: to show the moral lesson in the context of a genuine sister relationship.

Once we move beyond viewing Elinor and Marianne as mere opposing stereotypes, we still must ask whether Austen promotes one sister’s perspective over another. Most critics agree that whereas each sister may be the novel’s heroine, Elinor is the novel’s voice as her consciousness is the only one the narrative fully enters. As David Kaufmann explains, “To write about *Sense and Sensibility* entails wrangling with the problematic centrality of Elinor

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<sup>43</sup> See also Margaret Kirkham and Marilyn Butler on the sister pair as a didactic lesson comparing two worldviews. Butler argues against theories that Austen tries to create “a compromise solution somewhere between ‘Sense’ and ‘Sensibility’” (190) to suggest Austen uses the contrast to make a moral/ideological point, “comparing the ‘schooled’ individual to the ‘natural’ one” (189).

<sup>44</sup> See also Susan Sniader Lanser, who refers to this as “marriage quests in doubled—and sistered—form” (56).

<sup>45</sup> See also James Thompson, who argues that “Edmund [sic] and Colonel Brandon are, for all intents and purposes, extraneous . . . What matters most is the sororal bond” (par. 1); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who suggests that the sisters’ “passion” is “the backbone of this powerful novel” (823); and Diane Shubinsky, who suggests in an endnote that “the emphasis is placed on the two women rather than between husband and wife. Although female friendship was important to Austen, she never made it paramount in any of her later works.” I, of course, disagree with the latter assertion, but coincide in seeing this novel as her highest emphasis on sisterhood over marriage.

Dashwood. To take the novel seriously means one should not . . . champion Marianne at Elinor's expense" (385). As Kaufmann implies, readers tend to be enamored with Marianne's romantic idealism, and critics are unsure how to respond to rational Elinor's role. Several have wisely pointed out that Elinor does possess strong emotion of her own, though it is contained.<sup>46</sup> Others have even argued that Elinor and Marianne are more alike than unlike in this novel.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, critics must note that the two sisters possess different worldviews; their debate is whether both sisters must learn from each other and grow, or if only Marianne must learn from Elinor. Johnson, for example, suggests that Elinor deceives herself in the same way Marianne does, just not as extensively, while others see Elinor needing to grow in expressing her emotions (63). Conversely, Susan Morgan denies Elinor's need to change, or increase in sensibility, in the novel, arguing that her balanced judgment allows her room to constantly redefine her perceptions; thus growth is an innate part of her worldview, making it a strong one ("Polite Lies" 200). I argue that Elinor does grow some, but that Austen primarily emphasizes Marianne's need to mature morally.

While most critics accept that *Sense and Sensibility* affirms Elinor's perspective over Marianne's, they debate why Austen advocates Elinor's attention to propriety and reserve over Marianne's idealism. Though some see it as a capitulation to society that betrays Marianne, many critics suggest that Austen criticizes society, showing Elinor's decorum as the means to

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<sup>46</sup> Duckworth argues that Elinor does possess emotion and depth of feeling but has simply embraced "personal reserve," which guards her privacy (111). Daniel R. Mangiavellano critiques scholars who posit "Elinor's strong feelings as mere rumor in the text," arguing that she does indeed possess them in the novel (par. 4).

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Anderson and Jordan Kidd offer an intriguing argument that Elinor and Marianne both represent excessive sensibility and that it is minor characters Mrs. Jennings and Mrs. Palmer who reflect the proper balance of sense and sensibility. Mereike Tamm asserts that when one analyzes Marianne and Elinor's shared appreciation of amateur arts, the qualities they share, in contrast with other characters in the novel, becomes more strongly marked than their differences (397).

survive in a dangerous world. Claudia Johnson, for example, asserts that Austen is not judging Marianne in this novel, but rather presenting her as a victim to an “arbitrary” and “capricious” patrilineal system (50–52). Julie A. Shaffer argues that the novel exposes a reality which is “so inadequate at meeting women’s needs that women like Marianne become drawn to the kinds of consoling fantasies that sensibility provides” (139). For these critics, Austen’s defense of Elinor does not condemn Marianne, but shows that her response will not enable her to survive her world.<sup>48</sup> Marylea Meyersohn suggests that by affirming Elinor’s silence, Austen demands that Marianne learn “*not* to express herself directly, not to tell the truth about her feelings,” confirming society and seeking to silence women (37). Yet Austen’s message through Elinor is not to reinforce society but for women like Marianne to understand it so they can survive it more effectively.

Yet Austen’s lesson is more than for Marianne to learn social survival, or even to critique her society. Marianne must learn a moral lesson about genuine self-knowledge and about selflessness. I argue that Austen makes moral judgments on Marianne’s behavior that cannot be ignored.<sup>49</sup> As Butler explains, the novel places Elinor’s “doctrine of civility in opposition to Marianne’s individualism” as part of a standard of “objective morality,” that, I would argue, entails considering others’ needs and not just one’s own (191). Duckworth mitigates this somewhat by suggesting Austen confirms Marianne for critiquing her society’s falseness but shows her attitude “taken to an extreme [is] immoral” (106). Marianne lacks what Lauren M. E. Goodlad refers to as “intersubjectivity”; as Goodlad explains, “privileging personal happiness in

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<sup>48</sup> Michal Beth Dinkler argues that Elinor’s manipulation of speech and silence gives her a form of power and “social control,” suggesting that Marianne needs to grow so that she too can have some form of protection (par. 13, 21).

<sup>49</sup> In this I strongly disagree with Mary Poovey who suggests that this novel offers “infinite gradations and convenient exceptions” to “moral absolutes” as selfishness becomes necessary to survive in this self-based society (184). As her indictment of sisterly rivalry shows, Austen demands moral choices even when unprofitable.

the absence of mutual recognition results, in one form or another, in the self's negation of external reality" (71).<sup>50</sup> By considering her own emotions only, Marianne refuses to recognize and consider others and ends up "negating" reality and limiting her capacity for self-knowledge, gained by seeing herself in the context of reality. In other words, Marianne loses her personal integrity through her own selfishness, a moral failing in Austen's world. It is sisterhood above all else that enables Marianne to mature morally beyond this.

### **Female Education in Eighteenth-Century Literature: *Camilla***

Jane Austen mentions Fanny Burney, specifically referencing her novel *Camilla*, as a literary predecessor in *Northanger Abbey*. In fact, Austen seems to suggest a sisterhood of heroines and novel-writers as she does so, arguing: "Alas! If the heroine of one novel be not patronized by the heroine of another, from whom can she expect protection and regard? . . . Let us not desert one another; we are an injured body" (*NA* 23). This sisterhood, Austen implies, offers not only support but also mentorship, as these are novels "in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, . . . the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language" (24). But if Austen hints that Burney is a literary mentor, such a suggestion of female teaching contradicts a strong theme in Burney's own works.

While Austen learns from Burney's "greatest powers of the mind" in shaping her novels (24), she also clearly alters Burney's presentation of women's moral development. Austen repeatedly suggests throughout her novels that women are the most successful means of helping each other mature. According to Burney's *Camilla*, however, women cannot effectively educate one another. Burney suggests an inherent danger in feminine instruction, as exemplified when

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<sup>50</sup> This recalls Susan Morgan's argument in "Polite Lies: The Veiled Heroine of Sense and Sensibility," which suggests that Elinor's polite lies are no more superficial than Marianne's exaggerated emotions which not only indulge herself at others' expense but also ignore one's limits of perception and deny one's potential to learn (198–99, 201). Thus, considering others also leads to better knowing yourself.

Mrs. Arlbery decides to help Camilla win Edgar's heart. Mrs. Arlbery explains to her young friend that though Edgar loves her, "if you are not well advised, his passion will be unavailing; and your artlessness, your facility, and your innocence, with his knowledge, nay, his very admiration of them, will operate but to separate you" (*Camilla* 455). Yet this advice serves only to delay the pair's romantic resolution. The threat Mrs. Arlbery poses, Burney seems to suggest, is that she will teach Camilla to be artful, making her less vulnerable. When misogynist Dr. Marchmont justifies thinking "wretchedly ill" of all women, he exclaims, "I think of them as they are! I think of them as I have found them. They are artful, though feeble; they are shallow, yet subtle" (642). Such "feminine" forms of power as subtlety and art, which Mrs. Arlbery would teach Camilla, are cast in this novel as cruelty and manipulation. Mary Poovey identifies this kind of "self-expression through strategies of indirection [and] obliqueness" as coded "characteristically feminine" (42). She argues that these qualities are not "'natural' to women" but rather "characterized women's learned or internalized responses to the objective female social situation" (Poovey 43). But whether biological or socially conditioned, such covert and subtle forms of indirect influence are a feminine response to the direct activity of masculine control. In *Camilla*, Burney rejects covert, subtle forms of power and influence that would replace direct, active intervention. She expresses a fear of such feminine power.

Through *Camilla*, Burney proposes that feminine forms of mentorship are destructive, whether offered by men or women. For all his anti-women talk, Dr. Marchmont functions as a prime example of the destructive force of feminized instruction. Dr. Marchmont practices and teaches the very "feminine" behavior he attacks in women. Though he attacks women for being artful and deceptive, his own advice appears to Edgar as "equivocal conduct" (*Camilla* 595). To this, Dr. Marchmont responds, "The fervor of your integrity, my dear Mandlebert, mistakes

caution for deceit” (595). Caution, for our moral hero, stands opposed to integrity and aligned with deceit. Whereas caution appears as a wise choice for women in Austen’s novels, in *Camilla* caution surfaces as deceptive *and* destructive. The only genuine solution is the frank “openness I so much pine to meet with” that Edgar describes (595). Burney further hints that not only are the feminized qualities Dr. Marchmont and Mrs. Arlbery teach negative, but that the feminine relational intimacy that contextualizes their instruction is negative as well. Edgar’s relationship with Dr. Marchmont, in all its harmful features, is explicitly compared by Burney to sisterhood: “While, in the bosom of her faithful sister, Camilla reposed her feelings and her fears . . . Edgar sought his not less faithful, nor honourable, but far more worldly friend, Dr. Marchmont” (642). Dr. Marchmont’s tutoring relationship with Edgar is sisterly in nature; he offers tender support to his young charge. Yet Burney suggests that such a context of instruction is not profitable.

The only form of instruction Burney allows as profitable is Camilla placing herself fully into Edgar’s hands with the plea for him to teach her. Though founded in their relationship, such instruction is fully hierarchical and gendered. In this education model, Burney recalls the pattern that Rousseau proposes, of the innocent, pure, unlearned girl taught by her future husband, founded on his premise that “A woman’s education must therefore be planned in relation to a man” (Book V). Rousseau offers us Sophy, with “only a good disposition and an ordinary heart,” in *Emile*, his treatise on education, as the ideal wife for his hero. As this ideal woman, “Her mind knows little, but it is trained to learn; it is well-tilled soil, ready for the sower. . . . What charming ignorance! Happy is he who is destined to be her tutor. She will not be her husband’s teacher but his scholar . . . and he will have the pleasure of teaching her everything” (Book V). Rousseau suggests that an ignorant, but “well-tilled,” mind is the ideal quality of a woman, and that her highest means of learning comes from this male tutor-husband who will teach her “everything.”

Echoing this idea from Rousseau, Burney proposes in *Camilla* that the best instruction for women comes from men of better understanding. In sharp contrast, Austen implicitly promotes sisterly instruction in all her novels. With its nurturing nature, relational depth, and feminine knowledge, such female guidance offers more benefit to Austen's heroines than any man's instruction ever does. Austen rejects the Rousseauian model that Burney follows and offers us sisterhood instead.

### *Northanger Abbey*

#### **A Heroine in Need of Instruction: Naïve, Artful, or Discerning?**

If any Austen novel offers us a heroine who needs to grow beyond intellectual or moral immaturity, *Northanger Abbey* would be the one. Austen parades Catherine's anti-heroine status to her readers from the first sentence: "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be a heroine" (NA 5). Yet Catherine's extreme innocence and naïveté align her in many ways more with a heroine of sensibility than any other Austen heroine. Catherine lacks the discernment, or perhaps we could say artfulness, to see through people's claims about themselves and decipher the hidden truth. Morally, Catherine's artlessness is sound; she evades deception. Intellectually, she must learn art in order to recognize it. Not only is she taken in by Isabella Thorpe's insincere friendship, but she lacks even the guile to interpret Isabella's purposefully and dramatically given hints of her infatuation for Catherine's brother James. Isabella perpetually assumes Catherine has intuited meanings our heroine has not yet noticed because she accepts appearances implicitly, as when Isabella reveals her engagement to James: "'Yes, my dear Catherine, it is so indeed; your penetration has not deceived you.—Oh! that arch eye of yours!—It sees through everything'" (85). Later, Catherine attempts to actually be arch "and therefore gaily said, 'Do not be uneasy, Isabella. James will soon be here'" (103).



Yet, once more, the joke is on Catherine as Isabella is now busy pursuing Captain Tilney. Catherine is too sincere to discern others' deception.

Our heroine lacks only the ability to criticize and disagree with others; her own instincts are already typically morally reliable, if she could only trust them. As Schaub points out, her "moral compass remains essentially unchanged throughout the novel," needing only to be balanced with greater self-confidence (par. 7).<sup>51</sup> Catherine trusts people to be as sincere as she herself is and too easily submits to others' judgment. When she meets John Thorpe, for example: his "manners did not please Catherine; but he was James's friend and Isabella's brother" (NA 33). She allows their judgment to supersede her own. Later, Austen explains her heroine's confusion over Thorpe's exaggerations because she accepts people's words at face value: "Catherine listened with astonishment; she knew not how to reconcile two such very different accounts of the same thing; for she had not been brought up to understand the propensities of a rattle, nor to know to how many idle assertions and impudent falsehoods the excess of vanity will lead" (46). Similarly, Catherine cannot bring herself to admit the insincerity in Isabella's friendly assertions and repeatedly defends her friend to herself against all evidence to the contrary. She instinctively senses General Tilney's true character but refuses to accept her judgment against his, questioning her own observations when they don't match his assertions: "but General Tilney, though so charming a man, seemed always a check upon his children's spirits" (113). Invariably, Catherine either senses the truth but is too insecure to trust herself, or she misses the truth in her eagerness to trust others. Her moral sense is good, but lacks sufficient skepticism.

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<sup>51</sup> See also Sheila J. Kindred and Dawes Chillman, who similarly suggest her innate morality and unerring accuracy in judging right from wrong and only failing in self-confidence and ability to rationalize or explain her instinct.

What Catherine needs to learn is that her society nurtures insincerity in its members. Isabella cannot flaunt her desperate desire to attract the wealthiest man she can find; nor can General Tilney openly express his pride in his wealth and greed for more. Thus, we see Isabella exclaim, “Do you know, there are two odious young men who have been staring at me this half hour. They really put me quite out of countenance,” and then later “to shew the independence of Miss Thorpe, and her resolution of humbling the sex, they set off immediately as fast as they could walk, in pursuit of the two young men” (27, 28). Hence General Tilney can deny his wealth in order to boast of it: “The General . . . began to talk of the smallness of the room and simplicity of the furniture, where every thing being for daily use, pretended only to comfort, &c.; flattering himself however that there were some apartments in the Abbey not unworthy of her notice—and was proceeding to mention the gilding of one in particular” (118). Isabella disguises her predatory quest and General Tilney his materialist pride because they represent disavowed, though real, goals in their society. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Austen repeatedly notes the immorality of her traditional patrilineal society with its false appearances of concern for others’ needs and for duty. Such insincerity is inexcusable for her. Though General Tilney and Isabella Thorpe exist on opposite ends of the spectrum of political power, due to their social status and gender, each pursues the same goals of accumulating wealth at the expense of others.<sup>52</sup>

Intriguingly, Isabella’s abuse of female friendship thus appears complicit in the mindset of such greedy and tyrannical patriarchs as General Tilney. Catherine cannot understand the falseness of this system, nor comprehend human fallibility. By implicitly comparing Isabella Thorpe and General Tilney, Austen once more reminds us that denying sisterhood participates in

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<sup>52</sup> Claudia Johnson notes this similarity between the two in order to argue that, for all Henry’s judgments, General Tilney is no less guilty a figure of “brute self-interest” than Isabella is, pointing out that “the two figures who most belittle the advantages of wealth also, to Catherine’s bewilderment, pursue it the most greedily and unscrupulously” (45).

the moral failings of the old hierarchical social order, which she shows us has been perpetuated in the new one too. Isabella cloaks her pursuit of James Morland in the guise of sisterly affection for Catherine, in exactly the same way she cloaks her dissatisfaction with his living in the guise of sorrow for their delayed marriage: “I hate money; and if our union could take place now upon only fifty pounds a year, I should not have a wish unsatisfied. Ah! my Catherine, you have found me out. There’s the sting. The long, long endless two years and a half that are to pass before your brother can hold the living” (99). Austen, with delightful irony, follows this with Mrs. Thorpe’s response: “Yes, yes, my darling Isabella . . . we perfectly see into your heart. You have no disguise” (99). In similar fashion, Isabella repeatedly protests her devotion to Catherine, only to toss her aside as she pursues Catherine’s brother. While “nothing, she declared, should induce her to join the set before her dear Catherine could join it too,” it is only moments later that she abandons Catherine to dance with James (35). Later, Isabella drops Catherine’s correspondence while pursuing Captain Tilney, only to resume it when that fails in order to tell her friend that James “is the only man I ever did or could love, and I trust you will convince him of it” (159). Isabella is exactly that female friend Austen most harshly critiques, the one who uses the sister-friend to get the man she desires. Catherine must learn to see through this imposition. Unlike Austen’s other heroines whom we have examined, Catherine’s maturation as a moral heroine does not depend on overcoming the tendency to betray sisterhood herself, but on developing the perspicuity to see through Isabella’s betrayal.

Catherine does develop this critical discernment, because she is intelligent and, more particularly, because her moral judgment is sound. People’s inconsistency surprises her, and she preserves her trusting faith in humankind, but she also refuses to rationalize people’s contradictions, especially when they conflict with her moral principles. She initially questions

John Thorpe's incongruous exaggerations, but only decides he is insincere after he blatantly lies to her, causing her to do what she feels is wrong by failing to keep her engagement with the Tilneys. Seeing this moral indiscretion leads her to later doubt his proposals to her: "She was almost as far from believing as from wishing it to be sincere; for she had not forgotten that he could mistake, and his assertion of the offer and of her encouragement convinced her that his mistakes could sometimes be very egregious" (107). Similarly, though Isabella repeatedly proves her hypocrisy in friendship it is only when Isabella tries to persuade her to break a promise against her convictions and "Catherine felt herself to be in the right, and though pained by such tender, such flattering supplication, could not allow it to influence her" that Catherine begins to doubt Isabella (70). As Isabella accuses Catherine of devaluing her friendship, "Catherine thought this reproach equally strange and unkind. . . . Isabella appeared to her ungenerous and selfish, regardless of everything but her own gratification" (71). Isabella has already proved herself willing to disregard Catherine's interest for "her own gratification," but Catherine first mistrusts her when she sees Isabella ready to disregard the principle of honesty for such self-interest. Once she sees Isabella wound her brother, she can begin to criticize her: "Isabella could not be aware of the pain she was inflicting; but it was a degree of wilful thoughtlessness which Catherine could not but resent. James was the sufferer" (108). Catherine trusts her own judgment more when it is expressed in another's interest. And when Isabella finally reveals her disregard for fidelity to her engagement and breaks James's heart, then Catherine can confidently demonstrate her awareness of the insincerity: "Such a strain of artifice could not impose even upon Catherine. Its inconsistencies, contradictions, and falsehood, struck her from the very first. She was ashamed of Isabella, and ashamed of having ever loved her" (160). Catherine already possesses, and demonstrates throughout the novel, her commitment to Austen's moral code of

selfless concern for others, but she must learn to see through society and trust her own individual judgment, that already stems from such morality.

### **The Failure of Heroic Instruction**

Henry Tilney seems to offer Catherine her best option of learning such discernment. His ironic perspective on everything makes him nearly Catherine's opposite. He proves himself sufficiently detached from empty social convention to make jokes about it that Catherine typically does not understand, as when he mocks conventional introductions at their first meeting. After much comfortable conversation, he remarks, "I have hitherto been very remiss, madam, in the proper attentions of a partner here; I have not yet asked you how long you have been in Bath; whether you were ever here before; . . . and how you like the place altogether. I have been very negligent—but are you now at leisure to satisfy me in these particulars?" (14). Henry can recognize the insincerity of such conversational forms, just as he later recognizes the insincerity of Isabella's promises or the General's assurances. He responds to Catherine's astonishment that Isabella agreed to dance after protesting she simply couldn't in James's absence by saying ironically, "And did Isabella never change her mind before?" (96). Later, he discerns the insincerity of his father's assertion that he need not prepare for their visit and leaves early to meet those unspoken expectations. Though Catherine wonders at this—"the General made such a point of your providing nothing extraordinary"—Henry smiles and notes, "I wish I could reason like you, for his sake and my own" (155). Henry cannot avoid penetrating insincerity, while Catherine cannot manage to see it. Yet where Catherine always responds based on sound moral convictions but simply fails sometimes to see clearly, Henry always sees clearly but does not always judge wisely based on his more complete knowledge.

In spite of his observant insight, Henry fails when he does not recognize his own bias and treats it as objective also. Frequently, his misunderstanding revolves on his incomplete knowledge of the female situation and his gender bias. When Isabella and Captain Tilney begin flirting, even though she is engaged, Catherine wishes the Captain to be made aware of Isabella's engagement, assuming that only ignorance would allow him to behave so: "his behavior was so incompatible with a knowledge of Isabella's engagement, that she could not, upon reflection, imagine him aware of it" (108). For Catherine, complete knowledge always leads directly to correct action. Yet Henry seems to excuse his brother's behavior, though he rightly suspects him to be deliberately toying with Isabella. Instead, he lays the blame entirely on the woman: "Is it my brother's attentions to Miss Thorpe, or Miss Thorpe's admission of them, that gives pain? . . . No man is offended by another man's admiration of the woman he loves; it is the woman only who can make it a torment" (109). Yet, as Claudia Johnson insightfully points out, Henry earlier criticized John Thorpe for distracting his dance partner's attention: "'That gentleman would have put me out of patience, had he staid with you half a minute longer. He has no business to withdraw the attention of my partner from me. We have entered into a contract of mutual agreeableness for the space of an evening'" (54).<sup>53</sup> His only defense for his own brother "withdrawing the attention" of one who has entered a far more serious contract of agreeableness than a simple dance seems to be that the captain means nothing by it and the woman is a coquette and thus deserves to be manipulated. Such a perspective not only shows bias, whether for his own family or his own gender, but also reveals unconcern of how much Isabella has to lose in comparison to Captain Tilney by their flirtation. She could lose her reputation and her financial future, while he risks nothing.

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<sup>53</sup> See Johnson, who argues that Captain Tilney is in fact *more* guilty as Isabella's quest is justified due to her own disempowerment and dire need to marry the richest man, while Captain Tilney has no excuse but selfishness (47).

Henry shows himself even more unaware of the gravity of women's condition when he gives his famous "Remember that we are English" speech in response to Catherine's Gothic fantasies about General Tilney murdering or imprisoning his wife. Nearly every critic must mention this speech, debating whether Austen supports or ironizes it. It is difficult to take Henry's confident speech here, one of the few moments he actually speaks seriously, as convincing for Austen when she informs us at the end of the novel that "Catherine, at any rate, heard enough to feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty" (183). Henry appears shocked by Catherine's imaginations about his father, arguing that "He loved her, I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to . . . and I will not pretend to say that while she lived, she might not often have had much to bear, but though his temper injured her, his judgment never did"(145). Yet his conviction in the quality of his father's "judgment" is surely misplaced. His father may never murder a wife, but he will send a defenseless young woman traveling unchaperoned without money in a socially vulnerable position because he discovers she was not the material conquest he thought she was.<sup>54</sup> Eleanor feels not only the rudeness of this, but the tremendous threat of it also: "After courting you from the protection of real friends to this—almost double distance from your home, to have you driven out of the house, without the considerations even of decent civility! . . . I seem myself guilty of all its insult" (166). While Henry places such faith in the fact that "we are English" and our education does not "prepare us for such atrocities" nor "our lives connive at them," Eleanor realizes that her father will not even be bound by the social *forms* of consideration for others, much less by genuine concern (145). As we discover, General Tilney does not abide even by the barest form of civility to guests and to

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<sup>54</sup> Carolyn D. Williams points out that "Without a contribution from Eleanor, she would not have had enough money to pay her fare: a potentially disastrous scenario for lone female travelers in any period" (59).

vulnerable young women. And he is more than capable of injuring his family *within* the forms of civility as well.

The mental and emotional repression that General Tilney enacts on his family gives us a clear idea of how he must have treated his wife. While he may not have shut her up in typical Gothic style, per Catherine's imaginations of "the cell in which she languished out her days" (138), General Tilney likely confined her mind and spirits as we see him do to his children. Catherine may misinterpret the actual nature of his repression, but she intuits correctly when upon his departure, "Catherine was shocked to find how much her spirits were relieved by the separation" (131). Later, "His departure gave Catherine the first experimental conviction that a loss may sometimes be a gain. . . . [and] made her thoroughly sensible of the restraint which the General's presence had imposed" (162). Not only does he dramatically inhibit his children's spirits, but he actually silences them. In his first recorded conversation with Catherine and Eleanor, he asks his daughter if she has given her invitation and then says, "'Well, proceed by all means. I know how much your heart is in it. My daughter, Miss Morland,' he continued, without leaving his daughter time to speak, 'has been forming a bold wish'" (100). Eleanor never gets a chance to speak or express her own wishes, and though General Tilney is all attention to Catherine, even she soon finds that, without directly silencing her, he ignores the responses from her which he solicits: "Which would she prefer? He was equally at her service.—Which did his daughter think would most accord with her fair friend's wishes?—But he thought he could discern.—Yes, he certainly read in Miss Morland's eyes a judicious desire of making use of the smiling weather" even though Catherine instead longs to explore the abbey (129). And from the first moment within the abbey, we see Eleanor's terror of displeasing her father by tardiness: "Miss Tilney gently hinted her fear of being late; and in half a minute they ran downstairs



together, in an alarm not wholly unfounded” (120). If such is the experience Mrs. Tilney knew, surely Catherine did not far err in supposing her imprisoned by her husband.

Yet Henry expresses total shock at this assumption, a reminder from Austen, I would suggest, that though he lives equally under the General’s repression, his share of it as a male differs from what his sister knows or, we can assume, his mother knew. Henry has another home and an occupation as clergy that takes him often from home, and away from his father’s eye. He explains to Catherine that “His sister . . . was uncomfortably circumstanced—she had no female companion—and, in the frequent absence of her father, was sometimes without any companion at all” (114). Though Henry assumes her uncomfortable circumstance is her solitude when her father leaves, I would suggest her greatest discomfort is being alone with her father. Unwittingly, Henry recognizes Eleanor’s problem, that “she ha[s] no female companion,” but does not discern that the hardship of that circumstance is that no one understands her situation as a woman confined under her father’s domineering personality without the escape of an occupation. The freedom an occupation and mobility brings to men is an oft-repeated theme in Austen’s novels. As Anne Elliot exclaims in *Persuasion* when defining why women remember their lost loves longer than men do, “We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion” (241). Those Austen heroes, like Edward Ferrars, who lack an occupation find themselves as emotionally confined as her women do. Henry’s employment offers him an escape that he does not seem to fully appreciate when he critiques Catherine for recognizing his father’s truly repressive nature. And he must pay for this ignorance when he discovers his father’s true character at the novel’s conclusion and “blushed” for him (NA 183).

Henry not only lacks a full knowledge of the female situation that women like Mrs. Tilney, Eleanor, and Catherine face, but he also employs a superior masculine tone with

Catherine that I argue undermines his effectiveness as teacher. I do not believe that Henry is meant to be taken as sincere in many of his ironic misogynist-sounding statements. He is far more tongue-in-cheek than some critics would recognize, and Eleanor apparently even worries about this as she corrects him: “And now, Henry . . . you may as well make Miss Morland understand yourself—unless you mean to have her think you intolerably rude to your sister, and a great brute in your opinion to women in general. Miss Morland is not used to your odd ways” (83). Giving Henry the benefit of the doubt, as Eleanor would want us to, I do not suggest that he actually means his chauvinistic-sounding remarks, such as, “No—I will be noble. 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 sometimes down to the comprehension of yours” (82). I will grant that Henry means this in jest, just as perhaps Austen does when she asserts that rational men desire nothing “more in woman than ignorance” and that “a good-looking girl, with . . . a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man” (81).

Yet, if this is jest, there is partial truth lurking inside of it. Though Henry does feel great respect for his sister and does not believe himself as superior to women as he claims, he nonetheless does enjoy the feeling of intellectual superiority he gets when with Catherine. He forever smiles at her naïveté, delights in his opportunities to instruct her, and takes great pleasure in saying fine-sounding things that confound her. We see the aspect of their relationship that Henry most enjoys in one such conversation when Catherine says, “I do not understand you,” to which Henry replies, “Then we are on very unequal terms, for I understand you perfectly well” (96). In a perfect indictment of *him*, I believe, not a “satire on modern language” as Henry imagines, Catherine responds, “yes; I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible” (96). While Henry loves to instruct, he particularly loves to do so unintelligibly because it ensures that he

will maintain the intellectual superiority he delights in. Such a hierarchical mode of instruction does not work successfully in Austen's world.

The largest reason for the failure of this mode of instruction Henry offers in this novel is that Catherine's greatest weakness, as we have seen, is an inability to trust her own judgment and Henry's style does little to nurture her confidence. Instead, Henry sometimes undermines her with his gentle laughter, and other times silences her, even when, as we have seen, his judgment is not as all-knowing as he believes. When Henry defends Captain Tilney's mischief-making actions against Catherine's charge that "suppose he had made her very much in love with him?," Catherine finds herself submitting to his judgment almost against her will: "Frederick could not be unpardonably guilty, while Henry made himself so agreeable" (161). Earlier, we have seen Catherine's conclusion that "it being at any time a much simpler operation . . . to doubt her own judgment than Henry's, she was very soon obliged to give him credit for being right" (155). If Catherine most needs to develop confidence in her own judgment in order to reach maturity, Henry is actually the last person capable of enabling that growth.

### **The Benefit of Sisterly Instruction**

While Henry does the most talking, I would suggest that Eleanor ultimately does more to help Catherine learn than he does. As another woman, Eleanor shares a more sympathetic understanding of Catherine's situations than Henry does. After Catherine is tricked into riding with the Thorpes to Blaize castle and thus breaking her word to the Tilneys, Eleanor more quickly forgives Catherine than Henry does. Once Catherine explains the situation, Henry assures her of "his sister's concern, regret, and dependence on Catherine's honour" (67). Catherine cannot help but comment, "But, Mr. Tilney, why were *you* less generous than your sister? If she felt such confidence in my good intentions, and could suppose it only a mistake,

why should *you* be so ready to take offence?" (68). In view of the disparity we have seen between their circumstances, the brother and sister's differing responses should make more sense to us than it does to Catherine. After all, Eleanor is more accustomed to the experience of being imposed upon and less familiar with Henry's ability to act directly upon his intentions. Eleanor can understand good intentions that others prevent from being executed. Indeed, Eleanor's later experience of being forced to eject Catherine from her home against her will bears striking similarities to Catherine's experience trying to go to the Tilneys while John Thorpe is driving her. Though Catherine begs Thorpe to release her, "to what purpose did she speak?—Thorpe only lashed his horse into a brisker trot. . . . and Catherine, angry and vexed as she was, having no power of getting away, was obliged to give up the point and submit" (62). Just as Catherine lacks the horsemanship ability or the physical strength to escape Thorpe's will and must "give up the point and submit," so Eleanor lacks any authority in her own home to disagree with her father and offer Catherine any protection and similarly must submit to his will. She explains to Catherine, "I trust you will acquit me for you must have been long enough in this house to see that I am but a nominal mistress of it, that my real power is nothing" (166). Eleanor understands the inability to actively remonstrate. For this reason, she offers Catherine a sympathetic understanding that enables her to more profitably learn.

Perhaps it is for this reason that when Catherine explains to Henry that his sister taught her to "love a hyacinth" that she adds "I cannot tell how" (127). Eleanor's instruction of Catherine is of a much more subtle nature. She does not address Catherine from a position of superior intellect as Henry so frequently does, but from a site of mutuality and equality, teaching by example more than with words. Eleanor does not loftily instruct Catherine with long arguments she would not understand. Instead, Catherine imbibes qualities like loving a hyacinth

simply from Eleanor's example. We see Catherine learning modes of civil social behavior from Eleanor, as when she resolves to speak to Eleanor to "propose going away, and be guided in her conduct by the manner in which her proposal might be taken" (162). Catherine knows little about social situations, but Eleanor offers her a model to imitate. From their first meeting, the narrator notes that Miss Tilney's

air, though it had not all the decided pretension, the resolute stilishness of Miss Thorpe's, had more real elegance. Her manners shewed good sense and good breeding; they were neither shy, nor affectedly open; and she seemed capable of being young, attractive, and at a ball, without wanting to fix the attention of every man near her (38).

Eleanor demonstrates practically for Catherine how to behave as a woman with sincerity and decorum. Her mode of instruction by modeling is more humble and more subtle than Henry's.

Moreover, Eleanor speaks earnestly, without Henry's superior irony, and thus communicates to Catherine in a way that our heroine can understand. Her "gentl[e] hint[s]" tend to have more lasting effect with Catherine than Henry's lengthy explanations do because they are more intelligible (120). Eleanor speaks earnestly, couching awkward topics in gentleness rather than in the irony Henry uses. For example, we see her tactfully share her knowledge of social concerns with Catherine: "Miss Tilney was anxious to settle, though somewhat embarrassed in speaking of" Catherine's lack of sufficient funds to get home (169). Her insight is much appreciated here as "Catherine had never thought on that subject till that moment; but, upon examining her purse, was convinced that but for this kindness of her friend, she might have been turned from the house without even the means of getting home" (169). Eleanor's gentle introduction of the question allows Catherine to accept a gift she might otherwise have been

embarrassed to receive. While Henry's oblique manner confuses straightforward Catherine, Eleanor's gentleness softens but does not obfuscate her point. Henry, I suspect, intends to confound, but Eleanor desires mutual understanding, and so better achieves it with Catherine.

This mutuality that characterizes the instructing relationship between women appears for Austen as more potentially fruitful than the male teacher that Burney proposes. In *Northanger Abbey*, the sister-teacher is still overshadowed by the male-instructor. The young women's friendship is shown to be emotionally deep and sympathetic, as opposed to Isabella's effusive insincerity, and we see their "concern" and "affectionate solicitude" for each other most clearly when Eleanor must tell Catherine of her father's expulsion of her and each thinks first of the other's feelings (164). Yet, at the novel's conclusion, Eleanor seems to disappear, surfacing only to soften her father to Henry and Catherine's marriage. Rather than assertively portraying sisterly education in this novel, Austen primarily proposes the failure of masculine instruction as exemplified in Henry Tilney. It is in her subsequent novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, that Austen will depict the full potential of sisters to morally educate each other.

### *Sense and Sensibility*

#### **Moral Growth of a Heroine or Two**

While Catherine's principles are sound in *Northanger Abbey* and she needs only to learn about the reality of her society, *Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne must rethink some of her moral convictions. The narrator explains that Marianne "was sensible and clever, but eager in every thing; her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation" (*S&S* 6). In contrast to her older sister, Elinor, whose "feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them," Marianne "had resolved never to be taught" that knowledge (6). Our younger heroine in this novel does not lack knowledge or intellectual abilities but instead has rejected, by choice, qualities of character we

will see Austen recommend. Out of *Sense and Sensibility*'s sister duo, Elinor is the stronger heroine. It is her thoughts and reality the narrator follows and her choices the narrator commends. She becomes the moral guide for her younger sister Marianne. I will argue that both sisters are able to learn from their relationship, but that Marianne particularly adapts her moral principles to align more with her sister's attitudes and behavior. Near the end of the novel, Marianne explains her conduct to Elinor, "I compare it with what it ought to have been; I compare it with yours" (262). Elinor models the moral conduct she desires in her sister, and through this and her gentle challenges stemming from their intimate relationship, she is able to influence her sister's principles.

Critics, as we have seen, widely debate the degree to which Austen rejects Marianne's worldview and the reasons for that rejection. I will argue that Austen decisively critiques Marianne's romantic individualism as both dangerous for a socially vulnerable female, and thus a matter of survival, and immoral due to its selfishness, and thus a matter of morality. Marianne's sensibility, which Austen assures us "was potent enough!" (63), drives her to denounce all forms of social convention for their insincerity. When Elinor teases Marianne for being too open with Willoughby on a first meeting, Marianne protests, "I see what you mean. I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful" (37). Unlike Catherine, Marianne fully recognizes the insincerity of her society; her chosen response is to abandon its conventions completely for unlimited self-expression. Her individualism does not fully correlate to the modern individualist society that we saw in the previous chapter. She does not share the competition inherent in the rising middle class's philosophy of self-government, embodied as we have seen in characters like Mary

Crawford or Lydia Bennet. But Marianne's romantic individualism does depend on the pursuit of her own desires at the expense of society's demands, leading to Austen's reproof for selfishness.

In opposition to Marianne's romantic individualism, Austen posits Elinor's "plan of general civility" (71).<sup>55</sup> Though Marianne misunderstands any concession to other's expectations as submission to their judgment, Elinor proposes maintaining one's own personal standard of objective morality while showing consideration for others' values. Marianne, with evident sarcasm, asserts, "But I thought it was right, Elinor, . . . to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbors. This has always been your doctrine I am sure" (71). In response, Elinor protests:

No, Marianne, never. My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behavior. . . . 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 judgments in serious matters? (71)

Elinor agrees that her own or her sister's judgment may often be superior to the opinions of those in their society, or of their society in general, but she asserts that they must still adapt their behavior both to serve propriety and to consider others' interests or desires. I will later analyze the purpose of propriety as a mode of protection that Marianne must learn, but here I suggest that certain aspects of propriety and the other issue of "attention" to others are integral to Austen's moral system.

Principally, Austen suggests that ignoring propriety imperils individuals, particularly women, in a dangerous world. But I suggest that Austen also indicates it as a failing of her moral code because Marianne's (and Willoughby's) choice to ignore social mores reveals a

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<sup>55</sup> See Butler's discussion of Elinor's "doctrine of civility" (188).



misunderstanding of human nature. Willing to be a bit harsher in her criticism of Willoughby than of her sister, Elinor notes that she

saw nothing to censure in him but a propensity, in which he strongly resembled and peculiarly delighted her sister, of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances. In hastily forming and giving his opinion of other people, in sacrificing general politeness to the enjoyment of undivided attention where his heart was engaged, and in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety, he displayed a want of caution which Elinor could not approve. (37–38)

By “slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety,” Willoughby and Marianne display “a want of caution”: they do not protect themselves from lowering their reputation nor from potentially entangling themselves in a relationship beyond their willingness to commit. Marianne is, of course, more susceptible to this, and she is the one who suffers from her want of caution when Willoughby brazenly jilts her.

But this “want of caution” represents not only a dangerous deficiency of self-interest but also a moral deficiency of selflessness and self-command that Austen cannot excuse. By rejecting propriety as worthless, Marianne clarifies her belief that an individual’s feelings are always a reliable judge of morality and more sound than social codes. When she inappropriately visits the home of Willoughby’s aunt, implying her assumption that she will marry him and her eagerness for him to inherit that estate, she assures Elinor: “if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should have been sensible of it at the time, for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure” (52). Yet Marianne does *not* “always know when she is acting wrong”; by flouting the conventions of

propriety she asserts that she knows better than the conventions. Though, as we have seen, Austen denies that the external regulations of traditional society have any real power to create moral behavior, she also rejects the idea that personal preference alone can determine what is right. As Butler points out, Marianne holds the Enlightenment, and Romantic, belief in innate human goodness, while Elinor asserts human fallibility in need of some kind of boundary (187). Austen finds social conventions an insufficient, and often insincere, boundary to human selfishness, and the objective moral standard she presents lies beyond the bounds of society's conventions. Yet Austen simultaneously argues that flouting propriety fails just as much to lead Marianne to do what is right.

As Elinor's analysis of Willoughby's behavior suggests, his pursuit of his own interests often comes at the expense of others, lacking "attention to persons and circumstances" and "sacrificing general politeness" to his own enjoyment (37). Later, Elinor clearly pinpoints his most basic moral failing: selfishness. When "Marianne's lips quivered, and she repeated the word 'Selfish?' in a tone that implied—'do you really think him selfish?,'" Elinor explains: "The whole of his behavior . . . from the beginning to the end of the affair, has been grounded on selfishness. It was selfishness which first made him sport with your affections . . . His own enjoyment, or his own ease, was, in every particular, his ruling principle" (266). In his selfishness, Willoughby sacrifices everyone else's interests to his own, nearly destroying tenderhearted Marianne. Yet while Marianne certainly displays far more selfless affection for her sisters and mother than Willoughby ever possesses, Austen suggests that she too is selfish.

Certainly Marianne cares deeply, and selflessly, for those she loves. Elinor need only "appeal to her affection for her mother, by representing the inconveniences which that indulgent mother must draw on herself, . . . Marianne was shortly subdued" when Marianne wishes to

receive Willoughby's impractical gift of a horse (45). When Elinor feels traveling to London would not be best for the sisters, her reminder of leaving their mother with only Margaret causes Marianne to declare, "my mother, my dearest, kindest mother,—I feel the justice of what Elinor has urged, and if she were to be made less happy, less comfortable by our absence—Oh! no, nothing should tempt me to leave her. It should not, must not be a struggle" (115). Marianne's feelings are tender and kind, led more effectively by love than rebuke and revealing why the sister relationship is the most effective context of moral guidance for her. Yet that tender affection gives way before her self-indulgence of her extreme emotions, as when Willoughby leaves and her refusal to eat or sleep gives "pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbid[s] all attempt at consolation from either" (63). Love cannot outweigh her other feelings.

When it comes to those outside her circle of affection, Marianne loses any interest at all in their possible needs. While Mrs. Jennings is taking the sisters to London, Marianne

sat in silence almost all the way, wrapt in her own meditations, and scarcely ever voluntarily speaking, . . . To atone for this conduct therefore, Elinor took immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could. (119)

Elinor may not enjoy Mrs. Jennings' company any more than Marianne does, but she offers her the respect and appreciation Mrs. Jennings' kindness to them deserves. Later, Marianne admits, "Whenever I looked toward the past, . . . Every body seemed injured by me. The kindness, the unceasing kindness of Mrs. Jennings, I had repaid with ungrateful contempt. To the Middletons, the Palmers, the Steeles, to every common acquaintance even, I had been insolent and unjust" (262). Marianne may judge rightly, beyond what Catherine could have, of these characters'

moral failings, but in Austen's world, that gives her no right to lack compassion and kindness towards them. She must learn to adopt some of Elinor's politeness and consideration of others, even when they seem little deserving of respect.

Elinor's self-command not only appears as more moral, expressing a higher measure of selflessness that Austen applauds, but it also appears as a protection against a threatening world. Undeniably, the Dashwood women in this novel face a social system uninterested in their well-being. Though the overall inheritance structure does not prohibit them from receiving an inheritance, it certainly leaves them open to the betrayal of first the late Mr. Dashwood's deceased uncle, and then their greedy stepbrother. This uncle leaves his estate in trust only to Mr. Dashwood to belong to his grandson, a precocious child whose winning ways "outweigh all the value of the attention, which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters" (4). From this opening story, we see a world of injustice to women overall, and the Dashwood women in particular, a world where women give the faithful care and bratty boys receive the inheritance. Later we will see that it is also a world where a man can seduce and impregnate a woman, and leave her social existence shattered, and go on to marry a Miss Grey worth "Fifty thousand pounds!" (145), as Willoughby does. The inheritance structure places men, as well, in precarious positions, leaving Edward at the mercy of his mother, who holds the power to disinherit him and deny him as son. Clearly, women can also hold power here, but this dark novel seems to suggest that women still remain most vulnerable, and no one more so than penniless ones. Lucy Steele and her sister represent one response to this situation: sponging off every distant wealthy relation. They survive by a flattering civility, which Elinor notes as "some kind of sense, when she saw with what constant and judicious attentions they were making themselves agreeable to Lady Middleton" (90). As the narrator explains of conniving Lucy, "Her

flattery has already subdued the pride of Lady Middleton, and made an entry into the close heart of Mrs. John Dashwood” (191). This is one way to survive, but no moral Austen heroine can stoop to such insincerity and deception for greedy gain. Indeed, “the flattery which Lucy was proud to think of and administer at other times” she avoids before Elinor and Marianne because “she feared they would despise her” (185). Elinor and Marianne cannot survive their society by the means of such conniving “sense” without sacrificing Austen’s moral standards.

Yet through her large measure of “strength of understanding, and coolness of judgment,” Elinor can survive her society without compromising her morals, an ability Marianne must learn. Without ever fully compromising her honesty, “upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell” (92). She will not pretend an affection or devotion or preference that she does not feel, but she is willing to express interest when she feels little. Were it left to Marianne, the Middletons, on whose generosity her family’s home depends and subsistence depends, would soon be offended with their tenants. Not only does Elinor’s polite behavior protect their perilous social standing and living situation, but her decorum protects her from a shame that might lose her any hope of a marriage or future. She chooses not to express feelings for Edward until he grants her the confidence to do so. Marianne, conversely, daily exposes herself and her feelings with her passion for Willoughby. Because of this, she makes herself vulnerable “to some very impertinent remarks,” and the assumption of her engagement she gives rise to could easily quash her reputation when it became known that she behaved as if engaged, by writing letters, without that actual commitment (52). After discovering Willoughby’s profligacy, we cannot help but wonder how physically safe she ever was to tour all of Allenham alone in his company. Even when Willoughby defends himself as truly having loved her, he admits that his original intentions were solely “to make myself pleasing to her,

without any design of returning her affection” (242). Had Marianne’s sweetness not won his heart, he would have left her willingly, with a shattered reputation for brazenness that might have ruined forever her future chances of marriage or social standing. Of course, Elinor’s guarded feelings do not prevent her from “suffer[ing] the punishment of an attachment, without enjoying its advantages” (198), yet they do prevent her from being exposed to the world’s “derision for disappointed hopes” (*P&P* 212). This world is cruel to women and impropriety costs them far more than it ever costs men. If Marianne is to have a chance at survival, Austen suggests that she must learn to protect herself by following Elinor’s example.

While *Sense and Sensibility* focuses primarily on how Marianne must grow and mature into the more selfless and self-controlled morality her sister lives by, Elinor, too, must learn and grow. For all Elinor’s self-command and politeness, her judgment is not always unerring or entirely compassionate. She, too, deceives herself about the measure of Edward’s commitment to her when she sees him wearing a ring of hair and makes an unfounded assumption: “That the ring was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne” (*S&S* 74). Because of the large measure of restraint she places on her emotions and hopes, she cannot recognize when she is allowing herself to hope without basis: “she was well disposed on the whole to regard his actions with all the candid allowances and generous qualifications, which had been rather more painfully extorted from her, for Willoughby’s service, by her mother” (77). For all her attention to forms of politeness, Elinor can still be critical of people in her own mind and can also mistake their good intentions or sincerity. While unlike Marianne she at least does not express these injustices, Elinor must learn that her external regulation is not enough in itself. Her tendency to suspect Marianne of melodrama leads to her greatest mistake in the novel: assuming Marianne less sick than she actually is. Elinor pays dearly for this when Marianne nears death: “Hour after

hour passed away in sleepless pain and delirium on Marianne's side, and in the most cruel anxiety on Elinor's . . . Her apprehensions once raised, paid by their excess for all her former security" (236). With Marianne, Elinor learns to examine her heart more honestly and express her pent-up feelings, culminating in her explosion of emotion when she finds Edward is free: "She almost ran out of the room, and as soon as the door was closed, burst into tears of joy, which at first she thought would never cease" (273). Though with less to learn than Marianne, Elinor develops morally through sisterhood to be more able to sincerely value others and her own emotions.

### **Detriments to Sisterhood Hinder Growth**

The factors that impede these two sisters' closeness reveal the primary ways in which sisterhood can and should morally educate. The sisters love one another sincerely from the beginning of the novel, with genuine selflessness and affection, but they do not take full advantage of the benefits of sisterhood to help them mature. Each, for reasons most strongly associated with her own area of moral or emotional weakness, conceals her true feelings and situation from the other, creating much of the misunderstanding between them and exacerbating, rather than alleviating, their suffering. Near the moment of emotional crisis for both sisters, when Willoughby jilts Marianne and Edward's secret engagement to another woman is made known, Elinor and Marianne both recognize this concealment. Indicating their as yet emotional immaturity, both sisters, of course, accuse the other of emotional distance, blinded to their own.

After Elinor has seen Marianne write to Willoughby and impatiently await his letter, suggesting their secret engagement, Elinor reproaches Marianne, "you have no confidence in me, Marianne" (126). To which Marianne replies:

'Nay, Elinor, this reproach from *you*—you who have confidence in no one!'

‘Me!’ returned Elinor in some confusion; ‘indeed, Marianne, I have nothing to tell.’

‘Nor I,’ answered Marianne with energy, ‘our situations then are alike. We have neither of us anything to tell; you, because you communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing.’ (126)

Marianne argues that Elinor communicates nothing because she is so reticent and that she herself is too expressive of her emotions to ever conceal anything. Yet, Elinor’s confusion has been that Marianne will not verbalize what her actions have constantly communicated: “every circumstance except *one* is in favour of their engagement; but that *one* is the total silence of both on the subject, and with me it almost outweighs every other” (61). In fact, openly expressed actions that are never actually declared are the root cause of Willoughby’s behavior anyway; he implies feelings that he never actually commits to. As Marianne explains to Elinor about him loving her: “It was every day implied, but never professedly declared. Sometimes I thought it had been—but it never was” (139). Marianne does not realize that free expression of her feelings without verbalizing them does not equal open communication. Both sisters believe that they have been honest with each other, but they have not been. Marianne points to Elinor’s reserve, and Elinor indicates Marianne’s secrecy. Neither is willing at this moment to recognize her own concealment, too immature to take responsibility for their communication breakdown.

The reasons that each sister keeps secrets from the other reveal, for each of them, her exact area in need of moral education from her sister. Marianne enjoys the thrill of secret romance, and does not wish to expose herself to potential criticism from Elinor for her relationship. Elinor, in contrast, does not trust her sister to have sufficient critical judgment to be a support to her in her trial. An additional reason, the only professed one for Elinor, has been her



commitment to duty, which demands she keep a promise of secrecy given against her will to Lucy Steele. She explains this motive to Marianne when the truth of Edward and Lucy's engagement finally becomes known and Marianne wonders how she could hide her pain so effectively: "By feeling that I was doing my duty.—My promise to Lucy, obliged me to be secret. I owed it to her, therefore, to avoid giving any hint of the truth; and I owed it to my family and friends, not to create a solicitude about me, which it could not be in my power to satisfy" (197). Yet Elinor later admits the deep pain intentionally caused by such a "confidence" as Lucy gave: "It was told me,—it was in a manner forced on me by the very person herself, whose prior engagement ruined all my prospects; and told me, as I thought, with triumph.—This person's suspicions, therefore, I have had to oppose, by endeavoring to appear indifferent where I have been most deeply interested" (198). Intriguingly, Elinor's acceptance of her "duty" to another, whom we might feel does not truly deserve such honor, actually entails her duplicity and insincerity with this person.

Certainly Elinor's fidelity to the promise Lucy slyly and cruelly forced on her has not caused Elinor to feel more generous toward or think more kindly of this person. Elinor does later show her moral determination to be selfless towards both Edward and Lucy, by seeking to promote their comfort, at least in Edward's case, and be as generous as she can against her own inclinations with Lucy. When Edward walks in on Lucy and Elinor in a most awkward scene, Elinor tries to ease their discomfort, first by carrying on the proper polite conversation and then by giving them time alone to talk: "Her exertions did not stop here; for she soon afterwards felt herself so heroically disposed as to determine, under pretence of fetching Marianne, to leave the others by themselves; and she really did it, and *that* in the handsomest manner, for she loitered away several minutes on the landing, with the most high-minded fortitude" (181). Elinor's

intentions are generous, though the narrator's language may ironically treat the sincerity of her choice, suggesting it as pretentious. Towards Edward, Elinor shows kindhearted forgiveness that he does not expect: "and they parted, with a very earnest assurance on *her* side of her unceasing good wishes for his happiness in every change of situation that might befall him" (219). Towards Lucy, Elinor restrains as much as possible any resentment she must feel, avoiding her malicious "confidences" as much as possible not only to protect herself but also in part to avoid creating in herself the same spite that overflows from Lucy: "for she felt such conversations to be an indulgence which Lucy did not deserve, and which were dangerous to herself" (113). Elinor behaves ever graciously to Lucy, and even appears to attempt the high moral road of stemming her ill feelings, but that does not change the reality that Elinor still harbors those ill feelings. Her decision to keep Lucy's confidence expresses a moral consideration of other's needs and wishes, but Austen seems to show that forgiveness does not fully reach Elinor's heart. Looking at Elinor's choice of concealment through Austen's moral standard of internally-motivated external actions, we see it somewhat lacking. Elinor's lack of openness reveals her occasional emphasis on external appearance over internal heart, though Austen still gives her much credit for acting out of a genuine moral spirit.

Elinor's other unconfessed reason for concealing her secret from Marianne reveals an area of even further weakness that she needs true sisterhood to mature beyond. The narrator notes after Elinor first receives the painful communication:

The necessity of concealing from her mother and Marianne . . . was no aggravation of Elinor's distress. On the contrary it was a relief to her, to be spared the communication of what would give such affliction to them . . . which was more than she felt equal to support. From their counsel, or their conversation she

knew she could receive no assistance, their tenderness and sorrow must add to her distress . . . . She was stronger alone. (104–05)

Elinor conveys, in many ways, greater selflessness, though less sincerity, than Marianne does. She thinks far more of the effect she has on others, caring about pain she might cause, than Marianne does. Marianne later learns to appreciate this about Elinor and to seek to imitate it, repenting to Elinor for “leaving you, for whom I professed unbounded affection, to be miserable for my sake” (263). Yet Elinor must learn to receive strength and support from others. Though her mother’s, her sister’s, and her society’s frequent lack of sound judgment makes her self-containment understandable, Elinor must still overcome this unwillingness to share her heart and life with others. Her inability to be open hinders her in developing relationships. Though this may not appear in as immoral a light for Austen as Marianne’s selfishness, it is a weakness. Most importantly, by hiding her heart, Elinor deprives her mother and sister of the opportunity to learn from her example. Elinor denies the educative potential of sisterhood by doing this.<sup>56</sup>

Marianne, on the other hand, preserves her concealment as a further form of self-indulgence. When Willoughby first leaves, Marianne, as much as Elinor, keeps to herself, always choosing long lonely walks in order to prolong and enlarge her sorrow: “her solitary walks and silent meditations, still produced occasional effusions of sorrow as lively as ever” (63– 64). Marianne intentionally dramatizes herself, putting her own indulgence of her emotions over the concern and feelings of her most loving friends. It is this romantic indulgence that almost kills her, giving her “a cold so violent” from “Two delightful twilight walks . . . [where] the grass was the longest and wettest” that it becomes a nearly fatal fever (231). To Elinor, Marianne admits,

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<sup>56</sup> Laurie Buchanan makes a valuable point that Elinor’s lack of openness indicates a disconnect from femininity, arguing that Elinor is “cut off from a woman’s life of intimacy, nurturance and support, from the connectedness with other women that reaffirms their feminine selves” (83). Thus, for Buchanan, communicating with Marianne allows Elinor to “establish[h] the bonds of female friendship, the connectedness that reveals her feminine self” (84–85).

“My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I had felt even at the time to be wrong. Had I died,—it would have been self-destruction” (262). Austen suggests the extreme selfishness of suicide; Marianne has considered no one but herself in pandering to her own feelings. Greater openness with her sister would have allowed Elinor to remonstrate with gentle hints for greater self-control.

Elinor’s exertions are continually extended to guide Marianne toward such self-command whether it is to get Marianne away from solitary rambles, since “Elinor greatly disapproved such continual seclusion” (65), or getting Marianne to sleep: “Her sister’s earnest, though gentle persuasion, however, soon softened her to compliance, and Elinor saw her lay her aching head on the pillow, and saw her, as she hoped, in a way to get some quiet rest” (147). Marianne does not want Elinor’s rebuke, however, for behavior that she knows Elinor would disapprove. When she writes her desperate last letter to Willoughby and Elinor asks “in a tone of the most considerate gentleness, ‘Marianne, may I ask?’” she informs her, “‘No, Elinor . . . ask nothing; you will soon know all’” (134). Marianne refuses to openly admit her questionable choices to Elinor because she does not want to be urged, instructed, or otherwise challenged by her.

When both sisters finally are honest with one another and all concealment is removed, we see the first beginnings of them learning from each other. Elinor reveals to Marianne that self-command can coexist with even the strongest feelings, as she demonstrates after Marianne accuses her: “If such is your way of thinking, . . . if the loss of what you is most valued is so easily to be made up by something else, your resolution, your self-command, are, perhaps, a little less to be wondered at.—They are brought more within my comprehension” (198). In what is perhaps Elinor’s longest and most emotionally-charged speech, indicated by far more broken pauses than ever appear in Elinor’s diction, she conveys the depth of feeling that she has indeed

experienced, and still managed to conceal out of her sense of duty and affection for her sister and mother. Thompson asserts that this speech is “so striking and powerful because it is the first time in the novel where Elinor speaks without restraint” and that “the string of dashes that connect every sentence here are Austen’s invariable sign of emotional agitation” (pars. 11, 12). Elinor openly expresses an emotional depth that Marianne, and perhaps even the reader, has not suspected in her:

—If you can think me capable of ever feeling—surely you may suppose that I have suffered *now*. The composure of mind with which I have brought myself at present to consider the matter, the consolation that I have been willing to admit, have been the effect of constant and painful exertion;—they did not spring up of themselves; . . . —*Then*, if I had not been bound to silence, perhaps nothing could have kept me entirely—not even what I owed to my dearest friends—from openly shewing that I was *very* unhappy. (S&S 198–99)

This first moment of true openness on Elinor’s part brings Marianne to one of her most poignant moments of self-awareness: “‘Oh! Elinor,’ she cried, ‘you have made me hate myself for ever.—How barbarous I have been to you!—you who have been my only comfort, how have borne with me in all my misery . . . Is this the only return I can make you?—Because your merit cries out upon myself, I have been trying to do it away’” (199). With this first moment of fully restored communication between the sisters, sisterhood can become a source of moral education. By gaining openness, the sisters can finally begin to grow through their relationship, through genuinely knowing each other and thus knowing themselves. Austen thus suggests that true moral growth can only come through a relational context rooted in deep emotional intimacy. Further, Marianne can hear Elinor and see her own selfishness in contrast, and Elinor can open

up her heart and admit her weakness, because of the tender love and sympathy both consistently show to each other. Austen suggests that this feminine nurturing relationship based on openness and sympathy is a far more effective means of moral development than any superior male teacher could ever offer.

### **The Emotional Depth of the Sister Bond and Moral Growth**

By presenting these sisters' relationship as the seat of true education, Austen indicates the type of education she favors, in contrast to the model we have seen set up by Frances Burney. Marianne and Elinor are able to learn from each other because of their deep relationship and the selfless love they already have for one another. Affection incites learning. Even in Marianne's fiercest conviction that self-command is unacceptable and controlled emotion reprehensible, her love for Elinor forces her to admit some flexibility to that maxim: "That her sister's affections *were* calm, she dared not deny, though she blushed to acknowledge it; and of the strength of her own, she gave very striking proof, by still loving and respecting that sister, in spite of this very mortifying conviction" (79). Because she cares about Elinor, Marianne is willing to choose politeness to others and restraint over her own emotions after learning of her sister's suffering. Strongly against her sincere, open mode of self-expression, Marianne agrees to treat Lucy and Edward with cordiality and respond to Mrs. Jennings' support of their relationship with absolute discretion: "These were great concession;—but where Marianne felt that she had injured, no reparation could be too much for her to make. She performed her promise of being discreet, to admiration" (199). And initially, until the end of the novel even, it is only with Marianne that Elinor can let her guard down and openly express her emotions. Austen suggests affection as the best incitement to genuine learning, a worthy context for the education she advocates. We repeatedly see this in the novel, as the sisters' affection leads to listening: "The tenderest caresses

followed this confession. In such a frame of mind as she was now in, Elinor had no difficulty in obtaining from her whatever promise she required” (199). The sisters’ tender sympathy and support earns them the right to influence each other.

In contrast to what we saw in Burney’s *Camilla*, Austen proposes influence and offering an example as far higher forms of moral education than direct, overt instruction. One doubts that impetuous Marianne would listen to a monologue on fortitude and decorum; and if she did, I am sure she and Willoughby would mock it delightedly afterwards. And dutiful as Elinor is, she would listen politely but with internal skepticism. Since Austen emphasizes so clearly the maturity and knowledge that expresses itself through one’s character, attitudes, and actions, it makes sense that she believes an example more effective than a lecture. To address the heart of individuals who do not even see into it themselves requires enough intimacy to know the other better than oneself. Elinor and Marianne have a deep enough relationship that Marianne can exclaim, “I, and only I, knew your heart and its sorrows; yet, to what did it influence me?” (262). Even the women’s mother does not fully understand Elinor’s suffering: “She now found that she had erred in relying on Elinor’s representation of herself . . . forg[otten] that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much” (270). Because Marianne knows Elinor so intimately, she can see the genuine nature of the example Elinor sets for her. Because Elinor knows Marianne so completely, she can recognize the failings that will hurt her.

In this intimate relationship, influence can take place and an example can be set. When Elinor must inform Marianne of losing Edward and her own suffering, she fears the pain it will cause Marianne and “was very far from wishing to dwell on her feelings, or to represent herself as suffering much, any otherwise than as the self-command she had practiced since her first knowledge of Edward’s engagement, might suggest a hint of what was practicable to Marianne”

(196). As Marianne expresses, “your merit cries out upon myself” (199). Though she cannot at first fully appreciate that example, even then she becomes “more dissatisfied with herself than ever, by the comparison it necessarily produced between Elinor’s conduct and her own” (203). Later she reproaches herself: “Your example was before me: but to what avail?—Was I more considerate of you and your comfort? Did I imitate your forbearance, or lessen your restraints, by taking any part in those offices of general complaisance or particular gratitude which you had hitherto been left to discharge alone?—No” (263–63). Yet Marianne wrongs herself; she may not have fully responded to Elinor’s example initially, but certainly she is learning from and imitating it now.

The tender influence these sisters have on one another through their affection and example contrasts sharply with the “influence” Lucy Steele has on her sister. Elinor finds herself aggravated by the “impertinence” of the elder Miss Steele, “but she was saved the trouble of checking it, by Lucy’s sharp reprimand, which now, as on many occasions, though it did not give much sweetness to the manners of one sister, was of advantage in governing those of the other” (164). Lucy’s harshness with her sister offers some protection and some instruction, but it has no lasting effect on Miss Steele’s behavior or character. There is no lasting affection between these two, suggesting the roots of this lack of effect. Lucy cares more about her own reputation than her sister’s when she corrects her sister; her total selfishness towards her sister expresses itself when she greedily runs off with Robert Ferrars, stealing her sister’s money “and poor Nancy had not seven shillings in the world” (281). Elinor’s desire to influence Marianne, and Marianne’s wish to help her be open and free, may at times stem from frustration with each other, as we have seen, but it ultimately develops from a deep desire to see the other be happy and complete. When Elinor sees Marianne developing fortitude to bear her sorrows,



She who had seen her week after week so constantly suffering, oppressed by anguish of heart which she had neither courage nor fortitude to conceal, now saw with a joy, which no other could equally share, an apparent composure of mind, which, in being the result as she trusted of serious reflection, must eventually lead her to contentment and cheerfulness. (259)

Knowing and loving her sister as she does, Elinor finds joy in her moral growth because it promises increased future happiness for her.

The intimate, mutual, instructive relationship these sisters share contrasts sharply with the pseudo-sister pair who develops at the novel's end: Fanny Dashwood and Lucy Ferrars, nee Steele. With Lucy settled in as Mrs. Ferrars' "favorite child," she and Fanny live as sisters, and none too affectionate ones. The only hindrance to their contented wealthy lives is "the jealousies and ill-will continually subsisting between Fanny and Lucy, in which their husbands of course took a part" (287). Austen suggests that such "harmony in which they all lived" with their wealth actually holds little value in comparison to the deep sister bond and moral maturity her heroines develop. Marianne and Elinor marry well at the novel's conclusion, but the chief happiness Austen bestows on them is their sisterhood.

Critics have remained unsure how to interpret the dual-marriage ending of *Sense and Sensibility*. While Elinor gets an almost fairy tale ending, with an unlikely turn of events releasing Edward to marry her, Marianne marries the Colonel without us seeing any sort of romantic feelings developing in her. Their marriage is a happy ending for Colonel Brandon, whose deep feelings we have seen all along, but we are not allowed to actually see Marianne's passion or know if it ever rivaled her romance with Willoughby. Austen frames it in a way that does hint at Marianne's lack of agency: "to see Marianne settled at the mansion-house was

equally the wish of Edward and Elinor. They each felt his [Colonel Brandon's] sorrows, and their own obligations, and Marianne, by general consent, was to be the reward of it all" (287). Her choice to marry him seems one of compassion rather than passion: "With such a confederacy against her—with a knowledge so intimate of his goodness—with a conviction of his fond attachment to herself, which at last, though long after it was observable to everybody else—burst on her—what could she do?" (287–88). The narrator explains that "Marianne found her own happiness in forming his . . . and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby" (288). This might not be less romantically satisfying than her previous romance or than Edward and Elinor's.

Some critics have suggested that Marianne's marriage is "a betrayal of the developed character she has become" or as Austen's cruel punishment for her romantic heroine (Kirkham 87).<sup>57</sup> Others try to defend the marriage as happy for Marianne for widely divergent reasons: offering her a retreat from society, giving her a husband similar to the sister she comes to appreciate, or granting her the true man of sensibility and romance as her husband.<sup>58</sup> Marianne's marriage is less romantic, and perhaps intended to be less satisfying than her passion with Willoughby. In part, this does represent her maturity. She moves beyond her "romantic" opinion that "does not approve of second attachments" by loving again and marrying a man of whom she is his second attachment (*S&S* 42). Unromantic as it may be, finding "her happiness in forming his" does represent a maturation beyond her earlier selfishness, and it is hard to believe that the man who has loved her all along so deeply and indulgently would ever do less than whatever

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<sup>57</sup> See Shaffer 129. Also, Duckworth argues that the marriage is dissatisfying because it is not about Marianne's personal happiness but about reconstituting society, which Marianne and Colonel Brandon's marriage does.

<sup>58</sup> Claudia Johnson suggests that with this marriage Austen flouts patriarchy and family ties, permitting happy second attachments for *women* as well as men (69). Susan Sniader Lanser suggests Colonel Brandon as an extension of Elinor (65). Anderson and Kidd mention Brandon's "genuine sensibility" that Marianne can appreciate (137).

would form his beloved's happiness. Colonel Brandon has won Elinor's, Mrs. Dashwood's, and perhaps even the reader's respect for his character and kindness, and one cannot help but feel that loving him represents greater discernment on Marianne's part than loving Willoughby. It may be less exciting, but it is certainly safer, and I suspect wiser.

This ending, I would argue, thus serves to reaffirm Austen's emphasis on her female characters' moral growth, particularly Marianne's, allowing her to demonstrate a selfless attitude, without losing her passion and tenderheartedness. And I further argue that it reiterates the learning context of sisterhood. Marianne's intense personality almost appears dominated by Elinor by Austen's wording that implies Elinor and Edward bestowing their sister as a gift on Colonel Brandon: "Marianne . . . to be the reward of it all" (287). Yet, Marianne also, "at nineteen" has been "placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village" of which Edward is her vicar (288). Socially, she is now over her sister, her patroness. Perhaps, then, Austen allows this sense of a passive Marianne to compensate for her social superiority to her sister and thus to imply that the two will live forever on mutual terms. Certainly, Austen gives more emphasis to the depth and security of the sisters' relationship at this novel's end than to these hastily thrown-together marriages she grants her heroines. It is their sisterhood that is their most satisfying relationship, because it is their sister bond that has been their source of strength and moral challenge. Austen concludes her novel with the sisters, not the lovers: "and among the merits and happiness of Elinor and Marianne, let it not be ranked as the least considerable, that though sisters, and living within sight of each other, they could live without disagreement between themselves, or producing coolness between their husbands" (289). Though critics have suggested a negative tone to this, that it is an impressive feat to survive their proximity, I would argue that Austen is reminding us of these sisters' moral growth and how

much their relationship has matured.<sup>59</sup> As we have seen, Austen never forgets that sisterhood is a challenge and a moral feat for her heroines to achieve.

Far from implying these two sisters are likely to “produc[e] coolness between their husbands,” Austen suggests that the deep bond between these sisters serves to forge relationships around them. The two heroes, whom Austen considers men of “good principles and good sense” are joined by Elinor and Marianne’s relationship: “their being in love with two sisters, and two sisters fond of each other, made that mutual regard inevitable and immediate, which might otherwise have waited the effect of time and judgment” (281). With such a clear earlier statement, I argue that Austen’s closing word can only be taken to remind us of the heroines’ growth and to place sisterhood as the conclusion and ultimate point of the whole novel. Didactic or not, this novel has clearly been about women’s moral, as well as social and emotional, growth, and sisterhood has been the most appropriate context to foster it.

### **Conclusion**

Through *Northanger Abbey*, Austen denies the power of the Rousseauian instructional model with the lofty male tutor shaping the innocent female. Eleanor, rather than Henry, proves the most effective in helping Catherine grow. With *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen affirms the strength of sisterhood in effecting genuine moral growth, showing the benefit of this feminine relational context for education. We see this pattern resurface later when Jane and Elizabeth help each other, and then both instruct Kitty after she is removed from Lydia’s influence. Though sisterhood is primarily denied Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, we see both these heroines effect change in others through feminine sisterly influence. Yet in one Austen novel, an educational

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<sup>59</sup> Amy Levin argues that Austen emphasizes sisterly disunity, reminding the reader of their past friction and suggesting the difficulty of positive sister relationships (39). In contrast, Susan Sniader Lanser suggests that this phrasing represents “Austen’s ambivalence at giving sisterhood the last and unconventional final word in *Sense and Sensibility*” (57).

relationship appears that almost exactly fits Rousseau and Burney's pattern: *Emma*. In this novel, Emma is guided and taught by the hero, Knightley, a man sixteen years her senior, who exclaims to her in his proposal, "I have blamed you, and lectured you, and you have borne it as no other woman in England would have borne it" (*E* 366). Does Emma's relationship with Knightley, and even Fanny's with Edmund, contradict my argument for sisterly education in Austen?

In Fanny's case, we see all too clearly Edmund's failure at his own moral code, suggesting that in the end, Fanny will shape *his* moral standards. But Emma truly is developed morally by Knightley's advice and reproofs, suggesting it as the most Rousseauian of all Austen's novels. Moreover, Emma consistently rejects the possibility of true sister relationships. Though her relationship with her governess has been "almost the intimacy of sisters," Emma preserves a role of superiority in this relationship and in that with her sister and with Harriet, the friend she chooses (55). Emma rejects the mutual friendship she might have had with Jane Fairfax, the only female figure with equal talents as Emma, of whom Emma's sister exclaims, "only Jane Fairfax one knows to be so very accomplished and superior!—and exactly Emma's age" (131). In Emma's own "teaching" relationship with Harriet, she practices a hierarchy that places it far more in line with Rousseau's model than Austen's sisterly one. I suggest that Emma has an almost masculine agency that allows her to hold her own with an older male guide in a way no other Austen heroine could. Even more significantly, though, I assert that Emma loses significantly by missing the true potential of sisterly influence. Emma has clearly refused genuine, educational sisterhood in this novel, and as a result, educational sisterhood refuses her. At the end of the novel, Emma forever loses her chance to be friends with Jane Fairfax, who speedily departs from Highbury. Austen reminds us through this anomaly of a novel that true moral maturity is difficult to reach without sisters.

As we see most clearly in *Sense and Sensibility*, the heroines' sister relationship allows them to perform the sort of feminine-coded instruction that Austen affirms: education by example and influence, rooted in affection and deep sympathy, and developed through an intimate relationship. By affirming such nurturing feminine qualities, and proposing women's moral autonomy and ability to mature as moral beings, Austen raises the value of women. She suggests that women are equal to men in terms of that which she holds in highest regard: morality. While affirming the feminine role of women, she privileges that role as more significant than the masculine one, and far more effective as moral education.

**CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION**  
**AUSTEN EVOKES NEW POSSIBILITIES: REINTERPRETING FEMALE**  
**IDENTITY IN VICTORIAN LITERATURE**  
**THROUGH SISTERHOOD**

Austen creates female characters with moral agency and the potential to struggle and mature as responsible human beings, specifically, as I have argued, through sisterhood. In each of her six major novels, Austen rewards her heroine's moral growth with marriage. Because of this, a few critics have suggested that Austen subordinates female friendship and sisterhood to matrimony, as when Janet Todd argues that "complete female candor seems the first sacrifice to adult heterosexual union" (298). Claudia Johnson denies Austen makes this sacrifice, but suggests Austen's realism claims "it is folly to suppose that female bonding can or should displace men in the minds of sensible women" in this society (91). Johnson and Todd surprisingly go so far as to assert that the eighteenth-century novelists I have analyzed *surpass* Austen in their support of sisterhood.<sup>60</sup> As I argued in Chapter One, Burney's and Edgeworth's novels actually reveal a rejection of sisterhood, and prior domestic novels exclude it entirely.<sup>61</sup> I strongly disagree that Austen makes sisterhood subsidiary. As I have demonstrated, the sister relationship drives Austen's novels, dramatically transforming negative eighteenth-century perceptions. Austen's presentation of sisters is, I argue, so powerful and complex that it opens up

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<sup>60</sup> Johnson suggests that "Unlike Edgeworth, Burney, and West, for example, Austen does not extensively consider female friendships as an important alternative or even supplement to the marital relationship" (91). Todd describes female friendship as "an ideal, avidly sought for its promise of female growth and autonomy" for authors like Burney or Richardson, but not by Austen (319).

<sup>61</sup> See James Thompson, for example, who argues that sister bonds are "rare to the point of nonexistence" in eighteenth-century novels (par. 3).

new possibilities for female identity and women's moral agency in succeeding literature. I further assert that her understanding of sister relationships challenges us as critics to reinterpret feminine characterizations in Victorian literature in view of the moral autonomy sisterhood enacts.

Austen reorients the direction of the domestic novel, upsetting eighteenth-century perceptions of women's identity within society by advocating the domestic family circle and feminine relationships above marriage and social status. In doing so, she partially initiates the domestic ideal that develops over the course of the Victorian period. So far from subordinating sisterhood to marriage, Austen often places higher value on consanguineous relationships, especially those of siblings, than on marital ones. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen analyzes fraternal love when discussing Fanny and William Price's relationship: "even the conjugal tie is beneath the fraternal. Children of the same family, the same blood, with the same first associations and habits, have some means of enjoyment in their power, which no subsequent connections can supply" (247). The love between brothers and sisters, for Austen, surpasses "even the conjugal tie."<sup>62</sup> Yet brothers, Austen reminds us, often fail women in this society, just as her eighteenth-century literary predecessors fearfully warned. In that same passage, Austen admits, "Fraternal love, sometimes almost everything, is at others worse than nothing" (*MP* 247). We see brothers' love for their sisters being "worse than nothing" as John Dashwood denies his sisters a livable sustenance in *Sense and Sensibility*, as James Morland forgets to protect his sister, Catherine, while flirting with Isabella in *Northanger Abbey*, and as even hero Edmund Bertram fails his sisters as a moral guide in *Mansfield Park*. In a society where women rely on brotherly

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<sup>62</sup> It is the emotional intimacy of siblings that she patterns her heroines' marriages after. See Glenda Hudson's *Sibling Love and Incest* for a discussion of the nearly incestuous, sibling-like marriages that Austen creates in three novels (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Emma*). For Hudson, this confirms that Austen privileges family-like emotional intimacy over erotic dynamics.



protection, Austen never forgets how frequently those brothers fall short. She shares the awareness of domestic danger for women shown in eighteenth-century domestic fiction. Yet instead of withdrawing from the family as Burney and Edgeworth seem to do in response to this, Austen advocates embracing the fraternal bond, specifically with the sister.

Austen offers us the solace of sisterhood for the pain of familial failure. As Mrs. Weston exclaims to the hero of *Emma*, “perhaps no man can be a good judge of the comfort a woman feels in the society of one of her own sex” (79). Preceding domestic novelists, like Frances Burney, represent sisterhood as dangerous because it is a potential threat to women’s vulnerability. Even Maria Edgeworth does not dare allow her rational, moral Belinda to be close to her own physical sisters. Burney suggests that her naïve heroines, vulnerable to a dangerous world, are imperiled by other women and only successfully rescued by heroic men like Lord Orville or Edgar. For many eighteenth-century domestic novelists, men serve as the solution to women’s vulnerability and the needed guide on women’s path of moral growth. Though Edgeworth’s *Belinda* offers us women who help other women profitably and suggests that Rousseau’s portrait of the male figure shaping himself a wife is less than ideal, she does not go to the length of offering *sisters* as companions and teachers to one another. Perhaps she fears the familial closeness of such sisterhood, even while she surpasses Burney by allowing female relationships. In contrast to these eighteenth-century domestic novelists, Austen fondly embraces both family relationships *and* female intimacy by advocating sisterhood. In doing so, she offers a new perspective on female identity, which will develop in Victorian thought.

In promoting sisterhood, Austen declares women’s moral strength. I suggest that we must recognize the strength sisterhood reveals in Austen’s work as we come to female characterizations in Victorian literature. Austen’s female characters are strong enough to benefit

from sisterhood rather than be weakened by it. By indicating women's capacity to successfully navigate the pitfalls to sisterhood, Austen asserts female moral autonomy that is equal to men's. In *Mansfield Park*, Edmund loses sight of his moral standards once in love with Mary Crawford, but Fanny preserves her convictions even when Henry's love and offer of security almost sways her. In fact, Fanny's value of sisterhood preserves her, as she cannot forget Henry toying with the Bertram sisters. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy must overcome pettiness relating to his foster-brother Wickham, just as Elizabeth must overcome competition and frustration with her sister Lydia. Austen's heroines prove themselves equally capable of moral struggle as her heroes are, and equally in need of such a struggle.

Further, by linking her moral value of selflessness to larger questions about what social structure is morally sound, Austen suggests that selfless behavior is not a demand for female passivity, but a significant expression of agency. Austen's ethical principles invoke a moral authority that stands outside of hierarchical structures and demands internal motivation for selflessness, not external regulation. Such selflessness is thus the submission of one's self to the concerns of others, but also represents personal independence at the same time. This definition of morality causes sisterhood in Austen's novels to exemplify character and agency. While she posits this moral strength in women, Austen simultaneously distinguishes her female characters by the transformative power of their feminine sister bond. It is the affection, nurture, and subtlety that characterize their sister relationship that Austen proposes is their greatest asset. She presents femininity as a strong force in spite of its socially enforced vulnerability: equally morally responsible, equally rational, equally capable, but more mutual, more nurturing, more tender, more affectionate, more relational, and stronger because of that. With this advocacy of familial

intimacy, powerful femininity, and female moral influence, Austen certainly foreshadows the Victorian domestic ideal.

Austen's positive portrayal of sisters opens the door to portraits of close sister bonds in Victorian literature that were not possible in eighteenth-century literature, along with new depictions of female identity. We find examples of devotion between sisters, women as moral guides, and agency within the domestic sphere in multiple novels that succeed Austen. Though not all literature in the nineteenth-century demonstrates identical perspectives on sisterhood or women, close sister bonds do surface across various genres in Victorian novels, a literary phenomenon that I argue Austen makes possible. I further argue that understanding the new presence of sisterly intimacy in Victorian literature is crucial to comprehend this era's developing concept of feminine identity. Literary examples of close sisters or sister-like relationships occur in novels such as Wilkie Collins's sensational *Woman in White* and Charlotte Brontë's domestic novel *Shirley*. Close sister connections are sufficiently valued that these novels' female characters, though not technically related, pattern their relationships upon sisterhood. Though only step-sisters, Marian Halcombe fiercely protects Laura throughout *Woman in White*, and when Laura draws up her legal marital documents, she begs her attorney, "pray make it law that Marian is to live with me" (173). The devotion between these two sisters enables their survival, even, at first appearances, beyond death. Similarly, in Brontë's novel, Caroline Helstone describes the sister-like intimacy of her relationship with Shirley Keeldar:

Shirley, I never had a sister—you never had a sister; but it flashes on me at this moment how sisters feel towards each other. Affection twined with their life; which no shocks of feeling can uproot . . . affection that no passion can ultimately outrival. . . . Love hurts us so, Shirley, it is so tormenting, so racking, and it burns

away our strength with its flame; in affection is no pain and no fire, only sustenance and balm. I am supported and soothed when you—that is, *you only*—are near, Shirley. (222)

Affection, support, and comfort are understood as keystones of sisterhood by these characters. That these qualities, culturally understood as feminine, came to characterize sisterhood may help explain their role in defining women's ideal identity in literature. Yet we must examine the moral strength sisterhood represents in Austen in order to effectively analyze such Victorian female characters, because it is from her novels that such deep emotion between sisters begins. Shirley and Caroline's or Laura and Marian's deep sisterly devotion reflects the emotional depth Austen consistently connects to her heroines' sister relationships.

The deepest emotion of an Austen novel is always reserved for the sister (or sister-like) pairs, unseating even the plot's romance and suggesting depths to her female characters that I suggest similarly resonate in Victorian sister characters as well.<sup>63</sup> Even in Austen's most romantic novel, *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth initially rejects Darcy in large part for his role in "ruining, perhaps for ever, the happiness of a most beloved sister" (212). Her sister means more to the heroine than even her suitor, demonstrating her devotion to a selfless relationship based solely on emotional ties rather than one offering social benefit. Even more strongly in other novels do feelings about sisterhood often outweigh all other emotions, reminding us that this deep value placed on sisterhood by Austen and her successors must be understood to fully grasp her characters. Marianne and Willoughby may have the great passion of *Sense and Sensibility*, and Edward and Elinor the most enduring love, but the two sisters share the deepest, most

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<sup>63</sup> Christine St. Peters argues that sisterhood even rivals marriage in directing each novel's plot, suggesting that the novels are each as much about finding the woman as finding the man. She argues that "while an Austen heroine needs a husband, a man is not enough. She also needs a woman. Integral to the securing of a suitable male is the search for a compatible woman" (474).

passionate emotion of the novel. The first time we see Elinor weep in the whole novel is out of her intense sympathy for Marianne: “Elinor drew near, but without saying a word; and seating herself on the bed, took her hand, kissed her affectionately several times, and then gave way to a burst of tears, which at first was scarcely less violent than Marianne’s” (S&S 135). Violent emotion in Elinor indicates something significant; this is a woman who calmly offers her lover a living that will enable him to marry another woman. Expressions of emotion are rare and deeply meaningful from Elinor. Such literary representations of intense emotional connection between women, particularly sisters, is unprecedented in Austen’s time. Yet through her portrayal it becomes commonplace by Caroline Helstone’s declaration in *Shirley*.

Emotions about sisterhood run deep in all Austen’s novels, even concerning the sister bonds that do not form. In *Persuasion*, Anne can almost rationalize away even her regret at being persuaded to give up Wentworth, yet she cannot deny a sense of loss about sisterhood. For all the injustices of her family’s treatment of her, Anne’s most sincere regret when comparing them to the Musgrove family is “that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little with her sisters” (P 78). Perhaps the most tragic part of Fanny’s entire oppressed story is the little note the narrator gives when she returns home to Portsmouth: “she could not but think particularly of another sister . . . whom she had left there not much younger . . . when the news of her death had at last reached Mansfield, [Fanny] had for a short time been quite afflicted” (MP 387). Such a childhood sorrow is made to feel crushing for the very way it is minimized in Fanny’s life and even the novel itself. Austen forces sisterhood upon our notice as a driving force in her female characters’ developing sense of identity. Surpassing even Catherine’s open longing for Henry’s affections, Eleanor’s ache for a sister is presented in *Northanger Abbey*: “I have no sister, you know . . . it is impossible for me not to be often solitary” (132). Though Emma, alone

of all Austen's heroines, seems able to deny sisterhood with little regret, even she begins to grieve her rejection of Jane Fairfax's friendship: "had she tried to know her better; had she done her part towards intimacy; had she endeavored to find a friend there instead of in Harriet Smith; she must, in all probability, have been spared from every pain which pressed on her now" (*E* 359). Austen's novels show significant emotional depth and moral potential to be found in sisterhood. By suggesting this role of sisterhood, Austen departs strongly from her eighteenth-century predecessors and enables the attachment we see between sisters in various Victorian novels. I argue that this sister relationship carries implications about female identity—in its femininity, morality, and domesticity—that critics must take into account when analyzing Victorian sisters.

The fact that deep emotional connection between sisters is expected in some Victorian novels, and at least allowed in others, relates to the greater value placed in this literary time period on the domestic family circle than in eighteenth-century literature. The sanctity of the family becomes a Victorian theme. As Glenda Hudson explains, the family becomes in Victorian literature a "refuge from the debasement of the changing world" (5). Nancy Armstrong's argument in *Desire and Domestic Fiction* suggests that the domestic novel helped create this idealization of a feminine domestic sphere, as part of a quest for women's political subjectivity. I suggest Austen, with her use of sisterhood, plays a crucial role in this return to the domestic, family circle. In contrast to the eighteenth-century domestic novel, we discover examples of women as supports to each other and even moral guides to one another in Victorian fiction. Indeed, Patmore Coventry's idealized woman in *The Angel in the House* posits women as the supreme moral force through their domestic role. Some Victorian domestic novels, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*, even suggest the possibility of political power through feminine

domestic influence. Nina Auerbach asserts that Gaskell's *Cranford* and Brontë's *Villette* "depict communities of women that have moved from the sphere of household management into that of government" (77).<sup>64</sup> This feminine power markedly differs from domestic novels prior to Austen, which clearly depict women's moral abilities but do not believe women are capable of leading each other to moral maturity.

Austen, however, proposed women's potential as moral teachers, not just as the sex in need of moral guidance. Fanny Price, after all, becomes the final moral force in *Mansfield Park*. Elizabeth Bennet discovers in *Pride and Prejudice*, that "by her ease and liveliness, his [Darcy's] mind might have been softened, his manners improved" (318). The Dashwood women create a home that exhorts Edward Ferrars to occupation and purpose and causes even greedy, self-indulgent Willoughby to exclaim of their cottage, "To me it is faultless. Nay, more, I consider it as the only form of building in which happiness is attainable" (55).<sup>65</sup> By suggesting this potential of women's moral influence, through the domestic sphere, Austen partially helps create the Victorian domestic ideal of the "Angel in the House." Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar discuss this "Angel in the House" idea as "The ideal woman that male authors dream of creating" (20).<sup>66</sup> Victorian thought romanticizes the female moral agency Austen introduces, suggesting perfection in her moral influence through the domestic sphere that denies any need for political agency. Yet Victorian literature struggles with this idealism, creating, I argue, more complex female characters than this angelic figure.

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<sup>64</sup> In looking specifically at Gaskell, Susan Morgan suggests that these novels indicate a need to get femininity into the now brutal public sphere, implying the political potential of feminine community (*Sisters in Time* 86–88).

<sup>65</sup> See Merike Tamm's description of this happy and influential community of Dashwood women in "Performing Heroism" p. 397.

<sup>66</sup> See also Virginia Woolf's discussion of killing the Angel in the House in "Professions for Women," specifically pp. 226–38.

This idealized portrait of moral femininity is typified in Coventry's poem, giving the "Angel in the House" image its name, as well as in John Ruskin's lecture "Of Queen's Gardens." Ruskin describes women's "queenly power" and "the order and beauty induced by such benignant power" and argues that "woman's power is for rule, not battle,—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision" ("Of Queen's Gardens" 77). In articulating such a lofty sphere of feminine moral influence, Ruskin creates an idealized figure who seems almost innately moral: "She will find what is good for her; you cannot; for there is just this difference between the making of a girl's character and a boy's—you may chisel a boy as you would a rock, or hammer him into it . . . But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does" (83). This makes female morality seem intrinsic, partially minimizing the achievement and effort of it.

Such an effortlessly angelic figure, with her feminine modesty and domesticity, seems to appear in various Victorian novels from Dickens's Agnes Wickfield in *David Copperfield* to Brontë's Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* to Wilkie Collins's Laura Fairlie in *Woman in White*. Caroline Helstone, for example, is described as the epitome of feminine grace in *Shirley*: "Caroline . . . is the soul of conscientious punctuality and nice exactitude . . . so delicate, dexterous, quaint, quick, quiet . . . all insular grace and purity" (439). She further embodies gentle, instinctive moral influence within the domestic sphere, as her lover Robert Moore describes: "Supposing . . . whenever her face was under your gaze, or her idea filled your thoughts, you gradually ceased to be hard and anxious, and pure affection, love of home, thirst for sweet discourse, unselfish longing to protect and cherish, replaced the sordid cankering calculations of your trade" (452). Characters such as Caroline, and her female author, are subject to fierce criticism by feminist scholars for sacrificing female subjectivity to a patriarchal ideal.



Her domestic perfection appears as a disguise to obscure her separation from the public sphere of “trade.” Gilbert and Gubar protest that the Angel in the House ideal, and her corresponding female monster image, “have also pervaded women’s writing” and assert that “women must kill the aesthetic ideal through which they themselves have been killed into art” (17). For these scholars, submitting to the feminine ideal denies “female autonomy” because such an angelic figure is “of course, *self-less*, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests” and thus useful to male artists because “wholly passive, completely void of generative power” (Gilbert and Gubar 28, 21). These critics imply that highly moral, domestic, and feminine characters cannot portray or even relate to Austen’s assertion of women’s moral agency through feminine influence. Female authors of such characters are assumed complicit in an objectifying ideal.

Yet I suggest that many of these novels defy, at least in part, the standardization of female identity that such idealism entails. And I assert that they do so through their use of sisterhood and female friendship. As Austen’s novels show, sisterhood does promote domestic relationships, moral character, and the benefit of subtle and affectionate feminine influence rather than masculine intervention. Yet in promoting this moral feminine domesticity, sisterhood simultaneously challenges the idea of a uniform, perfect, passive ideal of such qualities. Sisterhood requires tremendous moral action and agency, as Austen’s portrayal of sisterly rivalry declares. Moreover, the very nature of sisterhood entails variety and complexity in female identity. By introducing intimate sisterhood, Austen implies that more than one form of femininity exists. Her sister characters are different yet each is positively presented. Though Austen obligates Marianne to learn self-command and concern for others, her impulsiveness and energy are never transformed into Elinor’s quiet manner, whose “joy was of a different kind, and

led to any thing rather than to gaiety. . . . All within Elinor's breast was satisfaction, silent and strong" (S&S 238). Catherine Morland gains from Eleanor Tilney's maturity and insight in *Northanger Abbey*, but she does not ever fully lose her tendency toward hasty action and impetuously speaking her warm feelings and ideas. I suggest that in *Pride and Prejudice* Jane and Elizabeth learn from each other to be more discerningly skeptical and more optimistic and trusting respectively. Yet Jane remains the sweet, passive sister, unable to think ill of people, and Elizabeth the assertive, witty sister unafraid to speak her mind.

Gilbert and Gubar suggest that this is a form of doubling that enables Austen's "cover story," allowing Austen to present her own subversive voice through the sister who must be tamed while also displaying the socially acceptable Angel in the House figure (154, 160). They assert that in spite of Austen's covert efforts to attain autonomy for her female characters, they must submit to "the humiliating acknowledgment on the part of the witty sister that she must become her self-denying, quiet double" (162). To this claim, I protest the genuine realism of Austen's sister portraits. These sister figures are allowed to be fully rounded human beings, and their mutual relationship means that both learn from each other. I argue, instead, that Austen offers these sisters as equal but different forms of female identity. Both sisters in every novelistic instance embrace the feminine qualities of affection, intimacy, and subtlety, as well as Austen's moral value of selflessness, by valuing sisterhood. Yet each sister remains distinct, unique. Sisterhood enables Austen to create multi-faceted female identities, each growing to achieve her moral standard and each embodying some form of feminine influence, yet each distinctive in personality and character. This female complexity becomes even more striking in comparison to the characterizations of women in eighteenth-century domestic novels.

I suggest that sister relationships entail psychological complexity; thus Austen's creation of female intimacy, especially between sisters, engenders greater realism about varied female identity than the domestic novel in the eighteenth-century possesses. Certainly authors like Charlotte Smith, Frances Burney, and Maria Edgeworth reveal the reality of women's perilous social situation. Yet, their heroines often remain flat, and even stereotypical. Burney's Camilla grows, but her character remains impulsive and in need of guidance: "that sweet, open, generous, inconsiderate girl, whose feelings are all virtues, but whose impulses have no restraints" according to her mother (120). Edgeworth's Belinda may be rational, but she is only ever strong, stable, and wise. I suggest that placing women in a sister relationship requires them to have faults, just as entering any close relationship forces us as human beings to acknowledge our own flaws. If we remain emotionally distanced from others, we can preserve our idealized image of ourselves. Similarly, eighteenth-century heroines have only villainous female foils, accompanied by a positive male ideal or two, permitting the heroine to be the perfect embodiment of feminine identity in the world of her novel. Sister relationships where both sisters love each other and possess personal value require that each have flaws and that each have a distinct characterization. I argue that sisterhood's creation of such female complexity holds true in literary portrayals beyond Austen, in Victorian novels as well.

In Victorian novels with female friendships, like those of Shirley and Caroline in *Shirley* or Laura and Marian in *Woman in White* that we have noted, the differences between female characters demands diversity in their identity as women, which defies the power of the angelic ideal. While Caroline Helstone and Laura Fairlie may embody this domestic ideal, their counterpart sister figures do not. In *Woman in White*, for example, Laura Fairlie is a "fair, delicate girl" radiating innocence, charm, and gentleness, while Marian Halcombe is "ugly" yet

“bright, frank, and intelligent” (Collins 90, 74). As Marian herself explains, “I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short she is an angel; and I am—. . . finish that sentence, in the name of female propriety, yourself” (76). Marian specifically declares her distinction from Laura in not belonging to the ideal. Yet Marian wins the narrator’s respect as fully as Laura wins his heart.

Similarly, Caroline in *Shirley* is referred to by Robert’s brother, Louis Moore, as “a lily of the valley, untinted, needing no tint,” the delicate purity of idyllic femininity. But he then describes her friend Shirley as “bear[ing] nearer affinity to a rose: a sweet, lively delight guarded with prickly peril” (Brontë 439). The two are different, yet Caroline’s form of beauty is no more highly valued than Shirley’s. Indeed Louis Moore defines these two women in order to explain his preference for Shirley: “My wife, if I ever marry must stir my great frame with a sting now and then . . . I was not made so enduring to be mated with a lamb: I should find more congenial responsibility in the charge of a young lioness or leopardess” (439). These sister figures merit equal social value and moral credibility in these and various other Victorian novels, in spite of their striking differences in personality, appearance, and character traits that position them as foils to each other. The dramatized differences between women in these novels, I suggest, serve to emphasize the potential for variety in female identity. Such is the nature of sisterhood in literature, as Austen’s transformation of its role proclaims.

Austen’s powerful portrait of sisterhood compels us as critics to reinterpret characterizations of women in many of the Victorian novels that succeed her. Viewing certain “angelic” female characters like Caroline Helstone or Laura Fairlie as weak—because they are *so* passive, delicate, and gentle—oversimplifies the moral feat Austen declared sisterhood to be

when she introduced the possibility of devoted sisters to literature. Austen shows us through her novels the moral maturity, and even moral agency, found for women in valuing sisterhood.

When we look at the sister relationships of Victorian female characters, I argue that we begin to discover the depth of their moral struggle and growth. We must understand the eighteenth-century context of sisterhood, transformed by Austen, that precedes Victorian heroines who are critiqued for appearing to fit the objectified ideal, so we can better appreciate the struggle such heroines must make in order to value sisterhood.

In *Woman in White*, Laura Fairlie's gentle, loving behavior appears as instinctive and easy, fitting her overly passive nature that denies her own happiness to fulfill a promise of marriage. Recalling the eighteenth-century literary context of sisterhood prior to Austen reminds us of a different perspective. The social competition women face, which is exacerbated for sisters, should remind us of the moral battle Laura has chosen to overcome by denying her superiority in social status to her step-sister, even if the narrative does not draw attention to that point. As the infatuated narrator notes:

While Mrs. Vesey and Miss Halcombe were richly clad . . . , Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin . . . it made her, so far as externals went, look less affluent than her own governess. At a later period, when I learnt to know more of Miss Fairlie's character, I discovered that this curious contrast, on the wrong side, was due to her natural delicacy of feeling and . . . aversion to the slightest personal display of her wealth. (94)

Similarly, though Caroline may initially appear as passive and overly perfect, her sister-like relationship with Shirley involves a severe struggle to overcome jealousy over Robert's wooing of Shirley: "*what shall I do when Robert is taken quite from me? Where shall I turn? My Robert!*

I wish I could justly call him mine: but I am poverty and incapacity; Shirley is wealth and power . . . This is no sordid suit: she loves him . . . Let them be married then: but afterwards I shall be nothing to him” (219). Though withdrawing from Shirley during this emotional conflict, it is when they first meet again that Caroline offers her declaration of sisterly affection that we saw earlier. Sisterhood is no simple or inevitable action for these female characters. Choosing sisterhood involves overcoming social obstacles and personal conflicts that engender competition and division. When looking at these women in terms of their sister relationships, they appear anything but weak.

I argue that sisterhood in Victorian novels, as well as in Austen’s, protests the uniformity of an exaggerated, limited domestic ideal. At the same time, the deeply affectionate, supportive, and mutual relationship between these sisters embraces qualities seen as feminine in both Austen’s novels and Victorian literature. Similarly, close sister relationships assert the importance of valuing the domestic family circle. I suggest that sisterhood serves as a reminder that the “Angel in the House” ideal has limits; sister relationships in Austen assert that proposing a female identity which values domesticity and feminine relational qualities need *not* enforce a flat and objectifying ideal. Austen certainly encourages a moral standard of selflessness, but it is one equally applied to men and women alike. Her presentation of the value of sisterly education privileges feminine qualities. But her assertion of such feminine moral influence through sisterhood undermines critics’ attacks upon such portraits of female morality and domesticity as inherently objectified and agency-less. Austen’s sisters exemplify moral agency and strength. Through them, she challenges entire social systems and a condescending male-educator ideal. Austen’s offers a powerful, compelling portrait of women’s capacity through sisterhood,

challenging the limited potential eighteenth-century literature had offered and urging us to recognize the achievement of feminine autonomy that sisterhood represents.

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