

A SAFE PLACE:
JANE AUSTEN
AND
THE RICHARDSONIAN INHERITANCE

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by
NANCY RUTH FAWCETT, B. A., M. A.

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ABSTRACT

Jane Austen's novels have often been viewed as realistic portrayals of the time in which she lived. This paper attempts to modify this view by examining her work in the context of the novels of Samuel Richardson, the writer whom she reportedly admired above all others. There are many differences between the two authors, but their subject matter is essentially the same: the hearts and minds of marriageable young women. Richardson's heroines, however, are threatened and harassed while Austen's are free to experience without fear, and to learn without danger. In "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man", a parody she wrote of Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, Austen satirizes Richardson's timorous heroines and aggressive heroes; in her novels, women are self-assured and men are not frightening.

An examination of the social history of the eighteenth century and the letters of Jane Austen, however, demonstrates that the world of her novels is not the one she knew. Her much misunderstood letters, in particular, show that her attitudes towards sexual relationships have much in common with those of Samuel Richardson. In addition, her letters illustrate the source and significance of her celebrated irony.

Finally, this study concentrates on *Mansfield Park*, the novel that appears to contradict Austen's other novels. *Mansfield*

Park is didactic and unironic; it has an oppressed heroine, powerful male characters, and a society that neither appreciates nor defends women. In *Mansfield Park* the Richardsonian inheritance and Austen's social and sexual views come together and provide insights into her work. Jane Austen's heroines, with the exception of Fanny Price, inhabit a safe place she creates for them. Her rejection of the dangers of women's lives, which Richardson depicts so well, is proof, not of her realism, but of her artistry.

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION:
FROM SIR CHARLES GRANDISON
TO MANSFIELD PARK

This study of Jane Austen's novels grew out of my first reading of her parody of Samuel Richardson's last novel, shortly after it was published in 1981. Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man", a play intended for private performance, is a small but significant addition to her canon for it provides a new perspective on her relationship to Samuel Richardson, which in turn raises questions about the underlying assumptions of her own work. "Sir Charles Grandison" is a parody of Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* (1754), and is unremarkable except for the object of the only sustained satire it contains: Richardson's depiction of the sexes. Faintly at first, but with growing vigour as the play progresses, Austen ridicules his arrogant men who are capable of superhuman deeds and his beleaguered women who are praised as the best of their sex. Special scorn is reserved for the fear and subservience that characterizes women's attitudes to men; Austen's Harriet Byron flutters and faints before a bored villain and a boring hero. It is hardly surprising that Austen would parody Richardson's heroes and heroines, for her heroines are seldom afraid, and her heroes are rarely intimidating. It is comforting to turn to a novel by Jane

Austen after finishing *Clarissa* or *Sir Charles Grandison* ; the air of fear and anxiety that permeates even Richardson's comedies is replaced by an atmosphere of what seems to be reassuring normality.

Yet a growing body of evidence suggests that Richardson's view of the sexual relationships of his time is not as perverse as it is often assumed to be. Eighteenth-century authors of conduct books and present day social historians agree that women did have much to fear from the aggressiveness and arrogance of men. Richardson's emphasis on women's vulnerability to violence and coercion is not misplaced, although the form it took in his novels — the famous scenes of abduction and rape — is heightened and exaggerated. Abduction and rape were real problems, but the greatest danger by far was the violence done to women's minds and wills by restrictive definitions of femininity and callous men. Richardson documented this kind of violence too, but tried in his comedies to reconcile it with the patriarchal order of his society.

The letters of Jane Austen show a woman who took a conventional view of marriage and sexual roles. Like Richardson, she holds out the hope that an exceptional and lucky woman may marry the man she loves, but believes that most marriages are and should be made on the basis of liking and respect. Parental approval is necessary, as are considerations of rank and wealth, and differences in temperament or taste are much less significant. She has little sympathy for women who are unhappily married; like Sir Charles Grandison's mother, a woman should create her own happiness

and not burden her husband or friends with her disappointments. From her letters it is clear that Jane Austen did not substantially disagree with Richardson's assessment of how women should live in their society, and the Austen family tradition that, as a reader, she admired Richardson above all other novelists makes sense. He wrote about women as they were in the society she knew, and she respected the truth of his observations.

As an artist, though, Jane Austen had a more ambivalent attitude to Richardson. Her own novels stress women's possibilities rather than their limitations, and depict societies which, if unfairly prejudiced against women, present no insurmountable obstacles to the intelligent woman. Her heroines are free of tyrannical fathers and encroaching suitors, and enjoy both fine minds and the opportunity to exercise them. Yet one novel, written after she had published *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, is different. In *Mansfield Park* she turns back to Richardson and acknowledges her debt to him while criticizing his belief that women can flourish in the patriarchal society that he describes. The novel is partly a tribute to and partly a parody of *Sir Charles Grandison*, and copies the situation, characters, and relationships of Richardson's work but withholds his acceptance of the contradictions that govern women's lives. Like Richardson, Austen contrives a happy ending for her novel; however, she makes her distaste for the artificial resolution plain.

Mansfield Park is a perplexing hybrid of a novel, but it is an

invaluable guide to Austen's attitude to Richardson and to her novelistic technique. "Sir Charles Grandison" is a failed parody, a weak effort that is too insignificant to carry the weight of her reaction to Richardson's achievement. *Mansfield Park*, however, demonstrates that Jane Austen's so-called limitations and her characteristic mode of irony are wrapped up in her response to Richardson. In order to write comedies about the hearts and minds of women she had to avoid emphasizing the restrictive, frightening conditions that Richardson describes so well: the fathers, husbands, and brothers who demand obedience; the suitors who are deceitful and aggressive; the contradictory expectations that reduce women to passive immobility. If it is a relief to turn to Jane Austen after Samuel Richardson it is because her novels are free of paradoxical situations that cannot be resolved. Her novels are about women and, in fact, there are few men in them and little interest in male concerns such as war, business, or politics. Finally, her heroines have few restrictions. Fathers are either too silly or too alienated to interfere with their daughters' lives, while the few brothers that appear are absorbed in problems of their own. A heroine may have one problem to contend with — usually a lack of money — but every heroine is blessed with intelligence and self-confidence, and her financial situation is not dire enough to threaten her with the prospect of becoming a governess or paid companion. In all but one of her novels, Jane Austen sanitizes her society so that her work can celebrate women's potential; she repudiates Richardson's emphasis on

fear and limitation in order to achieve her goals.

Mansfield Park, however, is her attempt to meet Richardson on his own ground. *Mansfield Park* has everything that her other novels do not: a weak, vulnerable heroine; a powerful patriarch and a stronger than normal focus on men's concerns; female characters who are frustrated by society's definition of their femininity; and sexual relationships that are, without exception, characterized by dishonesty and blindness. In *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen shows what she excludes from her other novels, and why the omissions are necessary; she returns for another look at *Sir Charles Grandison* and notes her debt to, and her independence from, its author.

This study begins with an examination of Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man" which focusses on the play's parody of the novel's sexual definitions and relationships. Austen touches on *Sir Charles Grandison's* more obvious targets — its obsession with detail and the minutiae of everyday life — but bases her satire on its depictions of the perfect man, the perfect woman, and the ideal family. Chapters II and III challenge the assumptions that Richardson's view of sexual matters was unrealistic and that Austen shared neither his world nor his opinions. Eighteenth-century conduct books and the work of Lawrence Stone, Randolph Trumbach, and other social historians provide evidence that the dilemma of the Richardsonian heroine was a heightened but by no means untruthful representation of the frustrations and fears of women of the time.

Meanwhile, Jane Austen's letters reveal her knowledge and acceptance of these problems as well as her modes of expression and their significance.

Chapters V, VI, and VII are devoted to *Mansfield Park*. *Mansfield Park* is central to a study of Austen's fiction because it simultaneously acknowledges and parodies Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*; the story of Fanny Price incorporates Richardsonian elements that are not found in Austen's other novels, and her handling of this material highlights the characteristic style and exclusions of her other work. Each of these three chapters concentrates on one aspect of *Mansfield Park* that is not found in *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, or *Persuasion*. Thus, Chapter V explores the patriarchal order in *Mansfield Park*, while Chapter VI examines the novel's characterizations. Chapter VII looks at the relative absence of irony in *Mansfield Park* and its importance in the other novels. Chapter VIII, the Conclusion, provides an overview of the paper, and suggests a reevaluation of Austen's canon in light of this study's conclusions.

CHAPTER II

THE EVIDENCE OF "SIR CHARLES GRANDISON"

Ever since James Edward Austen-Leigh published his *Memoir of Jane Austen* in 1870 scholars of her novels have been both puzzled and intrigued by his assertion that Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison* was her favourite novel and its author her favourite novelist.¹ The ambivalent reaction is reflected in the manner in which critics write of the similarities and differences between the works of the two writers. The differences between them are obvious and specific: Austen is concise, witty, and ironic while Richardson is prolix, moral, and serious.² Their similarities, however, are discussed in terms that are more tentative. Thus, Jocelyn Harris states that Austen's attitude to her predecessor's work is "creatively critical",³ while A. D. McKillop sets the tone shared by most writers on this topic when he says that Austen received through *Sir Charles Grandison* "the tradition of a judgment of society by the intelligent feminine mind, secured by an accepted social and moral system".⁴ In fact, relatively few direct parallels can be drawn between the novels of the two authors, although good work has been done in this area.⁵ Jane Austen did not imitate Richardson; his influence on her can best be described as an inheritance from which she learned, in the words of B. C. Southam, "how to develop

her own personal style of social comedy — *domestic* social comedy, closely and realistically observed, from the woman's point of view".⁶

The Richardsonian inheritance is, most prominently, a matter of the novelist's attitudes to the status of women in his society. As the preeminent chronicler of women's lives in his time, he defines femininity, explores women's hearts and minds, and sets down rules of conduct for the female sex. In *Sir Charles Grandison* he created an immense social comedy which focusses on the situations of two marriageable heroines. Jane Austen's parody of this novel, "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man" reveals her attitude towards her inheritance; later, and much more skilfully, her attitude to Richardson is revealed again, in *Mansfield Park*.

The curious history of "Sir Charles Grandison", which was not credited to Austen until 1977, and not published until 1981,⁷ is matched by its peculiarities of composition. In the introduction to his edition of the play B. C. Southam deduces, from the technical and historical evidence, that Austen began the play in the early 1790s, put it aside and then worked on it again, intermittently, between 1796 and 1800 with the help of her young niece Anna.⁸ Southam cautions us against attaching too much significance to the parody, partly because the untidiness of the manuscript argues for its being a casual, little-valued work and partly because it is not a sustained or mature satire like the earlier "Love and Freindship".⁹ Yet, as he acknowledges, it is valuable "for the light it throws upon her read-

ing of Richardson".¹⁰

While it is true that the play's structure is haphazard and its satire at times aimless, it is also true that it gains in direction after the first act. Southam concludes that changes in the handwriting and in the appearance of the manuscript between Acts One and Two suggest that an older and more purposeful Austen took up the play again at this point after a lapse of several years, a conclusion that is supported by the 1799 watermark on the paper for the gathering on which Act Two is written.¹¹ The author by this time of three unpublished novels, she writes from Act Two on with more deftness and polish and it may be that the last four acts reflect her concerns as a novelist. It is possible that her attempt to parody an admired novel, while she herself was the author of novels in need of revision, gave her an opportunity to produce satirical criticism that throws light on both her enjoyment of Richardson and her own later work.

Much of the comedy of "Sir Charles Grandison" derives from its lampooning of the easy targets offered by the novel. The play is above all "a comedy of abridgement" which compresses an extremely long novel into an extremely short play.¹² Richardson's penchant for the minutiae of everyday life and the trivial conversation of polite society is parodied, as is the stolid perfection of a hero who is given little more to do than enquire after everyone's colds and pass around sandwiches.¹³ These targets are hit again and again, and not always successfully, for Austen sometimes reproduces the dullness

she is trying to satirize.

In addition to the obvious targets there are other strains of satire in the play that are of particular interest since they concentrate on the sexual relationships of men and women. In *A Natural Passion: A Study of the Novels of Samuel Richardson*, Margaret Anne Doody asserts that "the love relationship is the focal point of Richardson's imagination"¹⁴ and Richardson is increasingly seen to be a significant figure in articulating and, perhaps, inventing women's concerns and self-images.¹⁵ Nancy K. Miller in *The Heroine's Text* links Jane Austen to this view of Richardson by suggesting that she is the first female English novelist to break away from the " 'conventional' plots of vulnerable female virtue tried by the relentless assaults of male aggression in a consistently hostile world", plots popularized and to a certain extent developed by Richardson.¹⁶ It has long been a tenet of Austen criticism that she took materials from older fiction, like *Sir Charles Grandison*, and reshaped and revitalized them by accepting some of their conventions and parodying others.¹⁷ Miller, however, is arguing that her work is more revolutionary than that and Leroy Smith agrees that Austen's view of women is a new one.¹⁸

Sir Charles Grandison is the novel that best illustrates Richardson's concern with men, women, and the love relationship. *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, with their narrower focus on the experience of a young woman's involvement with one man, cannot match *Grandison* in its wide-ranging discussion of love, the choosing of a mate,

and marriage. *Sir Charles Grandison*, despite its title and the author's avowed intention of telling the story of a good man, owes its "depth and interest" to its female characters.¹⁹ The novel explores in detail the hearts and minds of not one but two heroines and relates the experiences of dozens of other women. In addition, much of the book is given over to defining feminine characteristics, foibles, strengths, and duties, and to describing how women should behave to the men in their lives.

It is a curious fact that while *Sir Charles Grandison* is a comic novel, the situations of the female characters are anything but comical. Even the weddings which are traditionally the mark of a comedy are presented as terror-filled occasions for the brides. Charlotte Grandison's unwillingness to marry is played for comic effect but underneath the witty skirmishing over her acceptance of Lord G., an early day and a church wedding are very real fears. As Harriet comments after Charlotte's wedding, "Marriage, Lucy, is an awful rite. It is supposed to be a joyful solemnity: But on the woman's side it can only be so, when she is given to the man she loves above all men in the world; and even to *her*, the anniversary day, when doubt is turned into certainty, must be happier than the day itself".²⁰ The nature of the doubt is made clear by Charlotte herself on Harriet's wedding day when she replies to Emily's observation that Harriet seems to be sorry that she is married:

Sorry! No, My Love! But a change of condition for life! New attachments! A new course of life! Her name sunk, and lost!

The property, person and will, of another, as excellent as the man is; obliged to go to a new house; to be ingrafted into a new family; to leave her own, who so dearly love her; an *irrevocable* destiny! — Do you think, Emily, new in her present circumstances; every eye upon her; it is not enough to make a considerate mind, as hers is, thoughtful! (III, 235)

In marriage joy may, at least, be mixed with the terror. Unalloyed fear, pain, and humiliation await those women who fall into disgrace. The Sir Hargrave Pollexfens and the Captain Andersons prey on the wary and well-protected, while the defenseless, such as Mrs. Oldham, are victimized because they appear to have no other options. Even the exemplary daughter of the most indulgent parents, Clementina della Poretta, is reduced to a strait-waistcoat and pressured to marry against her will. Harriet, Lady G., and Clementina are all lucky in having position, wealth, youth, and loving, understanding families and yet none of them is able to be happy in herself as Sir Charles is “happy in himself, and a Blessing to others” (I, 4). As Margaret Anne Doody observes, “if Man is free, Woman is, in this period, not free”;²¹ not being free, women find that happiness is always a conditional and precarious commodity, even in a comedy.

In contrast, Sir Charles and other men, being free, can be happy if they choose to be. Sir Charles has struggles but, as Harriet comments, “this man views every-thing in a right light. When his own happiness is not to be attained, he lays it out of his thoughts, and, as I have heretofore observed, rejoices in that of others” (II, 335). He can lay it out of his thoughts because he can act in the

world, busying himself with manufacturing happiness for others who then praise him for his goodness. A motif in the novel, which Jane Austen parodies in her play, is the ubiquity of men. Sir Charles has been everywhere and is constantly travelling about; Mr. Greville follows Harriet and posts spies to track her when he is unable to (II, 409-410); and Lady G. says of her “nimble Lord” that “he is twenty places in a minute” (III, 402-403). If much of Sir Charles’s happiness rests on his ability to bring happiness to others, that ability rests on his physical freedom and financial resources. The hero’s good deeds all follow the same pattern: he travels to the place where he is needed, whether to Lord W.’s or to Italy, speaks to the afflicted, masters them in argument, and then demonstrates his sincerity by supporting his words with money or, in the case of the Italian family, written agreements. On almost every occasion the recipients of Sir Charles’s help are attentive to his words but still truculent until he backs them up with cash. Lord W. has been continuing his liaison with Mrs. Giffard because he refuses to part with an extra £100 a year, a bonus he had promised to give her if he wanted to end their arrangement. Deaf to his nephew’s plea that it is shameful to trade a chance to live virtuously for £100 a year, he calls Sir Charles his “good Angel” when he secures Mrs. Giffard’s promise to leave but adds “If you have brought me off for £150 I will adore you” (II, 54). Only when he is informed that Sir Charles will pay the disputed amount is his reformation complete: “he looked around him, his head turning as if on a pivot; and, at last, bursting

out into tears and speech together — And is it thus you subdue me? Is it thus you convince me of my shameful littleness?" (II, 55).

Similarly, Sir Charles brings the Beauchamps to a grudging reconciliation through his words but effects a full agreement over the return of his friend by offering to assume the costs of his lodging and allowance. The recalcitrant Lady Beauchamp, though still proud, submits:

I will not be under obligations to you — not *pecuniary* ones, however. No, Sir Harry! Recall your son: I will trust to your love: Do for him what you please: Let him be independent on this *insolent* man [She said this with a smile, that made it obliging]; and if we are to be visitors, friends, neighbours, let it be on an equal foot and let him have nothing to reproach us with. (II, 283)

Women who are unhappily circumstanced have neither the physical freedom nor the financial resources to busy themselves with the affairs of others. Unrestricted travel and financial control are symbols of men's freedom to be happy, if they choose to be; this is a freedom which is not extended to women.

Happiness and freedom are not conditions that are readily available to women in *Sir Charles Grandison*, a situation that is reflected not only in the novel's plot but in its characterizations. Harriet's is a sprightly, roguish voice as the novel opens but, as B. C. Southam points out, "her liveliness and independence [are] lost once she has been saved by the hero".²² Her abduction teaches her that she is not free and she condemns her "wretched levity" on the subject of her ability to attract suitors (I, 150; I, 116). Love, courtship

and all relationships with men are serious and fearful matters, she learns, and she hereafter behaves with the appropriate solemnity. Since they are indicative of a sense of personal freedom, liveliness and independence in women are rigorously constrained in the novel, despite the presence in the story of Charlotte Grandison. Charlotte's vivacity is subjected to a chorus of loving disapproval which becomes bitter after she is married to Lord G. She is gradually trained, not to dispense completely with her rebelliousness and sharp wit, but to direct it to other women and safe targets like Mr. Selby. The important men in her life, her brother and her husband, are not to be tormented by her serious attempts to be treated as an independent being and not as one of Lord G.'s "chattels, a piece of furniture only, to be removed as any other piece of furniture, or picture, or cabinet, at his pleasure" (II, 500-501); she learns that these topics are to be treated playfully and confined to certain arenas. It is appropriate that the last sight of Lady G. in Volume VII is a portrait of a happy wife, mother, and nurse, venting much of her ironic wit on her adored marmouset and having the rest of it drawn off harmlessly by Sir Charles who "takes her down, and compliments her as if she were an overmatch for him", a ploy which impresses his superiority on her (III, 460). The accomplished musician, who had earlier played to express herself and to torment her Lord, now sings to her child and likens her talent to its "squallings" (III, 460). Charlotte's capacity for music and raillery is domesticated and diminished and her liveliness is no longer a threat.

Charlotte is subdued, not extinguished, but she is an oddity and emphatically not the heroine. That distinction belongs to Harriet, and secondarily to Clementina. All three are vital and consistent characters and Jane Austen is said to have honored Richardson for his power of characterization,²³ but all three suffer diminution in the course of the novel. In Volume I Harriet describes her own forays into the world but by Volume IV she is reading of Sir Charles's actions, transcribing his letters and commenting on them and dwelling ever more on the yearnings of her heart. By Volume V she is transfixed by the events in Italy, is deteriorating in health, and is unwilling or unable to pursue her avocation of narrative letter-writing (II, 497). Once she is made "the happiest of women" Harriet begins to resemble Sir Charles and Clementina. She and Clementina "are mirrors to each other" and "Sweet sisters" and she "looks upon his praises now, to be her own" (III, 418, 454, 438). She trembles before her husband, faints at his unexpected appearance, and apologizes for closeting herself with Dr. Bartlett; her joy rests in being forgiven by her husband for these supposed transgressions. The mirror image is particularly apt because if she and Clementina mirror each other they both reflect the hero. As befits the novel that bears his name, the conclusion builds to a resounding chorus of praise for the hero, praise that echoes from mouth to mouth. Suitable as this may be to the overall plan of the novel it is, nevertheless, an unsatisfactory conclusion to the matter of the novel, the exploration of feminine hearts and minds and the significance of

love relationships. Women in *Sir Charles Grandison* are individuals only for brief periods of time. When they come into contact with men they become eerily alike and unlike themselves. When Harriet is at her best as “the happiest of women” she is little more than the meek, adoring wife of the godlike hero.

Richardson accomplished much in creating *Sir Charles Grandison's* female characters and its theme of love and marriage. In both areas he breaks away from the strictures of the conduct-books through the intensity of his characterizations and his recognition of the complexity of emotional situations.²⁴ Yet for all the freedom with which his heroines are portrayed, they are characters who are limited by their fears, lack of choice, circumscribed lives and, ironically, by the love and marriage they eventually find. Richardson may be inventing the novel of domestic comedy in *Sir Charles Grandison*,²⁵ but there is nothing essentially comic in his vision of women; if they are good, they are afraid and if they are bad, they are vicious. Even in *Sir Charles Grandison*, as Nancy K. Miller suggests, the female characters live in “a consistently hostile world” where they are “tried by the relentless assaults of male aggression”;²⁶ Sir Hargrave Pollexfen is the only rake in the novel but Sir Charles and his friends are as dominant and demanding as he is, if vastly more polite.

Jane Austen's novels, in contrast, are distinguished by an atmosphere of safety and freedom. Her heroines have little to fear from encroaching males and appear to find nothing “awful” in the

state of matrimony to which they aspire. In her works there are no nightmarish scenes of men attacking women, physically or verbally, no sense of the terror that all but immobilizes Fanny Burney's Evelina in her contacts with men, none of the agonizing helplessness that characterizes the life of Fielding's Amelia. Fathers and brothers do not change from kindly mentors to fearsome ogres and unwanted suitors are foolish rather than frightening. There is, indeed, by comparison with all those that preceded them, something revolutionary about her novels; for some, the image of Elizabeth Bennet defying convention by splashing alone through the rain to visit her sick sister symbolizes the freshness of Austen's approach.²⁷

Austen's originality was not simply a matter of her discarding the conventions and substituting for them more natural plots and characters.²⁸ Before the final version of Elizabeth's journey was written there was a long period of work and revision about which little is known. "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man" was, if Southam's hypothesis is correct, returned to at a significant point in Austen's development as a novelist: that is, after she had finished the first drafts of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* and at about the time she was writing *Northanger Abbey*. The play cannot be compared to the novels in scope or seriousness but the objects of its satire are relevant to them. Like *Northanger Abbey*, "Sir Charles Grandison" is a burlesque, but its target is not a type of fiction. It is a parody, rather, of the essence of Richardson's novel: the delineation of feminine character, the relationships of men and

women and the nature of love and marriage. Just as *Northanger Abbey* expresses, through its fun, Jane Austen's notion of fiction, so "Sir Charles Grandison" discloses her attitude towards those matters which were Richardson's province.

The subtitle of the play, "The Happy Man", is more than a mockery of Richardson's lack of subtlety in conveying his message that goodness brings happiness.²⁹ It suggests, in addition, that happiness is very much a male prerogative in a novel which ostensibly celebrates the joyous union of the sexes. As Doody points out, Dryden's *Alexander's Feast*, with its refrain of

Happy, happy, happy pair!
None but the *good* deserves the fair;

"runs as a kind of *leit-motif* throughout the novel".³⁰ It is, however, Sir Charles's happiness that is most convincingly presented; Harriet may refer to herself as "the happiest of all women" after her marriage but her fears and anxieties undermine her words. In the play as in the novel, it is men who are shown to be both satisfied and lucky. Austen's subtitle, "The Happy Man", points to the play's satire of the freedom and power of men, and the corresponding vapidness of women, in Richardson's novel.

That the two opening scenes of the play, which seem to have been written in the early 1790s, contain elements of sexual satire indicates that this form of criticism was already a habit of Austen's mind. Nor is it especially surprising since evidence of it is found in her other juvenalia, from the ridiculous heroines of "Love and

Freindship" to the ill-tempered marital intrigues of "The Three Sisters". The jokes in the first two scenes of "Sir Charles Grandison" are admirably suited to the novel they parody and are remarkably consistent in themselves and with the rest of the play. All three of the points which Austen satirizes more wittily from Act Two on are evident in Act One, Scenes One and Two. Men are omnipresent and superhumanly active, women are insipid and trivial and there is even a hint of the fear women have of men, the fear that is so palpable in every novel by Richardson. The satire is hesitant but it is present and it may be that the hiatus between Acts One and Two is the result, not of lack of interest, but of uncertainty over how to proceed or of a consciousness that the author cannot yet handle her material to her own satisfaction.

Act One, Scene One is a meandering and untidy scene, composed of little more than a flurry of meaningless entrances and exits. The meaninglessness and the flurry may be designed to show "the real-life smallness and triviality of the woman's world"³¹ and it is noteworthy that all the entrances and exits, but one, are performed by women. A distinctively feminine flavour is given to the hurry and bustle; the women are provided with handboxes and workbags in the stage directions (39). Noteworthy, too, is the fact that six of the ten entrances and exits are precipitated or commanded by Mr. Reeves. Described by Harriet in the novel as "a little too mild" (I, 87), the Mr. Reeves of the play is conflated with

Richardson's Mr. Selby to produce a swaggering, aggressive character before whose "raillery" Harriet and Mrs. Reeves flee in fear (39). A good part of the humour of this scene comes out of the satire of Richardson's fondness for domestic detail and from the confusion arising from the combined Reeves-Selby character. Out of this irony and satire, however, also comes an anxious, and not very funny, atmosphere. Harriet's roguish voice is not in evidence as it is in the novel. Instead, there is an air of bustle and confusion, complete with feminine trivialities, fears, and scurryings. The only major speech is given to Mr. Reeves who complains contemptuously of "dresses and bandboxes" and exults in his mastery of the house, which he demonstrates by ordering about Sally, the servant (39-40). He is a figure of fun but his new personality also establishes the familiar Richardsonian motif of a dominant male subduing the woman around him.

Scene Two is shorter than its predecessor and has even more entrances and exits, all orchestrated by Mr. Reeves. His first appearance suggests that it is his turn to be a flustered scurrier, for he enters, running, at one door only to exit at another (40). It is quickly apparent, however, that while he may be flustered his actions are neither trivial nor ineffectual. Harriet has been abducted and Mr. Reeves is a miracle of efficiency, calling servants and dispatching them on missions which are accomplished with impossible speed. London is canvassed for the missing chairmen in less than a minute and Mr. Smith is fetched in a matter of seconds (40-41).

Austen exaggerates for comic effect, but her version of the action is not much more incredible than Richardson's. In the novel the spiritless Mr. Reeves accomplishes Herculean tasks in a very few hours. Not aware of Harriet's abduction until after 3:00 a.m., by 2:00 p.m. he has sent people to Lady Betty, Wilson's sister, Greville, and Sir Hargrave, discovered and interviewed two of the chairmen, had London searched, visited Wilson's sister in Smithfield, dispatched another man to Reading and uncovered most of the plot against Harriet. In addition, he has maintained a minute-by-minute account of his efforts (I, 117-125). The superhuman efficiency of men is Austen's target here as much as Richardson's penchant for melodrama and improbability for in this sparse scene she meticulously includes a reference to Mrs. Reeves's off-stage hysterics as a reminder of women's behaviour in emergencies.

The first two scenes balance each other; both sexes are seen at their flurrying, silly worst but men are shown to be successfully engaged in serious endeavours while women flutter about over bandboxes and raillery. Women are, moreover, peripheral to the action and colourless. Mr. Reeves is by no means a fully realized character but he is, nevertheless, a defined and dominant presence. Even if most of the fun in these scenes, when played in the family circle, would come from the amateur actors' exaggerated dispatch and their slapstick entrances and exits, humour would also arise from Mr. Reeves's ranting and Harriet's fainthearted submission. Nor is this comedy only comedy of incongruity since the humour of Mr.

Reeves's first speech derives partly from its imitation of the tone of the anti-feminist tirades of characters like Mr. Selby: Austen captures nicely the combined accents of querouslessness and pomposity that mark such speeches. Similarly, the ditherings of Mrs. Reeves and Harriet are straight out of the novel, not displacements of it. Slight as they are, the first two scenes suggest the aspects of *Sir Charles Grandison* that Austen considers worthy of satire and these include Richardson's representation of the sexes as well as his liking for trivial detail and melodrama.

Harriet Byron is barely visible in Act One of "Sir Charles Grandison." Beginning in Act Two, she appears onstage more often but her shadowy presence is not made more substantial. From this point on, in fact, Harriet is little more than a chameleon who assumes the proper colouration according to her situation. Thus, in Act Two, which parodies Sir Hargrave Pollexfen's attempt to force Harriet to marry him, she is an hysterical victim. Later, in Acts Three and Four, which are set at Colnebrook, she is a vague, adoring, and sickly girl who seems to be in the grip of a monomania and in Act Five, as the soon-to-be happiest of all women, she is reduced to commonplaces and fatuities. She is, overall, a pale imitation of a conventional heroine, completely lacking in individuality. Sir Charles's praise of her as a "happy medium between gravity and over-liveliness . . . [who] is lively or grave as the occasion requires" (52) underscores the irony of her presentation in the parody which suggests that Richardson's ideal heroine is an unremarkable nonen-

tity.

Austen's Harriet is such a weak and vacuous figure that, in the scene of the attempted marriage, she evokes from her abductor weariness rather than passion. Sir Hargrave wishes that "women were not quite so delicate, with all their faints and fits" (42) in a tone of annoyed resignation which is quite different from the menace of his comments in the novel where he relates all women's "fits and swoonings" to hypocrisy and art (I, 161). In "Sir Charles Grandison," Harriet's fainting is one of the circumstances that a villain bent on seduction must bear, along with the lady's attempt to bribe her captors, her longings for death, the cost of a new prayerbook for the clergyman, and a lost key that frustrates the seducer's attempts to procure a new prayerbook. The play's Sir Hargrave is a weary and rather pitiable rake who finally sighs that "she may as well die in my house as yours" and requires the assistance of Mrs. Awberry to carry Harriet away (44). Austen is satirizing the contrived and overheated treatment of this episode in the novel but her parody stresses the ridiculous ineffectuality of the heroine. Richardson's Harriet can, through her frenzied pleadings and actions, move the women and even Sir Hargrave to pity her. Certainly her determination to leave the room in which she has been imprisoned saves her from rape (I, 158). Austen's Harriet, in contrast, is unable to protect herself in any way. Austen invents the business of the lost key to the prayerbook cabinet in order to make clear what Richardson's presentation of the scene obscures: Harriet's melodra-

matics accomplish nothing and she is saved from forced marriage and rape by plot contrivances. Her impassioned speeches to her captors are wickedly parodied in the play when she screams “Burn, quick, quick!” to the prayerbook she has flung in the fire (43), for that plea is as sensible as any she makes in the novel. The novel’s Sir Hargrave tries to get Harriet alone in order to make her, threateningly, “Either Lady Pollexfen, or what I please”; it is appropriate that, in the play, Sir Hargrave wishes only to reason with his silly victim (I, 157; 43). Austen quotes, almost exactly, one line from the novel, Harriet’s breathless “So, so, you have killed me, I hope” (I, 158) in the play because, presumably, she could not devise anything that would better express her sense of the heroine’s ridiculousness.

Harriet fares little better in the rest of the play. In Act Three, Scene One, she is unable to converse coherently and is fixated on Sir Charles and his rescue of her. Charlotte’s attempts to turn her thoughts to resting or to her family are met by *non sequiturs* and a determined return to the subject of her indebtedness to Sir Charles. Charlotte finally gives up the struggle and allows, rather grimly, that “Well, really I am very glad he saved you, for both your [and your grandmother’s] sakes” (45). A running joke is established in this scene as Charlotte twice attempts and eventually succeeds in sending Harriet off to bed, noting that “it is four o’clock and you have been up ever since twelve” (46). Subject to dullness and “gloomy fits” (46), Harriet is hereafter accused of always being “languid at three o’clock” and is sent off to her room with a basin of

broth “when she gapes” (50-51). Harriet’s propensity for ill-health, especially after her abduction, is very much a part of the novel where her physical delicacy does not seem to detract from anyone’s notion of her as the perfect wife. Austen accentuates this incongruity by the praise which is heaped on the barely conscious Harriet. Sir Charles’s estimation of her as a “happy medium between gravity and over-liveliness” whose “mind is as complete as her person” (52) is doubly ironic in this context for Harriet is obviously unsound in both mind and body; Sir Charles’s appraisal of her is patently fictitious.

When Harriet is allowed some vivacity, it is of the most mundane type. Besides her languidness, Sir Charles’s value for her understanding is based on one conversation which is marked by her willingness to agree with Sir Charles, to repeat truisms and to report Lord G.’s arrival (49). In Act Five, Scene Two she is at her most lively as she inquires after Lucy’s and Nancy’s colds and the condition of the roads (56). Her conversation is as dull as all of the conversations at Colnebrook are shown to be. Even Charlotte, who does enliven the novel, is dull in the play. Her vivacity is reduced to witless flirtation with her brother — “I hope you do not think me a flatterer, Sir Charles” (48) — and she is, in general, rather vulgar.³² Although she is given some verve it seems more the result of peevishness than of a spirited drive for independence. Richardson creates in Charlotte an irresistible spokeswoman for women’s rights who is gradually taught that submission is preferable to rebellion;

Austen turns her into a bad-tempered child who is kept in check by her brother's commands to hold her tongue (50-51). If Harriet is vacuous, then Charlotte is obstreperous and neither is an acceptable female character. Yet, of the two, Charlotte is at least a definable stage presence. Vulgar she may be, but a cipher she is not.

The male characters of "Sir Charles Grandison" are no less ridiculous than the female. The bland, complacent Sir Charles, himself inordinately interested in the condition of everyone's cold (47), is a perfect match for his vacuous Harriet. He is onstage more than she is but his presence is scarcely more impressive than hers. Indeed, if Harriet is chameleon-like in her ability to fit in with her situation, then Sir Charles is interchangeable with the other male characters of the play. Like Mr. Reeves and Mr. Selby he is capable of making jokes in doubtful taste about female vulnerability: "How long Caroline has been gone! I hope no more Sir Hargrave Pollexfens have run away with her and Emily" (51). Like Lords L. and G., his appreciation of women is determined by his fondness for the type of temperament they display (he typically opts for the "happy medium") (52). He is made to praise Harriet in the words of Greville³³ and is described as "constantly going about from one place to another", just as Sir Hargrave Pollexfen, in Act Two, is described as being "here and there and everywhere" (46, 41). The essence of the joke about Austen's Sir Charles, aside from his dullness, is his resemblance to the play's other male characters, good and bad. Heroes or villains, they are all able to range freely and without question.

Mr. Reeves and his servants scatter to Paddington, Hampstead and Clapham at the end of Act One, Scene Two, while Miss Byron is being ludicrously squeezed in a door; while Harriet is being sent to her chamber, Sir Charles comes and goes as he pleases. Sir Hargrave eavesdrops on his intended, but Charlotte cannot pierce the mystery of her brother's ordinary affairs and has too much "respect for him" to ask (46). Sir Charles's likeness to Sir Hargrave is emphasized in the conclusion of Act Three, Scene One. In her one stroke of perspicuity in the play, Harriet wonders "What an odd brother is this? If he is so fond of them, why should he wish them not to know his affairs?" (46) When Charlotte returns and asks why she looks dull, Harriet replies that she was thinking of Sir Hargrave (46). Partly a mockery of Harriet's habit of denying her attraction to Sir Charles, this dialogue underscores the similarity of the novel's hero and villain. Charlotte may "always catch him doing some good action" (45), but apart from this eccentricity, Sir Charles is a man very much in the mold of Sir Hargrave. Sir Hargrave, like Sir Charles, is handsome, polite, well-dressed and amiable, a traveller, a good manager and a brave man. Pride and hot-temper are faults they share and they both have an inclination to be secretive and dogmatic, to scheme, and to jest with ladies (I, 44-45, 63). Sir Charles, of course, schemes and keeps secrets only for honorable reasons; if he discomfits Charlotte with his jesting it is always for a good end. Austen's satire points out that these are differences of degree, not of kind. Sir Charles is as ubiquitous as Sir Hargrave, as encroaching

as Greville, as anti-feminist as Mr. Selby. He is the hero only by the grace of his virtue and his creator.

Since he is the hero, he is given godlike attributes. In Act Five, Scene One he is undaunted by Mr. Selby's unequivocal refusal to let him marry Harriet until she turns twenty-two, in four years time, and until the Lady Clementina is also married. Sir Charles's reply that the Lady Clementina will marry if he does and that Harriet seems "quite as much twenty-two by her prudence" overcomes Mr. Selby who exclaims "Upon my word, you are a fine fellow. You have done away with all my objections" (54). Lesser men may be hampered by lost keys and unwilling women but Sir Charles cannot be blocked by time or deathless vows. By compressing the entire Clementina subplot into a few lines, Austen ridicules both the space given to it in the novel and the means by which it, and most other problems, are resolved. Sir Charles talks every difficulty into a solution. As the exchange with Mr. Selby demonstrates, the hero has only to articulate his point of view for other people to agree with him. A change in his own understanding of the situation is never necessary; at most, he may revise his views slightly in order to take account of unforeseen complications, such as Clementina's flight to England. Jane Austen sees Richardson's "Happy Man" as complacent in his own goodness and lucky, above all, in the characterization and plot that turn him into the godlike hero.

An element noticeably absent in "Sir Charles Grandison" is the terror women experience in the novel. Harriet is shown to be

panic-stricken in Act Two but her abductor is so forlorn and her situation so silly that she is an object of fun rather than pity. Austen's Sir Hargrave, unlike Richardson's, is incapable of physical violence and Austen excludes the threat of rape which hangs over the scene in the novel. B. C. Southam notes that she also strikes out the line "I see no Dearly beloveds here and I will not have any" and speculates that it was removed because it was offensive to the clergy.³⁴ Given the freedom with which Austen treats the clergy in other works, it is more likely that she deleted the line because Sir Hargrave's mockery of it in the novel endows it and its speaker with pathos (I, 155). Pathos is at odds with the satire of the feckless heroine and is, therefore, removed. Similarly, the only reference to the fear with which women view marriage is Charlotte's ironic line "There is something monstrous frightful, to be sure, my dear Harriet, in marrying a man that one likes" (55). Feminine terrors are portrayed as trivial and exaggerated in a world where Charlotte's deep-rooted aversion to marriage is dismissed by Sir Charles with these words of wisdom: "I am sure you have nothing to complain of in Lord G. And if you will make a good wife, I will answer for it, he will a husband" (57). The dangers faced by women in Richardson's novel are as contrived as this formula for a happy marriage; both are arranged to suit the author's view of women and their roles.

Jane Austen's most obvious target of satire in "Sir Charles Grandison" is Richardson's notion of women. His female characters, and especially his heroines, are parodied as colourless and insub-

stantial figures who descend into stereotypical behaviour in moments of crisis. While this view of Harriet and Clementina ignores the very real individuality with which Richardson endows them, it is a valid criticism. Harriet in the grasp of Sir Hargrave and Clementina in the grip of madness are both fantastic figures. More importantly, when the novel contends that women, happily married, are at their best it paradoxically portrays them as less vital and interesting than when they are heartfree. Love for a man curbs a woman's witty tongue, lowers her high spirits, diminishes her sense of self and erodes her confidence; love is not so much "a narrower of the heart" (I, 387), as Harriet complains, as a subduer of the personality. This is as true for the lively girl, like Charlotte Grandison, as it is for the novel's true heroines. Charlotte's vivacity is turned into pointless rudeness in the play because her rebelliousness is, ultimately, purposeless. Rude or meek, Richardson's heroines are brought to the same role of submissive wifehood, a point which Austen emphasizes by concluding her play with the prospect of a double wedding (57). Charlotte's rebelliousness only makes her adjustment to her fate more difficult. Richardson's female characters are unsatisfactory heroines of domestic comedy for they are limited by the very love relationships to which they aspire.

"Sir Charles Grandison" satirizes Richardson's male characters as well, but for different reasons. Dull as they may be, they are allowed superhuman abilities. "Here and there and everywhere," they are so busy as to have "no time for love" and are treated with

exaggerated respect by the women who surround them (41, 45-46). In addition, the men resemble each other. Mr. Reeves takes on the personality of Mr. Selby, Sir Charles displays characteristics of Sir Hargrave, Mr. Greville and Mr. Selby, and Sir Hargrave exhibits some of Sir Charles's stolid complacency. Underlying Richardson's characterizations of men are assumptions about masculine pride, aggression and authority, all of which are rooted in the belief that men are beings to be feared by women. Sir Charles, Sir Hargrave, and Mr. Reeves, are parodied as manifestations of the same type by Jane Austen, their power exaggerated by her in order to point out Richardson's insistence on it.

Men who are shown to inspire fear require women who are, correspondingly, fearful; Richardson's portrayal of both sexes rests on this tenet which is central to his work. Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison", with its parody of the novel's weak women and dominant men, and its farcical rendition of Harriet's ordeal with Sir Hargrave, appears to support this conclusion. It is by no means a startling one. In her last, unfinished novel, *Sandition*, the would-be rake, Denham, is ridiculed for liking "the impassioned, & most exceptional parts of Richardson's [novels] . . . so far as Man's determined pursuit of Woman in defiance of every opposition of feeling & convenience is concerned".³⁵ "Sir Charles Grandison" shows that this opinion was held by Austen from her youth and at a time when she was writing the initial versions of her first three novels. It also demonstrates that her awareness of Richardson's faults ex-

tended beyond "his prolix style and tedious narrative", ³⁶or even "the impassioned, & most exceptional parts" of his novels, to the very heart of his subject-matter: men, women, and love. That this, in turn, contributed to her own achievement, novels that "portray the possibility of an authentic existence for a woman" and which are primarily concerned with a "quest for freedom"³⁷ is an idea which is supported by "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man." The value of "Sir Charles Grandison" lies in the insights it gives into Jane Austen's "creatively critical" attitude towards the novel.

Richardson's domestic comedy and those of Austen share more than a general interest in a woman's experience of love; Austen's novels are reworkings of Richardson's themes which self-consciously exclude his insistence on the difficulties and dangers of being a woman in a man's world.

"Sir Charles Grandison" can be focussed like a microscope on the novel that inspired it to bring into view the particular aspects of Richardson's novel that are significant to Jane Austen's fiction. And, like a microscope, it transmits an image that shows both an overall pattern and specific details. Thus, the parody of the omnipotence of men translates into both the notable absence of men and their concerns in Austen's novels and the appearance in them of such powerless heroes as Edward Ferrars. The sickly, vacuous Harriet of the play is reproduced in Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* and contradicted by the typical Austen heroine who is both healthy and distinctive. Her heroines, moreover, are faced with problems and

difficulties but they are never the grave perils which Richardson's heroines confront. In Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison," as in her novels, the idea that there is "something monstrous frightful . . . in marrying a man that one likes" is a subject to be treated ironically. Accompanying the irony, however, is a consciousness that it is not entirely just, an awareness that her own exclusion of the "monstrous frightful" is as fantastic as Richardson's exaggeration of it.

NOTES

¹James Edward Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: 1926), p. 89.

²Frank Bradbrook, *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 84.

³Jocelyn Harris, "'As if they had been living friends': *Sir Charles Grandison* into *Mansfield Park*," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, LXXXIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1980), 361.

⁴Alan D. McKillop, *Early Masters of English Fiction* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1956), p. 95.

⁵Besides those of Bradbrook, McKillop and Harris, referred to above, see Henrietta Ten Harmsel, *Jane Austen: A Study in Fictional Conventions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1964), p. 193; Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading about Women in Novels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 81-134.

⁶B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison"*, foreword by Lord David Cecil (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 3-4.

⁷Southam, "*Grandison*", p. 1.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 29.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 116.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹³Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's "Sir Charles Grandison"*, ed. B. C. Southam, foreword by Lord David Cecil (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1981), pp. 47, 51. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text. Since the play is so short and the lines are not numbered, references are to the page rather than the act and scene.

¹⁴Margaret Anne Doody, *A Natural Passion: A Study of the Novels of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 10.

¹⁵Sue Warrick Doederlein, "Clarissa in the Hands of the Critics", *ECS*, XVI, No. 4 (Summer 1983), 403; Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 149-150.

¹⁶Miller, pp. 154-155.

¹⁷Ten Harmsel, p. 193.

¹⁸Leroy W. Smith, *Jane Austen and the Drama of Women* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 8.

¹⁹Doody, p. 257.

²⁰Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. with an introduction by Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), II, 347. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

²¹Doody, p. 245.

²²Southam, "*Grandison*", p. 26.

²³Henry Austen, "Biographical Notice" (1818), reprinted in *Northanger Abbey and Persuasion*, Vol. V of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., rev. by B. C. Southam, 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 7.

²⁴Doody, p. 310.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 279.

²⁶Miller, pp. 149-150.

²⁷Norman Page, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972), p. 28; Brownstein, p. 123; Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction, 1778-1860* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1981), p. 73.

²⁸Ten Harmsel, p. 197.

²⁹Southam, "*Grandison*", p. 22.

³⁰Doody, p. 357.

³¹Southam, "*Grandison*", p. 23.

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 146, note to p. 41.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 125, note to p. 16, ll. 7-9.

³⁵Jane Austen, *Sandition* in *Minor Works*, Vol. VI of *The Works of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, revised ed. by B. C. Southam, 6 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 404.

³⁶Henry Austen, "Biographical Notice", 7.

³⁷Smith, pp. 21, 28.

CHAPTER III

JANE AUSTEN AND WOMEN IN DISTRESS

It is a commonplace of Richardson criticism that the writer's imagination was excited by scenes of women in distress. Terms like sado-masochistic, perverse, and obsessive are regularly used to describe his view of the relationship between the sexes.¹ Sometimes he is blamed for projecting his own fear of women onto his characters, with the result that he creates an image of femininity that is negative and alien;² at best it is allowed, by Carol Houlihan Flynn, that "when he seems most lurid Richardson may in truth be the most realistic. Or, more precisely, he writes realistically of a world that his readers believed to be true, using their own assumptions to authenticate his fictions".³ Flynn's qualification is important because it subtly shifts the emphasis of her statement towards fantasy, although this time the onus is placed on "the communal fears and beliefs of his readers"⁴ rather than on Richardson's fevered imagination. The effect of all these critiques of Richardson's perception of women is a skeptical attitude that undercuts everything that eighteenth-century writers of fiction and non-fiction had to say about the dangers women of the time faced. De-foe, Fielding, Richardson, and Burney are all conscious or unconscious embellishers of the assumptions of the day that were

designed to keep women in their place; Jane Austen, in contrast, has the good sense to point out that these assumptions are not only false, but ridiculous.

Yet Harrison R. Steeves, in *Before Jane Austen*, raises questions about the portrayal of women and sex in the eighteenth-century novel that deserve consideration. Noting that eighteenth-century fiction is “inordinately concerned with seemingly abnormal aspects of sex — with libertinism, callous intrigue, and even sexual violence”, as well as with promiscuity in the upper classes and the effects of this on marriage,⁵ Steeves comes to the conclusion that there is “*some* truth in it, and probably a great deal”.⁶ In his discussion he points to novelists like Robert Bage and William Godwin who, at the end of the century, were pleading “not only for political and legal equality for women, but for everyday decency in the treatment of wives and daughters — even more, perhaps, of women who lacked the security of marriage and family recognition”.⁷ Steeves's thoughtfulness on the subject is, in turn, thought-provoking; explaining away the evidence as a general delusion seems inadequate when, as he says, “the bearing of the *mass* of fiction of a period upon social problems is unmistakable”.⁸

Samuel Richardson and his fellow novelists may exaggerate the social problems about which they write, but that does not mean that the problems were only believed to be real. Carol Houlihan Flynn, for example, addresses Richardson's attitude towards prostitution in an arch tone, pointing out that the estimated

number of whores in London was inflated but that the belief, “however warranted, that fifty thousand prostitutes crowded the city, fueled Richardson’s imagination”.⁹ Roy Porter, in an essay entitled “Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain”, puts the number of prostitutes in the city at over ten thousand but emphasizes that they were extremely visible; public copulation was not unusual and there was little attempt to curb prostitution.¹⁰ Add to this Randolph Trumbach’s observation that the average age for beginning a life in prostitution was thirteen or fourteen¹¹ and it becomes clear that Richardson’s belief in the ubiquity of prostitution has some warrant, as does his understanding of the snares awaiting young girls in the metropolis. Ten thousand, a formidable number in itself for a city the size of eighteenth-century London, may well appear to be fifty thousand if the women are uninhibited and uncontrolled; the offence to decency is at least as great. And if the spectacle included a large number of girls as young as thirteen, then horrified expressions of moral outrage and fear for the safety of young women are not excessive responses. The fact that tales depicting the seduction of the innocent into prostitution have common elements does not prove that they are part of “the collective seduction fantasy”.¹² Cautionary tales of the last twenty years relate a stereotyped version of the way in which innocent youth is seduced into drug addiction or alcoholism; the details may or may not be true, but drug and alcohol abuse remains a serious social problem which no one would describe as a collective fantasy.

Nonfiction writers of the eighteenth century and social historians of the twentieth century together present a view of eighteenth-century men that suggests that women of the time did not just believe they had but, indeed, had reasons to be fearful of men. Writers of conduct books, from the arch-conservative Lord Halifax to the liberal Thomas Gisborne, and feminist writers like Mary Wollstonecraft, offer conflicting advice to women but are remarkably consistent in their view of men. The differences between the books of instruction lie not in their perceptions of the sexual situation but in the way they would have women handle the seemingly inevitable problems men cause them before and after marriage. Thus, Lord Halifax unsentimentally advises women how to survive and even prosper in the state of matrimony, while Mary Wollstonecraft advocates a radical restructuring of sexual relationships as the only way to ensure the quality of women's lives, married or single; Dr. Gregory, Thomas Gisborne, and two female authors of conduct books, Lady Eugenia Stanhope and Mrs. Hester Chapone, succeed only in softening Halifax's views, not denying them.

The conduct books are not, of course, without bias. Written for parents to give to their daughters, they predictably embrace tradition and authority: masquerades and novels are universally condemned, the wisdom of listening to one's parents is extolled and the virtues of obedience and modesty are everywhere upheld. It is, therefore, not too surprising that they also preach the virtues of a conventional marriage in which the husband is, according to the

dictates of holy scripture, the undisputed master of the family. What is surprising, however, is the lack of sentiment with which the state of matrimony is treated and the cynicism which colours the depiction of men. The conduct books are contradictory on this point. Women, they say, are born to be married and to give comfort and love to their husbands and families, which is their sacred duty. They must choose their mates carefully, on the grounds of good principles and decency and warm affection. Yet the books warn that it is difficult to know if a man has these qualities because he will be quick to deceive and will take advantage of any woman who betrays her interest in him and tries to know him better. The sacred duty of marriage, similarly, may be sacred on one side only and is fraught with many difficulties. The conduct books are designed to guide a young woman smoothly into a proper marriage. While it is not inappropriate to instill a little awe for marriage and respect for parents' opinions of a husband in a prospective bride, it does seem counterproductive to make men and marriage so forbidding. Far from frightening women into being submissive wives such an approach seems more likely to make them extremely reluctant to marry at all and angry, like Charlotte Grandison, over the prospect of losing their rights over their own minds and persons to an unworthy master. The conduct books' insistence on the dangers of men and marriage may reflect not only their bias towards tradition and authority but a genuine concern over the perils their readers will face.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

(1792) attacks many of the rules promulgated by the conduct books which, she says, are designed to keep women weak and insignificant and submissive. She never, however, condemns the view of men the conduct books present. In fact, she reaffirms their pessimistic attitude when she complains that women will never be truly modest "till men are more chaste Where, indeed, could modest women find husbands from whom they would not continually turn with disgust?"¹³ She argues that women would be stronger if, rather than being protected from men's callousness, they were forced to confront it (224). When the conduct books speak of the dangers men and marriage hold for women they are by no means only, or even principally, reinforcing a patriarchal system and women's inferiority within it. They are, as Wollstonecraft states, trying to protect women from the misery which is a fact of the world as they know it (215, 224, 234-235). As Wollstonecraft saw, the reinforcement of the system is a by-product of the attempt to protect, not its principal objective. Her solution of first exposing women to the dangers that exist, and then re-educating both sexes so that conditions will gradually improve is farsighted but also very frightening; concerns for the safety of wives and daughters as well as the forces of reaction are involved in the repudiation of her theories.

A popular theme in the conduct books is the deceitfulness of men. Wollstonecraft singles out as "a mournful truth" Dr. Gregory's statement in *A Father's Legacy* (1762) that in it his daughters "will hear, at least once in their lives, the genuine statements of a man

who has no interest in deceiving them" (216). She calls this general deceptiveness "the root of the evil" that stains the lives of women and links its most common manifestation of "excessive gallantry" with "extreme moral dissoluteness" (216, 217). Here as elsewhere in the *Vindication* a dramatic conclusion links up with and illuminates the concerns of more conservative writers. Cautions about the dangers of allowing friendships with men, enjoying "innocent freedoms," and encountering the familiarity of men in public places run through Gregory, Chapone, and Gisborne.¹⁴ It is tempting to dismiss their warnings as prudish attempts to scare women into avoiding all contacts with men except the ones approved by their elders. Wollstonecraft's assessment of men's deceitfulness as "the root of the evil", however, forces one to realize that the other writers are speaking about a lack of honesty that undermines every contact between men and women.

It is accepted by all the writers of conduct books that men lie to women as a matter of course, either by affecting an interest that doesn't exist or by misrepresenting themselves; surprisingly, none of the advice-givers proposes a solid way to deal with the problem. Thomas Gisborne is representative of the others when he warns that a woman who marries without "actual knowledge of [a man's] character" has only herself to blame (232). Unfortunately, he never makes clear how the "actual knowledge" is to be attained. Most of the conduct books recommend marrying only where there is strong affection, but more effort is expended on telling a woman

how to understand her own heart than is spent on advising her how she can assure herself of a man's love. Dr. Gregory, to be sure, provides a checklist of the signs of true love in a man — the symptoms include concealment, timidity, and pessimism tending to depression — and he also feels that a man is likely to marry a woman he loves since he has the right to choose his mate (93, 88). It seems to matter little, though, whether the man truly loves or not since if a woman has “sense and taste, she will not find many men to whom she can possibly be supposed to bear any considerable share of esteem” (89). Knowing she is loved is important only because nature has luckily endowed her with “a greater flexibility of taste” that enables her to love an otherwise unattractive man because he loves her (90).

The conduct books say little about rakes and rapists, an omission which seems to support the argument that the seduced women of popular fiction reflect a communal fantasy rather than a contemporary reality; if there really were great numbers of libertines stalking the unwary would not the conduct books, so eager to expose men's deceptions and stratagems, be filled with warnings of the danger? In fact, the conduct books do speak of seduction, but in a manner appropriate to their genteel readers. Once again it is Mary Wollstonecraft, this time in the earlier *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), who articulates the fears that are implied by the others when they allude to the foolishness of women who give men advantage over them, or grant men familiarity or freedoms. *Thoughts*

on the Education of Daughters is, for the most part, a rather wooden performance, but it is infused with feeling when Wollstonecraft writes of the unmarried, financially dependent gentlewoman who keeps herself by taking a position as a governess or companion in a wealthy family:

A woman, who has beauty without sentiment, is in great danger of being seduced; and if she has any, cannot guard herself from painful mortifications. It is very disagreeable to keep up a continual reserve with men she has formerly been familiar with; yet if she places confidence, it is ten to one but she is deceived. Few men seriously think of marrying an inferior; and if they have honour enough not to take advantage of the artless tenderness of a woman who loves, and thinks not of the difference of rank, they do not deceive her until she has anticipated happiness I have not over-coloured the picture.¹⁵

Wollstonecraft's emotion and her familiarity with the situation she describes lend credibility to this passage and also suggest why it is not duplicated in Gregory, Gisborne, or any of the other commentators. They are writing to the soon-to-be married daughters of the wealthy. Lord Halifax knows that a woman will marry; the others make brief references to the acceptability if not the desirability of remaining single but only Gisborne details the poverty, isolation, and reputation for oddity that will probably be the lot of the unmarried woman (405-408). The hovering if shadowy menace of seduction to which the writers of conduct books refer is a possible fate for unmarried daughters but it is a more possible fate for those who are poor and unprotected, a fate which the conduct books do not con-

sider. Richardson's Pamela represents the kind of woman, poor and isolated from her friends, who is, according to Wollstonecraft, most likely to be seduced. The most frightening thing about seduction as Wollstonecraft describes it is that it can happen to anyone; Clarissa, pampered and favoured all her life, is suddenly as vulnerable as her counterpart below stairs and little better equipped to fend off the attacks. Indeed, in Wollstonecraft's opinion, she may be at more risk than her disadvantaged sister because she hungers for the kind of attention she used to receive as her due. If seduced maidens fascinated eighteenth-century readers it may be because they recognized that only precarious circumstance separated them from these pathetic figures. Instead of a communal fantasy, the interest in seduction may represent a communal understanding of shared vulnerability.

Wollstonecraft also discusses seduction in *A Vindication* when she argues that a seduction should "be termed a *left-handed* marriage, and the man should be *legally* obliged to maintain the woman and her children, unless adultery, a natural divorcement, abrogated the law" (154). Such a law is necessary, she adds, as long as women are exposed to seduction by their "frailty and want of principle", the natural results of their poor education and inability to support themselves (154). She concludes by emphasizing that a seduced woman's error

does not frequently even deserve the name of error; for many innocent girls become the dupes of a sincere, affectionate heart, and still more are, as it may emphatically be termed, ruined before they know the difference between

virtue and vice: — and thus prepared by their education for infamy, they become infamous. Asylums and Magdalens are not the proper remedies for these abuses. It is justice, not charity, that is wanting in the world. (155-156)

The tone of this passage is particularly interesting for Wollstonecraft is angry, not hysterical; the situation is described matter-of-factly, not luridly. She discusses seduction as a social problem and scornfully dismisses it as an occasion for sentimental charity. The financial dependence of women is seen as the root cause of the problem for it determines vulnerability: taught to rely on men, women are unable to protect or keep themselves if male support is lost. The distinction between justice and charity is also important. The Magdalen Hospital, founded in 1758, is in itself an indication that seduced maidens posed a significant social problem for by 1786 it had rehabilitated 1,571 women out of an admitted total of 2,415.¹⁶ However, as Mary Wollstonecraft points out, it and other charities assume that the ills to which they minister are the result of misfortune when, in fact, seduction is the result of an injustice that is part of society's unequal treatment of the sexes.

There is evidence in the conduct books and the works of Mary Wollstonecraft that seduction was a concern of women of the time. The worry for the middle or upper class woman, however, is not the benevolent procuress or even the demonically attractive Lovelace figure but rather the men who feign affection or hide moral flaws in order to gain a wife and who are all too likely to toy with a

friendless, naive woman for their own amusement. The melodramatic seductions, abductions and rapes of eighteenth-century fiction are symbolic enlargements of the more prosaic fear of being seduced into revealing a one-sided affection or making a bad marriage. The first, with its disappointment and embarrassment, is bad enough but the second, as the writers of conduct books make clear, is disastrous.

"The calamities of an unhappy marriage are so much greater than can befall a single person", warns Mrs. Chapone, that she does not hesitate to counsel calm acceptance of a single life, should that be a woman's lot (111). If poverty, isolation and a reputation for oddness are preferable to a bad marriage, then marriage must have its terrors and writers of conduct books discuss them in detail. Nor do they restrict themselves to delineating the problems of an unhappy marriage. In a famous passage of *Advice to a Daughter* (1688) Lord Halifax, in a businesslike tone, denominates "the most ordinary *Causes of Dissatisfaction* between Man and Wife" as the masculine failings of promiscuity, drunkenness, ill-humour, avarice and incompetence.¹⁷ Perhaps it is only a compliment to the ladies, but it is notable that all of the "*Causes of Dissatisfaction* " are discovered in the behaviour of men; women, it seems, can ameliorate or exacerbate the problems but are not the causes of them. Later writers are not as gloomy as Halifax about the prospects of a happy marriage but they are not really optimistic, either.

Dr. Gregory is pessimistic about the characters and habits

of men. Even if his general comments on men's hard-hearted, passionate, and dissolute ways (11) are discounted as attempts to allow his own sex freedoms he would deny women, many remarks remain that cannot be easily explained away. "A man of real genius and candour" he warns, "will seldom fall in your way"; nor will one who can be admired by a woman of "sense and taste" (37, 88-89). This negativity might be understandable if Dr. Gregory, like Lord Halifax, assumed that a woman's husband was chosen for her since it would be sensible to assure a bride who has no say in the matter that the groom she dislikes is as worthy as most of the eligible men in the world. However, Dr. Gregory believes that a woman who has reached the age of judgement should choose her own husband (119). He also wishes his daughters to marry for their own happiness, respectability, and usefulness (117). This hope is consistently undercut, unfortunately, by his bleak estimation of men's characters which obliges him to paint them as coarse, proud, easily threatened and indelicate schemers. They are also dissolute; he specifically warns against marrying a man with venereal disease (132-133). The final stroke to this portrait of man is his well-known injunction against a woman ever revealing the full extent of her affection for her husband to him. Terming it "an unpleasant truth," he defends it on the grounds that "violent love cannot subsist, at least cannot be expressed, for any time together, on both sides; otherwise the certain consequence, however concealed, is satiety and disgust. Nature in this case has laid the reserve on you"

(131-132). In protesting against Gregory's advice to hide all learning and even good sense from men, Mary Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication* that it is nothing more than catering to fools since Gregory admits that men of real sense would not be offended by an intelligent woman (219). The *Legacy* is built on the assumption that most men are fools. Dr. Gregory's final warning against marrying a fool (131-132) is ironic for his book makes it clear that only a rare and lucky woman will be able to avoid doing just that.

Dr. Gregory is often a target for those writers who follow him. In a lesser-known work, *A Letter to a New-Married Lady* (1777), Mrs. Chapone decries his ban on a woman's declaring her love for her husband¹⁸ and Thomas Gisborne, in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, declares that there is no need for women to hide their intelligence from men (264, 266). Yet both of these works convey low opinions of men, as does Eugenia Stanhope's *The Deportment of a Married Life*. Mrs. Chapone counsels the new wife not to bother her husband, Mr. B., with domestic disputes and details and adds that Mr. B. should be kept from "growing dull and weary in your company" (15-16). It is also advisable to flatter him by adopting his tastes in reading and amusements (17). More disturbingly, it is assumed that the new husband's present complaisance is the result of his brightly burning passion and the new wife is encouraged to act quickly, while it is still blazing, "to build the solid foundation of a durable friendship" (13-14). To this end she is to

avoid everything that can create a moment's disgust to-

wards either your person or your mind. Keep the infirmities of both out of the observation of your husband more scrupulously than of any other man; and never let your idea in his imagination be accompanied with circumstances unpleasant or disgraceful. (14)

This new husband is the victim of his passions. Malleable only when he is in their grip, he must somehow be imprinted with a favourable image of his wife at that time if the marriage is to be tolerable after his passion for her has abated. If not quite fools, men are certainly childlike in their need to be amused and flattered. They appear to be immune to ideals of fidelity and companionship and must be tricked and cajoled into establishing a mature marital relationship. Not surprisingly, Mrs. Chapone includes advice on how to handle Mr. B.'s possible unkindness or unfaithfulness (25-26); the passionate child she describes is only too likely to indulge in them both.

In *The Deportment of a Married Life* (1790) Eugenia Stanhope emphasizes the need to humour a husband but unlike Mrs. Chapone she does not patronize men (or her readers) by intimating that men are childlike. She locates the inequality of marriage in two things: the importance to men of their "Prerogative",¹⁹ and the fact that "what in Women are Crimes; Custom, however unjustly, has made in Man but Follies" (12). It is essential for every new wife to convince herself "that there is a *real* Superiority in the Husband," however difficult that may be, and to believe it "happily" and "readily" (191-192). To her credit, Stanhope does not suggest that this is

an easy step, only a necessary one, since even the best man will insist on retaining his prerogative (192). As a result, and because men are “naturally” stubborn and proud (17), a wife should never voice her dissatisfaction with her husband’s behaviour but should rather endeavour to change it by humouring him (14). Stanhope singles out drunkenness as the most common folly to which men are prone and stresses that neither this, nor the problems of infidelity and alienation that are often caused by it, nor a man’s financial irresponsibility can be dealt with openly (12-15, 174). *The Deportment of a Married Life* recognizes the unfairness of a woman’s role in marriage and argues that the injustice stems from, not the will of God, but the characters and habits of men. The advice is unsentimental and straightforward. The ultimate injustice, however, is only implied. Women are encouraged to give their husbands complete freedom in going out, and are given the same freedom themselves; unfortunately, there are few places where a woman would want to go since most of them are suitable only to the rougher tastes of men (235). Similarly, a long discussion of conformity of temper and sentiment between man and wife ends confusedly by enjoining women to imitate their husbands in these respects but to retain their own individuality. They should be shadows to their husbands, not their “faithful Mirror[s]” (223-224). The distinction is slight and only underlines the power of men. Stanhope suggests that it is possible to bow to a husband’s prerogative and still be happy; her language indicates that the happiness is, indeed, shadowy.

Thomas Gisborne's *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (1797) seems more liberal than the works of Dr. Gregory, Mrs. Chapone or Eugenia Stanhope. Gisborne has a refreshing air of common sense and his book "pleased" Jane Austen, even though she "had quite determined not to read it".²⁰ Part of the attractiveness of the *Enquiry* comes from Gisborne's habit of discussing general principles of female life rather than the practical applications of those principles. He devotes several pages, for example, to a consideration of the principle of obedience in marriage, quoting the scriptural passages that support it and pointing out that the rule is "not absolute": wives cannot be forced to transgress against divine law or a third party (227-228). He also states that a husband is bound by these same scriptures to treat his wife considerately (232). This all sounds very sensible but Gisborne does not address the problem of a woman who disagrees with her husband over the interpretation of a divine law or the rights of a third party. A woman, moreover, who discovers that her husband does not treat her with consideration and does not even believe that he is bound to do so is dismissed by Gisborne: "the fault surely is her own" for failing to ensure his willingness to follow the scriptures before they were married (232). Later in the *Enquiry* Gisborne tacitly admits that the probability of marrying an irreligious man is high, when he explains why women are more religious than men:

[Women] have minds more susceptible of lively impressions; they are less exposed than the other sex to the temptations of open vice; they have quicker feelings of native delicacy, and a stronger sense of shame, no inconsiderable supports

to virtue; and they are subjected, in a peculiar degree, to vicissitudes of health adapted to awaken serious thought, and to set before them the prospect and the consequences of dissolution. (248-9)

Gisborne concludes by offering the optimistic news that a wife's piety often spreads to her husband, resulting in the improvement of both his soul and their marriage (249); as cheering as this information may be, it contrasts strangely with his contempt for women who do not marry men of proven religious principles. Finally, and unlike Eugenia Stanhope, Gisborne does not stress the commitment to self-abnegation and circumspection that is involved in the doctrine of obedience. His position is supported by the Bible and reasonable argument, Stanhope's by references to the male prerogative and the double standard of sexual morality, but a woman who followed his advice would find herself in the situation described by Stanhope.

Gisborne is not, in fact, much more optimistic than his colleagues about the men his readers will meet and marry. His brave statements about the absurdity of a woman's hiding either her love or her intelligence from her husband (255, 263-264) are undermined by the qualifications that surround them. If it is acceptable to acknowledge her intelligence, she must take care not to display it with pride or ambition (265). He also admits that men frequently hesitate to marry a woman of "exceptional" intelligence, for fear that she will be immersed in her studies, will want to talk about

them, and will neglect her domestic duties in their favour (269). If, then, it is all right for a woman to admit to being intelligent or talented, it is emphatically not all right to pursue her interests avidly or to discuss them with pride. Similarly, she may show her love to her husband but should behave towards him with a "purity of manners and conduct, 'coupled with fear' " (247). These opinions do represent an advance over the dire warnings of earlier writers. Gisborne does not share Dr. Gregory's overt suspiciousness and pessimism, but he does, paradoxically, place a greater burden on women by making them responsible for the happiness of their marriages. He assures them that it is their own fault if they marry unhappily and yet nowhere does he indicate how a woman is to gain "an actual knowledge of [a man's] character" (232) before marriage. He counsels reliance on the advice of "virtuous relatives" (240-241) but later, ironically, he warns parents that "there is scarcely any circumstance by which the sober judgement and the fixed principles of parents are so frequently perverted, as by a scheming eagerness respecting the settlement of their daughters in marriage" (388). Gisborne performs a neat trick in the *Enquiry*. On the one hand he holds out the promise of a sensible, tender husband, while on the other he obliquely admits that such a man is difficult, if not impossible, to find. More than any of the others, Gisborne specializes in establishing general principles and rules of behaviour that should, if they are followed correctly, result in a happy marriage. He correspondingly devotes much less attention than his predecessors to

discussing ways of handling marital and premarital problems and conflicts. By striking a balance between radicals like Mary Wollstonecraft and reactionaries like Jane West, he does present an improved model of marriage.²¹ The structure is flimsy, however, as it is built on too many omissions, too many contradictions and too many commandments that are attractive but difficult to implement.

A comparison of Gisborne's *Enquiry* with a conduct book for men, written at about the same time, demonstrates the difference between male and female attitudes towards marriage. Gisborne himself wrote a conduct book for men, *An Enquiry into the Duties of Men* (1794), but it is devoted to exploring men's professional and social obligations; marriage is apparently considered a lesser duty since it is considered only once, in the last few pages of the chapter devoted to the private gentleman. The discussion is brief and sketchy. Gisborne surveys the scriptural injunctions pertaining to the doctrine of obedience and adds, seemingly as incentive, the advice that gentle treatment of a wife will make it easier for the husband to influence her dispositions and correct her failings.²² Besides warning that marriage can be miserable, and cautioning that it is inconsiderate and, at worst, cruel, to toy with a woman for whom one does not care (600-601), Gisborne has little else to say to men about marriage or women. J. Aikin's *Letters From a Father to His Son, On Various Topics, Relative to Literature and the Conduct of Life* (1793), devotes a whole chapter to marriage though his tone suggests that it is a topic of lesser interest to men. Gisborne warns

his female readers in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* that choosing a man of poor moral character will result in “years of danger and misery” (242); Aikin likens the choice of an unsuitable wife to making a voyage round the world with an incompatible cabin mate.²³ The prospect of the latter is daunting but even under the worst circumstances it is bearable, for it is always possible to leave the cabin and, if necessary, the ship. Choosing a wife is a less harrowing job than selecting a husband. In Aikin’s *Letters* there are no discussions of the importance of finding a woman of good moral character; principles are, seemingly, something that women, unlike men, are assumed to possess. Nor, interestingly, are there any examinations of the principle of obedience as it applies to either men or women. Aikin directs his readers to search for a woman of good sense, temper, and health because a woman who possesses these qualities can have “her tastes, manners and opinions . . . changed if she loves her husband” (334, 339). A man marries “for [his] own benefit, by which [he is] to obtain additional sources of happiness” (339) and although he is cautioned that “‘all the colour of remaining life’ depends” on his choice of wife (342) the warning does not carry the air of urgency that envelops the conduct books that are written for women. The threat of danger that hangs over Gisborne, Gregory, and the rest is not present in Aikin; a bad marriage will deny a man “additional sources of happiness” but will not oblige him to suffer under tyranny.

Aikin’s *Letters* also provides a sidelight on a topic that is

not directly explored in the womens' conduct books: the physical stress of marriage. Womens' health is mentioned by the other writers, but usually in the context of whether or not it is attractive for a woman to be healthy. Dr. Gregory, for example, counsels women against advertising their good health since it will repel men (56-57), while Thomas Gisborne disagrees and recommends that they exercise (222), though he does notice that women are more likely to be sick than men (249). In the *Vindication* Mary Wollstonecraft agrees that women are usually sick and argues that they are trained not to be healthy (88). Aikin, in warning his readers against marrying a "delicate" woman, points out that great

exertions of fortitude and self-command are continually required in the course of female duty Occasions of alarm, suffering and disgust come much more frequently in the way of women than of men. To them belong all offices about the weak, the sick, and the dying. When the house becomes a scene of wretchedness from any cause, the man often runs abroad, the woman must stay at home and face the worst. (339-340)

Aikin is stating one fact of women's lives, the care of the sick and dying, and hinting at another: pregnancy and childbirth. Ruth Perry, in an article entitled "The Veil of Chastity: Mary Astell's Feminism", finds in Astell's writings a "sense of lurking danger in relationships with men" which she traces, in part, to the perils of pregnancy and childbirth.²⁴ Although conditions had improved somewhat by 1800,²⁵ Perry's analysis of figures from the early eighteenth century indicates the risks that women throughout the century faced. By a conservative estimate, one out of sixty deliveries re-

sulted in the death of the mother, and the average married woman could expect to be pregnant ten to twelve times, although a high rate of miscarriage meant that she would give birth only six to eight times.²⁶ Primitive obstetrical techniques resulted in an array of common physical problems ranging from anaemia and incontinence to life-threatening infections.²⁷ Since marriage almost inevitably meant multiple pregnancies, it is reasonable to assume that not only Mary Astell but all the writers of conduct books convey a “sense of lurking danger” to their readers that is influenced by their knowledge of the hazards of female sexuality.

The conduct books offer a perspective on the problems and difficulties of sexual relationships for eighteenth-century women. They are backed up by the mass of the period’s fiction, including novels and the poems and stories of periodical literature.²⁸ They are also supported by the recent work of social historians on eighteenth-century sexuality and marriage. Roy Porter’s essay in *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, edited by Paul-Gabriel Boucé, confirms the conduct books’ cynicism about male behaviour. Porter, in “Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain”, asserts that male promiscuity was widely viewed as “manly” and points out that both Wilkes and Fox were commended for their sexual escapades.²⁹ He also contends that such views were both widespread and long-lived; only some groups in society, such as the various Dissenting sects, were noticeably opposed to the prevailing licentiousness, and reform movements, such as the Society

for the Reformation of Manners or the Proclamation Society of 1787 and its successor, Wilberforce's Vice Society of 1802, attracted little popular support.³⁰ Anna K. Clark's "Rape or Seduction? A Controversy Over Sexual Violence in the Nineteenth Century", an article in *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Power, Women's Resistance*, describes a rape and murder case of 1817 which touched off a debate on sexual violence. Clark's essay presents evidence that violence was accepted as a means of seduction by the courts and by a significant proportion of the population³¹ and provides an intriguing if by no means conclusive sidelight on the eighteenth-century novel's depiction of sexual violence. As useful as these two studies are, they are superseded in importance by the work of Randolph Trumbach and Lawrence Stone in, respectively, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* and *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800*. Both authors reach conclusions that endorse the conduct books' suspicion of men and pessimism about marriage.

Randolph Trumbach argues that the Marriage Act of 1753, which banned clandestine marriages, marks the passing of the idea that tricking or forcing an heiress into marriage was a legitimate way for a younger son to rise in the world.³² Trumbach attributes the change to the widespread acceptance of romantic love as a basis for marriage among the upper classes by 1753 and states that before then seven similar bills, one of them prompted by a brutal abduction and forced marriage, all failed in the House of Commons, probably

because younger sons sat in the lower house.³³ The possibility of being deceived by a man for his personal gain was a feature of life for wealthy women in the eighteenth century and it appears as if the practice was condoned until mid-century. The passage of the Marriage Act indicates that clandestine marriage was still a current problem although fewer people approved of it, and for the first time it was made a legally punishable offence. To use Mary Wollstonecraft's terms, the passing of the Act makes it clear that this kind of preying on women was now seen to be an actual injustice and not merely a personal misfortune for a woman and her family. Lawrence Stone points out that a second object of the Act was to correct an abuse of women's trust in contracting secret marriages or engagements which were often bigamous (although many people claimed a clandestine marriage in order to subvert a marriage arranged by parents).³⁴ As interpreted by both Stone and Trumbach, Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act is not a reactionary attempt to reestablish marital choices in the hands of parents or to create an increasingly powerful upper class but a signal that attitudes towards marriage were changing in ways that diminished its mercenary and callous aspects for the benefit of women.

Both Stone and Trumbach speculate about the personal behaviour of eighteenth-century men. In his chapter on the subject, "Male Sexual Behaviour and the Limits of Domesticity", Trumbach concludes that "independence and aggression rather than tenderness and attachment were the bases on which men built their identities

as males” and suggests that aristocratic men, used to whores, had difficulty establishing relations with women of their own class.³⁵ Although he sees an improvement in aristocratic male behaviour after 1750, with men showing less aggression and violence and more gentleness and seriousness, he cautions that “the internalization of [the] homosexual taboo, the formation of gender identity, and the development of heterosexual behaviour” all placed “severe limits” on the male aristocrat’s commitment to egalitarian marriage with its ideals of romantic love and contented domesticity.³⁶ In a lecture presented to the Association for Eighteenth-Century Studies at McMaster University in October 1984, Trumbach traced a growing double standard in the eighteenth century. He contrasts the seventeenth-century ideal of chastity, which applied to both sexes, with the eighteenth-century ideal of chastity, which applied solely to women, while promiscuous men won approbation and even admiration.³⁷ Men no longer, as they had a century before, brought cases before the ecclesiastical court to clear themselves of charges of promiscuity and, in a parallel development, were no longer arrested with the whores they patronized.³⁸ Trumbach’s description of an aggressive, independent male coincides with the conduct books’ portrayal of a passionate, obstinate man who is incapable of controlling his emotions or desires, while his comments on the double standard are echoed by not only Eugenia Stanhope but generally, in all the warnings never to encourage freedoms from a man; the double standard gives a man license to try to seduce every woman since it

is up to the woman to resist him.

Lawrence Stone's work in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* covers a much larger area than Trumbach's; his study ranges over three centuries and all classes, while Trumbach's relies on the evidence provided by the personal papers of the one hundred and sixty aristocratic families he studies.³⁹ Despite their different approaches, their conclusions about eighteenth-century sexuality are very similar. Stone suggests, for example, that marriage for love did not work to a woman's advantage since, as Dr. Gregory stated, she could not initiate a relationship but only return the affection of a man who loved her; hence, a happy marriage still depended on "the docility and adaptability of the woman".⁴⁰ Stone's exploration of male sexuality, libertinism, promiscuity, and the incidence of venereal disease indicates that seduction and adultery increased with the Restoration and were both widespread and openly practiced throughout the eighteenth-century.⁴¹ Often a bit of information gathered by Stone as part of a case history unexpectedly corroborates the warnings of the conduct books or the predictions of Mary Wollstonecraft. Thus, Wollstonecraft's emotional picture of the fate of genteel, impoverished single women is supported by Stone's survey of the backgrounds of the mistresses of wealthy men which shows them to be predominantly the daughters or widows of bankrupt businessmen and professional men.⁴² Similarly, the advice of the writers of conduct books comes to mind when Stone discusses Mrs. Hesther Thrale's reaction to her husband's second case of vene-

real disease in thirteen years: she remembers her father prophesying just such an occurrence when she agreed to marry the wealthy Thrale against her father's wishes but with the encouragement of her mother and uncle.⁴³ Her situation illustrates not only the warnings against marrying an unprincipled man but also the discussions of how difficult it is to judge a man's character even with the help of family and friends. Both these examples and Stone's general conclusions confirm that, despite the rise of companionate or egalitarian marriage in the eighteenth-century and the softening of manners in the upper classes in its last decades, men of every class shared, in the words of a nineteenth-century marriage manual, "the real and intense coarseness of the male character" which manifested itself in discourteousness, selfishness, tyranny and adultery.⁴⁴

The evidence of eighteenth-century conduct books and twentieth-century social historians unites to form certain conclusions about eighteenth-century sexual relationships. While neither group can furnish much proof that the seduced innocent was as ubiquitous as popular literature insisted she was, they both fill her place with evidence that women's health and safety were matters of great concern, whether they were single or married. Indeed, it seems as if the married woman was an object of special concern since she was likely to be married to a man who was aggressive and violent. If Stone and Trumbach cannot confirm the pervasiveness of the rape or seduction scenario familiar to readers of fiction, they do point out that it was not a fabrication. Enough heiresses were ab-

ducted, enough secret marriages were contracted and enough women were seduced into bad or bigamous marriages to make the passing of a new law forbidding these abuses both necessary and fiercely resisted for over half a century. The conduct books cannot accomplish their ends without contradicting themselves by pointing out at every turn that happiness in marriage is tenuous at best, largely because of the nature of men. They are permeated with low expectations of male behaviour, in and out of marriage; if the double standard was established and solidified in the eighteenth century, as Trumbach contends, the pressure it exerted was not felt only on sexual matters. Contradictory as it may seem, since men were celebrated as rational, women as irrational beings, it was men who were allowed to be incapable of controlling their passions and desires, while women were expected not only to control their own passions but to accommodate themselves to those of their husbands and fathers. The burden thus placed on a woman was made heavier by her right to choose her husband. Now laden with the moral implications of her choice and the responsibility if it turned out unhappily, it would not be surprising if she viewed marriage as a frightening and dangerous step. Her choice still limited to the offers she received, her chance to know her suitor still slight, her only other option to be an impecunious, friendless spinster, it is likely that a woman could easily marry a man who would not treat his wife with the deference enjoined by the scriptures. "Pathetic seduced maidens"⁴⁵ do not populate the pages of the conduct books but they are a peculiarly apt

symbol of the pathetic maidens who were seduced into marriage by their own expectations and society's pressures; their fate was not more pleasant than that of their fictional sisters.

Since Richardson used the conduct books as a guide to writing his fiction,⁴⁶ it is not surprising that his novels echo their point of view. From their warnings against attending masquerades to their minute explorations of the principle of obedience, Richardson's novels reproduce the cautions and the rules of the conduct books. Yet if Richardson, on occasion, imaginatively subverts a staple command of the conduct books, such as the one forbidding a woman to reveal her love first,⁴⁷ he also uses his imagination to give life to their prevailing distrust of men. Charlotte Grandison's struggles with married life are an illustration of the difficulties of believing "happily" and "readily" in the superiority of her husband and Harriet's situation when she believes Sir Charles is lost to her exemplifies the quandary of a woman who is faced with the prospect of marrying an unobjectionable man she does not love. Sir Hargrave, Captain Anderson and Mr. Greville are violent, scheming deceivers while Sir Charles, the best of men, is both proud and hot-tempered. Richardson died before the most liberal authors of conduct books published their works and yet, writing at the mid-century, he details a view of women and marriage that coincides with those published in the conduct manuals of the 1790s. The core of Richardson's fiction—that women are, with good reason, afraid of men—is an attempt to reproduce the emotional truth of their lives. The "impassioned, &

most exceptional parts" of his novels which Jane Austen condemned in *Sandition* are dramatic exaggerations of the fears he understood, but they do not relegate the rest of his work to the realm of sado-masochistic fantasy, communal or individual. Richardson did not slavishly imitate the advice of the conduct books. From them, from other sources, and from observation, he grasped the fears that haunted women and the dichotomies that restricted them and produced novels that explore the complexities of women's lives. Scenes of women in distress may have excited his imagination simply because they were so pervasive. It should be remembered, moreover, that Richardson is also an ameliorator of a situation he describes so well. In *Sir Charles Grandison* and *Pamela* the fears are transmuted into a happy, if precarious, accommodation between the sexes; in *Clarissa*, where extremes prevail and where reconciliation is impossible, the heroine faces all the dangers and transcends them.

If Jane Austen is unusual in the gallery of eighteenth-century novelists who stress sexual abnormality and violence it is not because she inhabited a different world or had a saner outlook on the world she shared with the others. Like Richardson, she is an ameliorator of relations between the sexes, but she is more radical than he in creating fiction that denies the fears that hedge her subject matter. To paraphrase Harrison R. Steeves, the bearing of not only the mass of fiction, but of the conduct books of the period and the work of social historians two centuries later "is unmistakable". Female fearfulness and male aggression are muted to the point of nonexist-

ence in the novels of Jane Austen; their absence is a fictional necessity, not a concession to the demands of realism and common sense.

NOTES

¹Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper, 1961), pp. 48-49; Morris Golden, *Richardson's Characters* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1963), p. 17; Carol Houlihan Flynn, *Samuel Richardson: A Man of Letters* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 102.

²Sue Warrick Doederlein, "Clarissa in the Hands of the Critics," *ECS*, XVI, No. 4 (Summer 1983), 405.

³Flynn, p. 102.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵Harrison R. Steeves, *Before Jane Austen: The Shaping of the English Novel in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), p. 88.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁹Flynn, pp. 103-104.

¹⁰Roy Porter, "Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain" in Paul-Gabriel Boucé, ed., *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), p. 9.

¹¹Randolph Trumbach, "The Sexual Subcultures of Eighteenth-Century London," The Association for Eighteenth-Century Studies, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ont., 4 Oct. 1984.

¹²Flynn, p. 105.

¹³Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1967), p. 285. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

¹⁴Dr. Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, new ed., (London: Cadell and Davies, 1814), pp. 48, 83; Mrs. Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, new ed., (London: J. Walter and C. Dilly, 1797), p. 111; Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Cadell, Jr., and W. Davies, 1797), pp. 101-103. All subsequent references are to these editions and will be cited in the text.

¹⁵Mary Wollstonecraft, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters with Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life*, intro. to the Garland ed. by Gina Luria (1787; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), pp. 75-77. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

¹⁶Susan Staves, "British Seduced Maidens," *ECS*, XVI, No. 2 (Winter 1980-81), 110, 134.

¹⁷George Savile, Marquess of Halifax, *The Lady's New-Year's-Gift: or, Advice to a Daughter* in *The Complete Works of George Savile, First Marquess of Halifax*, ed. with an introduction by Walter Raleigh (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1912), pp. 10-16.

¹⁸Mrs. Hester Chapone, *A Letter to a New-Married Lady* (London: E. and C. Dilly and J. Walter, 1777), p. 11. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

¹⁹E[ugenia] S[tanhope], *The Deportment of a Married Life: Laid Down in a Series of Letters*, 2nd ed. (London: Mr. Hodges, 1790), p. 192. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

²⁰"To Cassandra Austen", 30 Aug. 1805, *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, collected and ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 169.

²¹Gina Luria, Introduction to the Garland ed. of *The Female Aegis or the Duties of Women* (London, 1798; rpt. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), p.6.

²²Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of Men in the Higher and Middle Classes of Society in Great Britain, Resulting from*

their Respective Stations, Professions, and Employments (London: J. Davis for B. & J. White, 1794), p. 603. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

²³John Aikin, *Letters From a Father to His Son, On Various Topics, Relative to Literature and the Conduct of Life* (London: J. Johnson, 1793), pp. 332-333. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

²⁴Ruth Perry, "The Veil of Chastity: Mary Astell's Feminism" in Paul-Gabriel Boucé, ed., *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), p. 144.

²⁵Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 72-73, 79-80.

²⁶Perry, p. 147.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 149.

²⁸Alison Adburgham, *Women in Print: Writing Women and Women's Magazine's from the Restoration to the Accession of Victoria* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1972), p. 266.

²⁹Porter, pp. 12-13.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 14.

³¹Anna K. Clark, "Rape or Seduction? A Controversy over Sexual Violence in the Nineteenth Century" in *The Sexual Dynamics of History: Men's Power, Women's Resistance* by The London Feminist History Group (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1983), pp. 16-17.

³²Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), pp. 107-109.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

³⁴Stone, p. 36.

³⁵Trumbach, *Family*, pp. 282-283.

³⁶*Ibid.*, p. 284.

³⁷Trumbach, "Sexual Subcultures."

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹Trumbach, *Family*, pp.

⁴⁰Stone, pp. 398-399.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, pp. 530-538.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 531.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 314, 600.

⁴⁴Stone, p. 400, quoting *The English Matron* (London, 1846), pp. 2, 16, 18, 179-182, Ch. II-III, *passim*.

⁴⁵Staves, 118.

⁴⁶Margaret Anne Doody, *A Natural Passion: A Study of the Novels of Samuel Richardson* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974), p. 310.

⁴⁷Doody, pp. 312-313.

CHAPTER IV

"THE TRUE ART OF LETTER-WRITING"

Although, as Leroy W. Smith states, "the once-popular image of Austen as a 'refined Victorian lady' has generally been discarded",¹ there is a continuing perception that her life had little in common with the lives of the other eighteenth-century novelists. Lord David Cecil, in *A Portrait of Jane Austen*, takes care to separate the England of the first half of the century, "the riotous, brutal, uproarious England depicted in Hogarth's pictures and Smollett's novels", from the England in which Jane Austen grew up, an England which esteemed delicacy, fine feelings, and decorum.² England did change during the eighteenth century, but J. H. Plumb's analysis of the years 1784-1815, very nearly the span of Jane Austen's life, indicates that the period was not an oasis of refinement. It was, instead, an era of instability: Romantic worship of nature coincided with upheavals in rural life which included intense, widespread poverty and violent revolt; scientific writing was as popular as the poetry of Burns or Wordsworth; the French Revolution and ensuing wars enhanced British national prestige but aggravated economic and social problems.³ There is also the evidence of Roy Porter and of Randolph Trumbach, cited in the last chapter, on the limitations of the improved manners and mores towards the end of the century.⁴ Jane Austen created a radically different world in her fiction; she

did not live in it.

Many scholars have pointed out that Austen's letters show that she was acquainted with, and unshocked by, a wide range of human behaviour:⁵ she boasts of having "a very good eye at an Adul-tress" and characterizes a woman's pursuit of her intoxicated hus-band at a party as "an amusing scene."⁶ The world depicted in the letters, and the letters themselves, are neither delicate nor deco-rous, and this has led many critics, as Robert Alan Donovan has noted in "The Mind of Jane Austen," to profess themselves "disenchanted with the triviality of the letters and the vulgarity of the mind which produced them."⁷ Anyone hoping to find a reflection of the novels' elegance in the letters must be disappointed, for the letters are neither elegant nor polished. What is too rarely observed, however, is that the letters reveal Jane Austen's feelings about being a woman in ways that are significant for her novels. The letters are, above all, a woman's letters and are permeated with their author's consciousness of the paradoxical nature of a woman's life. Jane Austen knows that she is writing about "important nothings" (186): news and gossip about housekeeping, fashion, parties, and other people's courtships, marriages, and children, all the minutiae of family life which were a woman's province. Austen mocks her own and others' interest in such unimportant information even as she discusses it, yet she realizes that it is upon such insignificant de-tails that women, especially, build their lives. In addition, her let-ters show that she understands the reality behind the gossip about

courtship, marriage, birth, and death, and refuses to be either decorous or complacent about these topics. In her letters Jane Austen reveals herself as a contemporary of the authors of the conduct books even as she disassociates herself from their polite hypocrisies and contradictions; they share the same fears for women and the same understandings of their lives.

In *Jane Austen and Her Art* Mary Lascelles observes that there is a strong vein of “burlesque-gossip” in the letters.⁸ The letters are, in fact, so gossipy and concerned with trivialities that there is reason to believe that they are parodies of the letters that women were supposed to write. Conversation and familiar letter-writing were activities which were considered suitable for young women and they were governed by the same rules, as Jane Austen knew: “I have now attained the true art of letter-writing, which we are always told, is to express on paper exactly what one would say to the same person by word of mouth; I have been talking to you almost as fast as I could the whole of this letter” (102), she tells Cassandra. As her tone implies, however, she is aware that her letters would not be considered fine specimens of “the true art” described by the conduct books and demonstrated in the novels of Samuel Richardson. Women’s conversation must, above all, studiously avoid any hint of slander, indelicacy, and gossip, according to Mrs. Chapone, Dr. Gregory, and Thomas Gisborne.⁹ Dr. Gregory is, as usual, stricter than the others; he also bans all wit and humour because it is incompatible

with true delicacy and dignity.¹⁰ Gisborne is as severe against women who converse vainly, affectedly, and frivolously.¹¹ A woman who does so, he warns, may eventually “rest with proud confidence in her own judgment of persons and things; and . . . reprehend with censoriousness, or expose with sarcastic ridicule, the manners and the characters of her acquaintance.”¹² It is not known with any certainty how Jane Austen conversed,¹³ but the letters are proof that she wrote with proud confidence in her own judgment and a delight in the satirical exposure of her own and other people’s manners and characters. Far from following Gisborne’s advice to write letters “which contain the natural effusions of the heart, expressed in unaffected language” and to avoid trivial subjects like fashion and vanity,¹⁴ Jane Austen does just the opposite. Her language, it is true, is not florid, but she avoids or limits “the natural effusions of the heart” in favour of witticisms and ironic humour. Unlike the heroines created by Samuel Richardson, who are constantly faced with “critical situations”, and who write while their hearts are “wholly engaged in their subjects”,¹⁵ Austen is usually communicating occurrences of lesser import which do not claim her heart. She glories, instead, in transmitting petty details of unimportant things, including fashion, and is always ready to comment, self-deprecatingly, on her own vanity. Her letters defy the rules of familiar letter-writing so flagrantly that they arouse suspicion that they were written in a good-humoured spirit of rebellion against the

strictures of “the true art”.

It may be that Jane and Cassandra Austen, and possibly the whole Austen family, jokingly flouted the rules of good letter-writing in their private correspondence.¹⁶ When Jane Austen thanks her sister “five hundred & forty times for the exquisite piece of Workmanship which was brought into the room this mornng . . . — with some very inferior works of art in the same way — & which I read with high glee” (329), or tells her to “expect a most agreeable [sic] Letter; for not being overburdened with subject — (having nothing at all to say) — I shall have no check to my Genius from beginning to end” (112), she is acknowledging that the sisters vied in creating letters that exhibited their wit. Her praise of Cassandra as “the finest comic writer of the present age” (8) is her tribute to her sister’s prowess in the art of the familiar letter as the Austen women practised it. For them, it was essentially a comic exercise, and an opportunity to indulge in irreverence and satire. Part of the fun of the letters comes from the exaggerated, and at times outrageous, gossip they contain, but part of it arises from the letters’ general reversal of proper form. Jane Austen could, and did, write seriously but Cassandra apparently destroyed most of these letters.¹⁷ Perhaps she did it to protect her sister’s privacy; perhaps she felt that the comic letters more accurately represented the author of comic novels. Whatever her reason, the letters of Jane Austen that remain are essentially parodic, written as much to flout the rules that governed the feminine art of letter-writing as to

convey to her sister the news of the latest party.

A conventional, acceptable letter is often visible underneath one of Jane Austen's letters. A letter written to Cassandra on 25 March 1798 reports on the health of Mary and Mrs. Austen, Henry Austen's career, the servant problem, various books, and minor financial transactions, and is representative of Jane Austen's letters in both style and content. The subject-matter is trivial but it is enlivened by asides that, in a theatrical manner, comment on the main action. The asides also point to the kind of letter that Austen could have written. Like many letter-writers, she begins by scolding the person to whom she is writing for not writing more often, but then goes on to congratulate herself for having thereby "relieved my heart of a great deal of malevolence" (31). The aside cuts two ways: on the one hand she is feebly justifying, and therefore ridiculing, the triteness of her opening remarks while on the other she is suggesting that such a reproachful beginning to a letter is more indicative of the ill-humour of the writer than of the laxity of her correspondent. Similarly, Austen's description of her family's reaction to *Fitz-Albani* begins seriously as she indicates that she opposed buying it, "the only one of Egerton's works of which his family are ashamed" (32). Her gravity is immediately undercut by her mocking confession that "these scruples . . . do not at all interfere with my reading it" and her claim that, unlike her father, she is not disappointed with it because she "expected no better" (32). The pattern is repeated over and over again. A paragraph of straight re-

porting on the health of her mother and the condition of Mary Austen, newly delivered of a son, ends with a burlesque sketch of Miss Debary who is described as being little changed, occupied with “netting herself a gown in worsteds,” and wearing “a *pot* hat.” The writer then turns on her own burlesque, terming it “a short and compendious history of Miss Debary!” (31). Much of the humour of the letter comes from Austen’s ability to turn her ridicule on her own foibles and failings. An account of her teeming correspondence includes a mock-attack on Mrs. Heathcote who “has been ill-natured enough to send me a letter of enquiry” which will, of course, require Jane to write yet another letter (33). A conventional letter, one in which the writer would mention the kindness of Mrs. Heathcote’s inquiry, censure without irony the immoral book she is reading, and pass on equally irrelevant details about Miss Debary, is present in this letter of Jane Austen’s. The conventional letter is the framework on which she hangs her witty reversals and satires, and part of the humour of the letter of March 25 1798 derives from the incongruity between it and the letter which she did not write.

The parodic nature of the letters enables Jane Austen to take liberties with the subjects and people discussed in them. The polite response is assumed to exist and so Austen is free to insert observations of other kinds: her own suppositions, imitations of other people’s gossip, and the imagined remarks of various character types. These satiric elements are often directed towards puncturing the hypocrisy of conventional attitudes and ideas; she delights in

pointing out that the death of a spouse is not always a time of grief for the survivor, and that the birth of a child is not always a cause for celebration. Jane Austen's extant letters, for the most part, reveal the artist as she dissects and ridicules the human condition and they are, thus, valuable if incomplete guides to her attitudes about women's lives. They are incomplete because in most of them she is deliberately repressing the "effusions of the heart" and giving play to her wit. As some of her letters to Fanny Knight show, a serious topic like Fanny's romantic entanglements evokes a compassionate response; Jane Austen was not heartless, but she did not usually display her heart in the letters that survive. The extant letters are honest, if ironic, commentaries on ordinary life by a woman who is free to exploit her gift for satiric analysis.

Interpreting the letters requires an understanding of their uniquely parodic nature. Much of the irony, for example, is directed by the author against herself. As Donald Greene observes in "The Myth of Limitation", Austen's description of her own work as "a little bit (two inches wide) of ivory" is often taken as a serious evaluation of her fiction, even though the context of the remark suggests that it was made ironically.¹⁸ The letters abound in mocking references to her appearance, popularity, manners and habits, and at times she assumes a persona through which she satirizes an aspect of her personality. Her use of burlesque-gossip, too, has not been well understood. Mr. Warren who "is ugly enough; uglier even than his cousin John; but he does not look so *very* old" (91) is a vic-

tim not of Jane Austen's frustration over her lack of success at a ball, as John Halperin states,¹⁹ but of the ill-natured gossip that circulated about him; Jane Austen parodies the rumours here rather than the man. Most importantly, perhaps, the overall satirical inversion of the letters has been undervalued. The spirit in which the letters were undertaken allowed the writer to make judgments and indulge in satiric ridicule of persons and things without fearing that her irreverencies would be interpreted as cruelty or vindictiveness. Sadly, Jane Austen's freedoms with family and friends in the letters are now interpreted as evidence of the author's double life: outwardly serene and happy, inwardly filled with hatred and bitterness and frustration.²⁰ To find such evidence in the letters is to ignore their invariably light tone and their air of good-humoured complicity. There is plenty of proof in the letters of Jane Austen's critical mind, keen eye for hypocrisy, and enjoyment of human foibles, but little to suggest that she had difficulty integrating these qualities into her life. Indeed, the letters show that her family, and especially Cassandra, enjoyed this side of her and encouraged her to develop it. The letters need to be approached as the satiric productions of a gifted and perceptive intimate if they are to be correctly interpreted.

The letter to Cassandra of Thursday 20 November 1800, which is said by John Halperin to show how Austen's "disappointment and anger [over her lack of success at a ball] are sublimated in this Swiftian account of it",²¹ illustrates Austen's satirical ap-

proach and the misunderstandings it causes. The account of the ball is a parody of an after-the-party communication, and its author employs a persona, self-deprecating humour and burlesque-gossip to achieve her satire. Austen signals her intentions by prefacing her account with a warning about a forthcoming ball:

Your desiring to hear from me on Sunday will perhaps bring in you a more particular account of the Ball than you may care for, because one is prone to think much more of such things the morning after they happen, than when time has entirely driven them out of one's recollection. (90)

The unmemorable events of the night before follow, spiced with satire, which is directed at the writer herself as often as it is pointed at the hypocrisies of others. She accuses herself of drinking too much wine (90), airily explains that she was prevented from dancing all twelve dances only “by the want of a partner”, and sniffs that “there were very few Beauties” (91). She regrets that she was obliged to find Mrs. Wallace “a very fine young woman” (91) and notes contentedly of her own appearance that “my hair was at least tidy, which was all my ambition” (92). Mrs. Blount, with her “broad face, diamond bandeau, white shoes, pink husband, & fat neck”, Mr. Warren who “is ugly enough” (91) and the unfortunate Miss Debarys to whom Jane “was as civil . . . as their bad breath would allow” (92) are all treated harshly by Austen, but her portrait of herself as a vain, complacent, and censorious woman is no more flattering. The account is an exaggeration of what a self-satisfied young woman might be expected to write on such an occasion: a gossipy report

explaining how she chose not to dance every dance or was prevented from doing so by the merest stroke of luck, and how the much-touted beauties of the neighbourhood turned out to be overestimated. Mr. Warren is “ugly enough” because rumour described him as both very old and very ugly, and Mrs. Blount’s “pink husband” is listed as one of the lady’s attributes because gossip abounds in such incongruities. Austen parodies the gossip and the ladies who purvey it, and when she tires of her satire she ends it abruptly: “I will now have done with the Ball; & I will moreover go and dress for dinner” (92). She has told of the things that time relegates to oblivion and parodied her own vanity and irascibility, and so leaves one inconsequential occupation for another, having recorded them both for the amusement of her sister.

All of Austen’s accounts of balls and assemblies are written with an ironic awareness of her own fascination with the minutiae that make up such communications. It is an awareness, to be sure, that grows over time. A letter of 9 January 1796, for example, lists the people present and comments on the quality of the supper and the decorations without mockery. The young Jane Austen declares that “Miss Heathcote is pretty, but not near so handsome as I expected”, and the comment is a considered opinion of a rival, not a satire of such a judgment (1-2). There is, however, irony in her confession that she and Tom Lefroy did “everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together” and in her admission that she was “forced to fight hard” to avoid dancing

with John Lyford (2). This letter exudes an air of enjoyment; the joking is high-spirited rather than sharp. In later letters the uncritical attitude vanishes and is replaced by an ironic awareness of the trivial details that constitute an account of a ball. On Monday September 5 1796 she hopes “to receive so long & minute an account of every particular [of the ball] that I shall be tired of reading it” (11), and on 24 December 1798 she teases Cassandra by finding her sister’s prospective purchase of a new muslin gown as delightful as Cassandra’s recent attendance at a ball where she had many partners and dined with the Prince (44). On Monday 21 January 1799 she notes wryly that “I had a very pleasant evening . . . though you will probably find out that there was no particular reason for it; but I do not think it worth while to wait for enjoyment until there is some real opportunity for it” (56). By the time she comes to write of the latest ball on 20 November 1800, she attempts to vary the monotony of the report by inventing a persona who shares some of her personality traits, and by fashioning the gossip into a burlesque. Although she mentions balls frequently in later letters, the references are almost always mocking. Alluding ironically to the contrivances of romantic fiction, she innocently asks Cassandra in January 1801 why she danced “four dances with so stupid a Man? — why not rather dance two of them with some elegant brother-officer who was struck with your appearance as soon as you entered the room?” (108) Balls and her own expectations and rationalizations of them are often the subjects of Jane Austen’s letters, and only rarely does

she ignore their satiric possibilities.

Austen's comments about balls are often sharp, but this does not mean that she felt contempt for them or for the people who attended them. Although her early, uncritical enjoyment of balls appears to have abated rather quickly, she retained an interest in observing them. On Sunday 30 November 1800 she boasts that she has many "spies" posted in different places so that she can "derive from their various observations a good general idea" of the Basingstoke Ball (98). She reports on Tuesday 24 January 1809 that she has received "a very full and agreeable account of Mr. Hammond's Ball" and adds that she would have liked "to have seen Anna's looks and performance" (257). As late as 13 March 1817, just a few months before her death, in a letter to Fanny Knight, she probes Fanny's account of people's actions at a ball for significance: "What does her dancing away with so much spirit mean? that she does not care for him, or only wishes to *appear* not to care for him?" (482-483). She remained intrigued by dances and assemblies until the end of her life because they provided her with insights into human behaviour that were put to use in her fiction. Men's and women's actions at a dance presented opportunities for enjoyable speculation about their motives and provided evidence of the peculiar behaviour of people in groups. When Jane Austen charts the rise and fall of Darcy's popularity at the Netherfield ball in *Pride and Prejudice* or links important character development to Mr. Knightley's actions at the ball in *Emma*, she is displaying her appreciation of the gather-

ings in which she had participated. Under her amused and sometimes harsh critiques lies an affectionate understanding of the social ritual and the people who participate in it. When she turns her attention to other subjects, her attitude remains the same: unconventional, often sharp, but demonstrative of a keen interest in the ways in which people manage their lives.

The letters' unconventional wit and lack of seriousness have led to charges that Jane Austen is hardhearted and malicious.²² In addition, their frivolity makes it appear as if their author held the trials of women's lives in scant regard. When she jokes that Mrs. Hall's miscarriage was caused by the fright that lady received when "she happened unawares to look at her husband" (24), or announces that she has no pity for a newly-married friend of theirs who is unhappy "merely because she cannot live in two places at the same time, & at once enjoy the comforts of being married & single" (177), she seems coldly unsympathetic to the concerns that are written of so anxiously in the conduct books. In Jane Austen's letters men are not frightening, the prospect of marriage is not daunting, and the deaths of friends and acquaintances in childbirth are noted calmly and even casually. The apparent casualness of her attitude towards these matters, however, is part of the style of the letters. When Jane Austen writes seriously of marriage, as she does in a few of the surviving letters, she reveals herself a spiritual colleague of the writers of conduct books; she observes the same things that they do, although she usually expresses herself differ-

ently.

In her letters, Jane Austen mentions marriages made without parental approval, second marriages, marriages contracted with and without love, and even gives advice about marriage to her niece Fanny. Rarely does she indicate that the unions she discusses are happy, and it is clear that she understands how women are exhausted and endangered by the almost inevitable consequence of marriage: childbearing. She is, generally, flippant about the dangers of childbirth, complaining on 1 December 1798 that

Mary does not manage matters in such a way as to make me want to lay in myself. She is not tidy enough in her appearance; she has no dressing-gown to sit up in; her curtains are all too thin, and things are not in that comfort and style about her which are necessary to make her situation an enviable one. (35)

As the years pass, and the women of her acquaintance endure pregnancy after pregnancy, her tone becomes more acerbic: on 8 February 1807, she confesses that “I see nothing to be glad of, unless I make it a matter of Joy that Mrs. Wylmot has another son, & that Lord Lucan has taken a Mistress, both of which events are of course joyful to the Authors” (176). In 1817, shortly before her own death, she writes seriously on the subject to her niece Fanny. In two letters, dated Thursday 18 March 1817 and Sunday 23 March 1817, she expresses sorrow and frustration over “the business of Mothering” (483). In the earlier letter she points out that if Fanny does not marry and begin “the business of Mothering quite so early in life, you will be young in Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance, while

Mrs Wm Hammond is growing old by confinements & nursing" (483). In her next letter she is even more direct as she comments on the news that her niece Anna Lefroy is pregnant again: "Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty. — I am very sorry for her. — Mrs Clement too is in that way again. I am quite tired of so many Children. — Mrs Benn has a 13th" (488). In most of her letters to Cassandra Jane Austen obeys the spirit of comic subversion that rules their correspondence and adopts a flippant, sardonic attitude to the news of yet another child born or another friend dead in childbirth. The change in tone of the two letters to Fanny reflects not a sudden change of heart but rather a change of circumstance; she is writing not to amuse Cassandra but rather to warn a favourite niece against beginning the debilitating cycle of pregnancy "so early in life". "The business of Mothering" was an almost inevitable consequence of marriage, Austen knew, and she had no illusions about its dangers.

Jane Austen is more candid than the authors of conduct books about the dangers of multiple pregnancies, but she has little to say on one of their favourite topics, the bestial nature of men. She indulges in no rhetoric about scheming encroachers and deceivers and tells no heartrending stories about the sad lives of women who are married to cruel husbands. Indeed, on more than one occasion she expresses sympathy for men who are bound to unsatisfactory women (177, 362, 485). Here again, the parodic style of the

letters precludes, for the most part, the “effusions of the heart” that would accompany pathetic tales of women in distress. Yet if her satirical comments about the marriages of her acquaintances are examined along with her more serious observations on the subject, they suggest that Austen did not have a particularly high opinion of men’s characters. She was aware, for example, of a man’s role in his wife’s unending pregnancies, and recommended for one such couple “the simple regimen of separate rooms” (481). It is likely, however, judging by her remarks in her letters to Fanny, that she did not believe that this solution was “simple” to put into effect; she seems to have taken for granted that a man’s sexual demands on his wife would not be tempered by his concern for her well-being. In Austen’s own family her brother and sister-in-law Frank and Mary had eleven children, and two more sisters-in-law, the wives of Edward and Charles, died giving birth to their eleventh and fourth children, respectively.²³ People married in order to have children, but Austen shows some resentment of men’s sexual demands that continued despite their wives’ deterioration in health and vitality.

Austen seems to have believed that women’s chances for happiness in matrimony were limited, partly by their own characters and choices, but partly by marriage itself and the men who were to be their husbands. She writes to her brother Frank on 25 September 1813 that she is “anxious to have” her niece Anna’s engagement to the Reverend Ben Lefroy “go on well, there being quite as much in his favour as the Chances are likely to give her in any Matrimonial connection” (340). She elaborates:

I beleive [*sic*] he is sensible, certainly very religious, well connected & with some Independence. — There is an unfortunate dissimilarity of Taste between them in one respect which gives us some apprehensions, he hates company & she is very fond of it; — this, with some queerness of Temper on his side & much unsteadiness on hers, is untoward. (340-341)

Anna's "unsteadiness" may account for some of the coolness of tone in this paragraph; according to John Halperin, she had only recently broken off an engagement which the family thought unsuitable, and Jane Austen may have been worried about the speed with which she formed another attachment.²⁴ Austen's unemotional evaluation of Anna's "Chances", however, is indicative of her skeptical attitude towards marriage. In the life that Jane Austen knew, women accepted the men who offered themselves and lived with their choices. Anna has made her decision, and it is enough that her betrothed has some sense and is religious and well-connected. Austen is prophesying for Anna a limited kind of satisfaction in her marriage, not love or happiness, and this, she says, is as much as Anna can expect.

Austen is seldom sympathetic to women who have been, or who appear to be, unhappily married. She parodies the gossip about Miss Jackson who "is married to young Mr. Gunthorpe, & is to be very unhappy. He swears, drinks, is cross, jealous, selfish & Brutal; the match makes *her* family miserable, & has occasioned *his* being disinherited" (180). Mrs. Lyford's evident pleasure in being released from her marriage by the death of her husband is noted with disapproval: "Mrs. John Lyford is so much pleased with the state of wid-

owhood as to be going to put in for being a widow again" (105). She pities Edward Bridges because she thinks that "the pleasantest part of his married life must be the dinners, and breakfasts, and luncheons, and billiards that he gets in this way at G^m[Godmersham]" (361), but has no sympathy for his wife who takes refuge from her unhappiness in "her spasms & nervousness & the consequence they give her" (339). Austen ironically insists that

Lady Sondes' match surprises, but does not offend me; had her first marriage been of affection, or had there been a grown-up single daughter, I should not have forgiven her; but I consider everybody as having the right to marry *once* in their lives for love, if they can, and provided that she will now leave off having bad headaches and being pathetic, I can allow her, I can *wish* her to be happy. (240)

Although these women may have excellent reasons for being dissatisfied with their marriages, Jane Austen does not pity them. She singles them out for criticism not because they are unhappily married, but because they do not manage their lives properly. In 1813 she visits Harriet Moore, the bride who was unhappy because she could not "at once enjoy the comforts of being married & single" (177), and approves of the way in which Harriet has adapted to married life. It appears that the Reverend Mr. Moore had a bad temper, for Austen says that

Mr. Moore was very angry, which I was rather glad of. I wanted to see him angry; and, though he spoke to his servant in a very loud voice and with a good deal of heat, I was happy to perceive that he did not scold Harriot [*sic*] at all. Indeed, there is nothing to object to in his manners to her, and I do believe that he makes her — or she makes herself — very happy. (361)

Austen is pleased to see that Moore does not vent his temper on his wife, but she is more impressed by the fact that Harriet makes herself happy; her husband's behaviour to her matters less than her ability to adjust to her situation and be content with it. The implication is that women should not expect happiness from their husbands but should be prepared to conduct themselves as satisfied wives, whether they are or not. A satisfactory marriage depends on the adaptability of the woman, and that is why Jane Austen has little sympathy for the women of her acquaintance who fail to make acceptable adjustments to married life.

Jane Austen's comments on the wife's role in marriage are reminiscent of the views propounded in the conduct books which insist on the need for the woman to believe in the superiority of her husband, and to adopt his tastes and sentiments. She also seems to share with them the understanding that a woman is unlikely to marry for love or, at least, that she will find it difficult to do so. There are, however, two letters to Fanny that appear to contradict the idea that Jane Austen saw little possibility for love or happiness in marriage. These two letters are occasioned by Fanny's sudden doubts about accepting a most eligible suitor, Mr. J. Plumtre. Fanny writes anxiously, and secretly, to her aunt for advice, and Austen replies thoughtfully and compassionately. The letters are noteworthy for their pleas against marrying without love and for their discussion of an ideal of marriage, but they do not contradict

the views expressed in Austen's other letters. They seem different from the other letters because they are dealing with a possibility rather than a fact, but this difference is more apparent than real. In fact, these emotional letters confirm that Jane Austen was as pessimistic as the writers of conduct books about marriage and men.

In the first letter, dated Friday 18 November 1814, Jane Austen is uncharacteristically indecisive as she tries to counsel her niece. Despite her professed ambivalence (408) and her promise to argue both sides of the question (410), she devotes most of her letter to arguing for the marriage because she is so convinced of the superiority of the young man in question. The worth of Mr. Plumtre, with "his situation in life, family, friends, & above all his character — his uncommonly amiable mind, strict principles, just notions, good habits", makes her "recommend . . . most thoroughly" "the desirableness of your falling in love with him again" (409). The suitor is too good, too uncommon in his excellent principles, habits, and temper to dismiss; these traits, which Jane Austen stresses again later on, are evidently not those which she sees in many men. In contrast, her unenthusiastic description of Ben Lefroy suggests that Anna's suitor may not have a praiseworthy character. So exemplary is Mr. Plumtre that Austen dismisses Fanny's complaints about his modesty, his inclination to Evangelicalism, and his humourlessness as inconsequential (410). In a passage which is reminiscent of the gloomy prediction of Dr. Gregory that his daughters will meet few men for whom they could feel esteem, much less love,²⁵ Austen argues that

There *are* such beings in the World perhaps, one in a Thou-

sand, as the Creature You and I should Think perfection, Where Grace & Spirit are united to Worth, where the Manners are equal to the Heart & Understanding, but such a person may not come in your way, or if he does, he may not be the eldest son of a Man of Fortune, the Brother of your particular friend, & belonging to your own County. (409-410)

In other words, the man whom a particular woman could accept unreservedly, with love and respect, may exist but it is extremely unlikely that she will meet or marry him. Mr. Plumtre is such a superior man that Fanny, who has “no inclination for any other person” (409), can have little reason to refuse him.

The only reason, in fact, that Fanny could have to refuse Mr. Plumtre is the one that she professes: she no longer thinks she loves him. In response to this, and after she has argued strenuously in favour of accepting him, Jane Austen declares

Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection; and if his deficiencies of Manner &c &c strike you more than all his good qualities, if you continue to think strongly of them, give him up at once. (410)

This is an unequivocal statement, but it is noteworthy that she has more to say in favour of the marriage than against it, despite her promise to deal with both sides of the question. If she has little to say against the marriage it is partly because her objection to it admits of little discussion: Fanny must not marry him without love, and only Fanny can know her own feelings. Since Fanny’s letter to her aunt, however, has been forceful enough to make Austen say “I

thought you really very much in love — But you certainly are not at all — there is no concealing it” (408), it is curious that she should devote so little space to reassuring her niece about the consequences of her change of heart, and so much to promoting the desirability of the match. Despite the strength of the statement against marrying without love, the letter argues most persuasively that Fanny could love Mr. Plumtre and should not wait, fruitlessly, for the ideal man.

Fanny certainly seems to have interpreted the letter as an argument for the marriage, because in her next letter to her niece, on Wednesday 20 November 1814, Jane Austen protests that

You frighten me out of my wits by your reference. Your affection gives me the highest pleasure, but indeed you must not let anything depend on my opinion. Your own feelings & none but your own, should determine such an important point. . . . when I think how very, very far it is from a *Now*, & take everything that *may be*, into consideration, I dare not say ‘Determine to accept him.’ The risk is too great for *you*, unless your own Sentiments prompt it. — You will think me perverse perhaps; in my last letter I was urging everything in his favour, & now I am inclining the other way.
(417)

Understandably frightened by the power Fanny has given her, and recognizing the bias of her last letter, Jane Austen now does argue the other way, but she still does not come out strongly for the supremacy of love. With a hint of irony, she concedes that Fanny may never attract another man as excellent as Mr. Plumtre but adds that “if that other Man has the power of attaching you *more*, he will be in your eyes the most perfect” (417-418). More revealing is her

next comment:

I should not be afraid of your *marrying* him; — with all his worth, you would soon love him enough for the happiness of both; but I should dread the continuance of this sort of tacit engagement, with such an uncertainty as there is, of *when* it may be completed. . . . You like him well enough to marry, but not well enough to wait. (418)

This observation is made to a young woman who has “very cool feelings” towards the man in question (417), and it seems to belong more to the writers of conduct books than to Jane Austen, the writer of novels. Austen subscribes to the belief that a good marriage may be built on no more than the man’s preference and the woman’s regard for his character, as long as the woman prefers no other man. Although she does not go as far as Dr. Gregory, who praises a woman’s ability to love any man if he loves her,²⁶ she appears to believe that a woman’s affections are flexible enough to expand from coolness to love if she is married to a worthy man. Liking is enough of a basis on which to marry; surprisingly, Austen contends that less liking is needed to marry than to wait. In one sense, of course, this is not astonishing: waiting is a test of love, as the story of Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* illustrates. In this context, however, the author of *Persuasion* is stating that love that is not strong enough to endure a separation or a delay is strong enough to establish a good marriage. Although Austen does, finally, uphold the demands of love in this debate, her support is qualified and equivocal.

Her last, passionate exclamation — “nothing can be compared to the misery of being bound *without* Love” — is tempered by the concluding, explanatory words: “bound to one, & preferring another” (418). To the end, she is thinking of what may happen while they wait. Fanny, she has written earlier in the letter, has met few eligible men and is entering into the time of life when “the *strongest* attachments [may] be formed” (417). If Fanny had been older and more experienced, considerations of love might have carried even less weight in her aunt’s advice to her than they did.

Although Jane Austen, in a letter of 13 March 1817, prophesies a romantic future for an anxious Fanny, promising her “somebody more generally unexceptional than anyone you have yet known, who will love you as warmly as ever He [J. Plumtre] did, and who will so completely attach you, that you will feel you never really loved before” (483), she is usually skeptical about love matches. As the two 1814 letters to Fanny show, she did esteem love as an ideal, but seems to have felt that it was rarely attained by the people she knew. On 27 October 1798 she comments sarcastically on the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Earle Harwood, who are living in seclusion, without a servant, until his family shall consent to receive his wife. The romantic details amuse Jane Austen; it is the lady’s “prodigious innate love of virtue” that prompts her “to marry under such circumstances” she asserts, ironically implying that Mrs. Harwood’s

love of virtue and her love for her husband are secondary reasons for her marriage (25-26). Later, on 19 June 1799, after receiving Cassandra's report of a meeting with Mrs. Harwood, she speculates that Earle Harwood fabricated the story of his wife's lurid past in order to glamorize his successful pursuit of her (72). On both sides, then, this seeming love match is complicated by motives of self-esteem, pride, and ambition. Similarly, the marriage of Miss Sawbridge, a wealthy woman, and Mr. Maxwell, a tutor, makes her think that "they must be one of the happiest Couple [*sic*] in the World, & either of them worthy of Envy — for she must be excessively in love, and he mounts from nothing, to a comfortable Home" (231). Austen's tone suggests her skepticism. Miss Sawbridge may be deeply in love with her tutor; on the other hand, she may just be eager to be married. These marriages offend Jane Austen not because they are based on a love that is not "rational" or properly respectful of the character and social position of the beloved,²⁷ but because the professed passion is a cloak for other emotions. Jane Austen is not skeptical about love, but she is skeptical about the individual's ability to recognize it in herself. For Austen, love is an ideal which is unlikely to be realized in this life.

Jane Austen's standards for marrying, and her understanding of the satisfactions to be expected by married women, are those of the eighteenth century. Like the writers of the conduct manuals, she

believes that a woman's esteem and liking for a man of whom her family approves will grow into affection for him after they are married, and like them she holds that a married woman's happiness is, and should be, in her own hands. A woman settles for the man who will bring her the best "Chances" for happiness, and Austen states that only great good fortune will attract to a sensible, cultured woman a husband whose temperament, person, and character will suit her. Austen's support of Mr. Plumtre as a prospective husband for Fanny is based on his moral character, and his good principles and habits are so impressive that she dismisses as insignificant the obvious differences in personality and temperament that exist between him and her niece. Good character is so important and, apparently, so rare that it overshadows other considerations, and this, too, recalls the conduct books which tell a woman that it is her duty to marry a man with good principles while they admit that such a man is hard to find.

Even if a woman marries happily, her marriage limits and threatens her. In a letter written in February 1817 Austen's extravagant, laughing praise of Fanny as "the Paragon of all that is Silly and Sensible, common-place & eccentric, Sad & Lively, Provoking & Interesting" (478) ends with the comic lament:

Oh! what a loss it will be when you are married. You are too agreeable in your single state, too agreeable as a Neice [*sic*]. I shall hate you when your delicious play of Mind is all

settled down into conjugal & maternal affections. (479)

Jane Austen is joking with her niece, but her comedy has a point. She knows that “conjugal and maternal affections” do change a woman, and is well aware that childbearing threatens not only the health but the spirit of the mother. By this time, she has seen her lively, novel-writing niece, Anna Austen Lefroy, turn into an exhausted “Poor Animal” who is pregnant for the third time after less than two and a half years of marriage (488); on 24 January 1817 she writes that “Anna has not been so well or so strong or looking so much like herself since her marriage as she is now” (475). Fanny will likely lose her “delicious play of mind” when she is married (and according to most reports, she did become snobbish and humourless after her marriage, in 1820, to the conservative Sir William Knatchbull).²⁸ “Single Women have a dreadful propensity for being poor” (483), Jane Austen writes, but she knows that married women have an equally dreadful propensity for losing their vitality and individuality.

Jane Austen’s letters show that she understands the dangers and limitations of women’s lives. Her satirical letters to Cassandra constitute a small rebellion against the standards of propriety that applied to women’s conversation and correspondence, but Austen does not struggle against the prevailing attitudes towards love and marriage. Instead, she argues for accommodation with them and criticizes those who do not make the adjustment. The

world of which Jane Austen was a part did not place material concerns ahead of emotional satisfaction in marriage, but neither did it interpret emotional fulfillment as later generations would. A woman's esteem for a man and the assumption that she would be able to adapt herself to his ways were enough to promise her emotional satisfaction after their marriage; the husband could expect more since he could choose his bride partly on the basis of his feelings for her. If Jane Austen narrowly comes down on the side of love in her discussion of Fanny's engagement to Mr. Plumtre, it is only because she fears that her niece does not like him enough to wait for him. Otherwise, as she states, Fanny's "very cool feelings" for him would be no impediment to their marriage (417). The marriages Jane Austen discusses in her letters have more in common with the marriage of Charlotte Grandison to Lord G. than with the union of Harriet Byron and Sir Charles, or, indeed, the marriages of any of the heroines of Austen's own novels. Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Anne Elliot, and all the rest transcend their limitations and are unaware of the dangers of marriage, but their experiences are not Jane Austen's.

Central to an understanding of the novels of Jane Austen is a recognition of the gulf that separates her fiction from her life. More so than most novelists, Jane Austen has been plagued by critical assumptions that she wrote, to some degree unconsciously about what she experienced, and that her life was genteel, circumscribed and uneventful. In *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, B. C. Southam discusses the nineteenth-century's appraisal of her as "dear Jane",

the gentle chronicler of elegant romances, and notes that Henry James was responsible for challenging that view and replacing it with his own perception of her as an unconscious artist.²⁹ Leroy W. Smith, in *Jane Austen and the Drama of Women*, finds that twentieth-century critical opinion is split between those who find her a moral, reasonable supporter of her society's values, and those who see as a victim of her own inner conflict, troubled by her need to conform to a society from which she is alienated.³⁰ All of these broad categories of critical opinion are remarkable because they share one assumption: that Jane Austen was limited to her narrow, genteel world, if not by her conscious refusal to step outside of it, then by her subconscious conflicts which prevented her from expressing her real opinions of her society. In some way, they all contend that she was an unconscious artist; either she unknowingly shaped the materials of everyday life into art, or she smilingly concentrated on the sunny side of life which she knew best and ignored its injustices, or she tried to do so but could not prevent her own bleaker views from creeping into her work. She must be unconscious of her artistry, of the truth of her society, or of her own psychology. Yet the letters reveal a woman who was, above all, extremely aware of her society and herself. Nothing shocks her, and she never feels driven to support society's values when they conflict with her own, or to apologize for her iconoclasm. Jane Austen's letters and her novels portray radically different worlds because of conscious decisions she made about the writing of each; the gulf between them is,

for her, the gulf between fact and fiction.

The reader of the letters may be surprised to find that, in Jane Austen's novels, her heroines attract husbands who promise them the sort of emotional satisfaction that Austen believed came only to "one in a Thousand". The skepticism of the letters about the possibilities of women marrying happily is replaced in the novels with an air of optimism which is vindicated by the conclusions of the stories. Similarly, the reader of *Sir Charles Grandison* who expects to find some evidence of Austen's admiration for Richardson's novel in her own work, finds instead a completely different atmosphere: her female characters, even the ones who are seduced and ruined by unprincipled men, are not afraid of men's power or of marriage, and her male characters are generally well-behaved and unassuming rather than aggressive and domineering. Jane Austen writes novels that break dramatically with the life depicted in Richardson's novel and in her own letters, but both are significant to her fiction. She writes about women's discoveries of their own minds and hearts, as Richardson does, but banishes the fear of men that permeates his novels. Indeed, the world of men that is so prominent a feature in his work is conspicuously absent in hers; men's lives and their characters are muted almost to the point of anonymity. From the letters she takes the insights into society, but not the codes by which she apparently lived her life. Her novels, as Nancy K. Miller observes, are opportunities "for exploring, with wit and irony, the possibilities of feminine mastery in [the] world"³¹

and to do that Austen rigorously excludes most of the opinions and circumstances of women's lives that keep them submissive and anxious. The result is neither a fantasy nor a realistic novel, but something new: fantasy that seems to be, and perhaps could be, real. She creates for her heroines a safe place and lets them find marriages that will not destroy their vitality and sense of self. They are models to follow because they improve themselves and overcome their own limitations; their stories, however, because they are artificially cleared of the obstacles and fears that restrict most women's lives, are presented ironically. Jane Austen retains from her letters her gift for self-parody and uses it in her novels to mock her own contrivances and omissions. Just as a passage of gossip or news in the letters will be undercut by a satiric thrust at her own style or assumptions, so serious narrative in the novels will have its deficiencies highlighted by an ironic comment or aside. Jane Austen is pleased by the nature of the artificial world she creates in the novels, and takes pains to give it an air of verisimilitude, but she is delighted to share the joke with her reader; he or she is encouraged to understand that she is writing of possibilities, not certainties.

NOTES

¹Leroy W. Smith, *Jane Austen and the Drama of Women* (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983), p. 19.

²David Cecil, *A Portrait of Jane Austen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1980), pp. 17-18.

³J. H. Plumb, *England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. VII of *The Pelican History of England*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), pp. 153-154, 163-164, 214.

⁴Roy Porter, "Mixed Feelings: The Enlightenment and Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain", in Paul-Gabriel Bouce, ed., *Sexuality in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), p. 14; Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978), p. 284.

⁵Yasmine Gooneratne, *Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 26; Diana Spearman, *The Novel and Society* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1966), pp. 150-151; Rachel M. Brownstein, *Becoming a Heroine: Reading About Women in Novels* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1984), p. 84; Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings", in F. R. Leavis, ed., *A Selection from "Scrutiny"*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), II, 67, 70-72.

⁶"To Cassandra," 12 May 1801, Letter 36, *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 127-128. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text. References are to the page number only since the date of the letter is usually stated in the text. The spelling and usage of the letters are left uncorrected, and I insert the abbreviation [*sic*] only when it seems likely that the reader will interpret the original as a typographical error.

⁷Robert Alan Donovan, "The Mind of Jane Austen", in Joel C.

Weinsheimer, ed., *Jane Austen Today*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 109; Q. D. Leavis, "A Critical Theory", II, 65-67, also discusses the history of the reception of the letters and argues that they are not disappointing.

⁸Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 28.

⁹Mrs. Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, new ed. (London: J. Walter and C. Dilly, 1797), p. 122; Dr. Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, new ed. (London: Cadell and Davies, 1814), pp. 38-39; Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Cadell, Jr., and W. Davies, 1797), p. 100.

¹⁰Gregory, pp. 35-36.

¹¹Gisborne, p. 100.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³The testimony of the Austen family that Jane Austen was a good conversationalist who never ridiculed or censured anyone is questioned in John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 4-6. Halperin speculates that the family tried to improve the author's image after her death in order to hide irregularities in her life or character. Their efforts were too extreme, he contends, and are, therefore, extremely untrustworthy. Mary Lascelles, however, in *Jane Austen and Her Art*, pp. 28-29, suggests that the novelist may well have been a decorous conversationalist; the satirical spirit that invests the novels and the letters could have been muted to polite, quiet humour in the presence of others. If the letters were, as I believe, intimate, parodic productions that gave Austen the freedom to exercise her gift for satire, Lascelles's suggestion makes a good deal of sense.

¹⁴Gisborne, pp. 112-113.

¹⁵Samuel Richardson, Preface to *Clarissa or, The History of a Young Lady*, 4 vols. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., Everyman's Library, 1932), I, xiv.

¹⁶Q. D. Leavis in "A Critical Theory", II, 74-75, suggests that the clannish family's awareness of its uniqueness promoted a characteristic "tone of family intercourse", and that Jane and Cassandra exemplified it.

¹⁷R. W. Chapman, Introduction to *Jane Austen's Letters to Her Sister Cassandra and Others*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. xxxix.

¹⁸Donald Greene, "The Myth of Limitation", in Joel C. Weinshemer, ed., *Jane Austen Today*, (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 149.

¹⁹Halperin, p. 123.

²⁰Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 108; Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defence and Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 91, 36.

²¹Halperin, p. 123.

²²Halperin, p. 59.

²³Halperin, pp. 24, 22.

²⁴Halperin, p. 224.

²⁵Gregory, p. 88-89.

²⁶Gregory, p. 90.

²⁷Cecil, p. 171.

²⁸Halperin, pp. 263-264; Cecil, p. 201. Both Halperin and Cecil express surprise that Fanny, who in her old age remembered her aunt as a common, unrefined woman, should ever have been Jane Austen's favourite niece. Lord Cecil points out that Fanny's criticism reflects both her altered social status (she married a baronet) and the rigorous standards of Victorian delicacy, but it seems likely, as well, that Jane Austen was right; Fanny, married, was no longer

her delightful niece but a woman who had adopted the tastes and sentiments of a husband eighteen years her senior.

²⁹B. C. Southam, Introduction to *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p. 32.

³⁰Smith, p. 1; Q. D. Leavis argues that Austen's letters prove that her "novels are limited in scope and subject by deliberate intention", II, 73, and that she is neither naive about her society nor troubled by her awareness of its shortcomings, II, 68-70.

³¹Nancy K. Miller, *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel 1722-1782* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 155.

CHAPTER V
DANGEROUS GROUND:
MANSFIELD PARK

Jane Austen is best known for novels that celebrate feminine achievement in love and self-knowledge. She writes plausible fantasies about love and marriage that stress the capacity of women to be independent, intelligent, and educable, and tempers her optimistic stories with her characteristic irony which reminds the reader that she is writing of possibilities rather than certainties. But *Mansfield Park*, her third published work and the fourth novel she completed, contradicts the general conclusions that are invited by the other five novels. From its heroine, to its celebrated subject of ordination, to its commendation of earnest morality over wit and spirit, *Mansfield Park* contrasts with and appears to deny the affirmation and optimism of Jane Austen's other novels. In attempts to define its peculiarity, critics have attached various labels to it. It is known as "Jane Austen's Victorian novel", her reactionary novel, her Augustan novel, and her Evangelical novel;¹ only the fact that it contradicts Austen's other productions is a matter of agreement. Even *Persuasion*, the subdued late novel that most resembles *Mansfield Park*, is significantly different from it. Anne Elliot is less of a pawn and more of an active intelligence than Fanny Price, and she, like Elizabeth Bennet, is able to create a new, better life

for herself that will avoid the errors of the old order. Only Fanny Price is doomed to remain unchanged, the creature of the men who formed her and the inhabitant of the same, minimally improved place. *Mansfield Park* seems to be about the impossibility of feminine achievement, and is correspondingly burdened with an impossible heroine.

Mansfield Park contrasts with Jane Austen's other novels because it focusses on, and is written in, a spirit of contradiction. The three novels — *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice* — completed or under revision when Austen began *Mansfield Park* all display her unique blend of optimism, fantasy, and irony; all three avoid the strain of violence that is featured in the works of Samuel Richardson. The dangers the heroines of these three novels face are usually the result of their misapprehensions, for the male characters are more interested in money and status than in sexual aggression. More importantly, the heroines are usually free to order their own lives. Parents are absent or unconcerned, and the proprieties are elastic enough to permit nominally chaperoned adventures and excursions. That *Mansfield Park* radically alters these conditions is not the result of a sudden reactionary fit on Austen's part, or a passing infatuation with Evangelicalism. Rather, *Mansfield Park* is an expression of Jane Austen's debt

to Richardson and an acknowledgement of the facts of women's lives that she evades in her other novels. From Richardson Jane Austen inherits an interest in what women could dare and achieve in the patriarchal society of eighteenth-century England. She rejects, however, his emphasis on the patriarchy and the limits it imposes on women. Only in *Mansfield Park* does she look directly at the patriarchy and fashion her own statement of how it damages its women. It is both a tribute to and a correction of Richardson; the perceptions are her own, but the focus belongs to him.

That Austen had Samuel Richardson's works in mind when she wrote *Mansfield Park* is suggested by Jocelyn Harris's article " 'As if they had been living friends': *Sir Charles Grandison* into *Mansfield Park* ".² Harris contends that in her novel Austen recreates not only the Richardsonian themes of education, marriage, and love, but also many of the situations of the earlier work. Fanny Price, like Harriet Byron, becomes part of a prominent Northamptonshire family and falls in love with her new "brother". Both heroines suffer the agony of watching the men they love nearly marry other women; worse, they are forced to encourage the marriages they dread and to contemplate their own marriages to men they do not love. Details of characterization and relationships are also carried over from one novel to the other.³ The evidence collected by Harris indicates more than casual borrowing on Austen's part; she takes a "creatively critical" approach to Richardson's material.⁴

Mansfield Park, moreover, shows parallels not only with *Sir Charles Grandison* but to Austen's parody of it, "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man". As she does in her play, Austen banishes overt sexual violence from her novel. Fanny's would-be lover Henry Crawford means to have "the glory . . . of forcing her to love him",⁵ but he does not contemplate abduction or rape. Fanny, like Harriet, becomes breathless, weeps bitterly, and almost faints when she is confronted by the possibility of marrying her unwanted lover, but not because she is squeezed in a door. Rather, these reactions occur during her interview with Sir Thomas (315, 319, 321). As these examples suggest, Austen writes about other kinds of violence in *Mansfield Park*: she describes the kind of emotional abuse that produces a Fanny Price. There is more than a passing resemblance between Fanny and the burlesque Harriet of "Sir Charles Grandison". Both are colourless, fragile, and fearful heroines who share a propensity for silence. Both lack vitality and, surprisingly, their lack of spirit wins them high praise from the men they eventually marry. Their relationships with their husbands-to-be, moreover, are complicated by the fact that they have been taught to think of them as their brothers; Fanny and Harriet chafe at being regarded as sisters when their feelings have changed, and Edmund and Sir Charles retain something of their brotherly roles after their marriages. Finally, Austen's play and novel both focus on Richardson's concepts of the perfect woman and man. *Mansfield Park* is the only one of Austen's novels which has in it a functioning patriarchy. Sir Thomas Bertram,

the master of Mansfield, is neither ineffectual nor alienated; he is the principled, able, and responsible head of his family. Yet the order and harmony which his presence should ensure are insecure, and his influence much exaggerated, just as they are in the Colnebrook of "Sir Charles Grandison". Austen's parody suggests that the patriarch's rebellious subordinates can only be repressed, not reformed; the godlike male does not so much resolve problems as command their disappearance. *Mansfield Park* suggests the same things but it does not laugh about them.

The parallels between *Mansfield Park*, *Sir Charles Grandison*, and "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man" indicate Austen's continuing interest in Richardson's final novel, an interest which is also attested to by her family's testimony that it was her favourite. That she liked it because it was a social comedy is probable, but it is also possible that she was intrigued by its insights into women's lives within a flourishing patriarchy. All of her novels may be inspired by that paradox so acutely rendered by Richardson, the paradox of an intelligent woman's position in a male-dominated society; but in *Mansfield Park* alone does she present a vital patriarchy and a heroine who conforms to its ideals. Only in *Mansfield Park* does she detail the effects of that society on every female character and insist on the conditions that have weakened and invalidated women. Her patriarchy is less idyllic than the one Richardson describes in *Sir Charles Grandison*, but Mansfield and Colnebrook, Fanny and Harriet are the best their societies can pro-

duce. The difference is that while Mansfield and Fanny are the best, they are also painfully inadequate.

Mansfield Park is a contradiction within Austen's canon and within itself. It is the only novel which does not prepare a safe place for its heroine; the only novel which insists on the continuing power of the patriarchy; the only novel which has a victim as its heroine. Its uniqueness, however, does not refer solely to itself or to Richardson's work. Rather, it illuminates the assumptions that are the foundations of Jane Austen's five other novels. It looks back to and corrects Richardson's vision of a beatific patriarchy while pointing out the liberties Austen takes in creating the nominal patriarchies of *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*. *Mansfield Park* provides a subtext for the other novels; its reliance on paradox, use of fairytale and romance motifs, characterizations and emphasis on the patriarchy are muted or altered in them. The other novels deny the lessons of *Mansfield Park*, but it supplies what readers of the time would have brought to the fiction on their own. *Mansfield Park* was the novel Jane Austen only had to write once. As its heroine's name suggests, it details the price women who live in a patriarchy must pay, a price most of Austen's heroines need not consider.⁶

The claim that Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* is the only one of her novels to be set in a flourishing patriarchy can be substantiated by comparing it to her other works. In two significant ways, the presence and importance of male characters in relation to the

heroine, and the evidence of conditions prejudicial to women, *Mansfield Park* is decidedly different from the rest. Fanny Price is given double sets of brothers, two fathers, and an unwanted suitor who does not go away when he is dismissed, and all of them, men and boys, dominate her by their seniority, authority, or irrepressibility. In addition, all of the female characters of *Mansfield Park* are, in some way, victimized by the patriarchy in which they live. Foolish and dissolute women are found in all of Austen's novels, but only in *Mansfield Park* are women's faults directly linked to their environment, and only in *Mansfield Park* do they reap harsh punishments for their transgressions.

Mansfield Park is unique in having in it a patriarch, Sir Thomas Bertram, who is worthy of the name. His supremacy in his family is unquestioned, his wife, children, and various relatives are dependent on him, and his family is organized along hierarchical lines. Sir Thomas himself is able and honourable. His faults are those that arise out of his position: sternness, aloofness, a preference for subordination over equality, a regard for status and wealth. But, it must be emphasized, he is neither tyrannical nor snobbish nor mercenary. His faults are those of his station in life and are relatively insignificant. The novel provides glimpses of other families that are headed by men who are seriously flawed. Admiral Crawford is "vicious" (41) and Mr. Price a coarse drunkard, while Dr. Grant is a peevish gourmand who rages for a week over a poor dinner. Sir Thomas is not a fool like Mr. Rushworth or a trifler like Mr. Yates, and

he is clear sighted enough to recognize their faults. Sir Thomas is as fine an example of a patriarch as his society produces and his estate reflects his worth.

At Mansfield, no sounds of contention, no raised voice, no abrupt bursts, no tread of violence was ever heard; all proceeded in a regular course of cheerful orderliness; every body's feelings were consulted. (391-392)

It is a place where there is "a consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety, an attention towards every body" (348). Order, regularity, peacefulness, propriety, and consideration define Sir Thomas's achievement at Mansfield and redound to his credit.

No other heroine created by Jane Austen is situated in a comparable atmosphere, although Elizabeth Bennet marries into another model estate after she converts its master to her preferences for equality and playfulness. Elinor Dashwood's father is dead, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot have ineffectual or alienated fathers, and Catherine Morland is travelling without her parents. Their homes are neither marvels of harmony nor chaotic hovels, and none of the heads of the families inspires awe. In each case, the strict patriarchal order is barely present and women predominate. There are, to be sure, reminders of patriarchal society in each of the novels. The Bennet girls are unfairly restricted by the entailment that passes their father's property to Mr. Collins, the Dashwoods are impoverished when their great uncle

leaves his estate to their already wealthy half-brother, and Anne Elliot must live with the consequences of her father's mismanagement of his affairs. Catherine and Emma are more fortunate, but they too meet with male arrogance and insensitivity and Eleanor Tilney and Jane Fairfax are reminders that some women are unhappily circumstanced through no fault of their own. There are also minor female characters in all of the novels who suffer more dramatically at the hands of men: Mrs. Smith of *Persuasion*, Eliza Williams of *Sense and Sensibility*, Charlotte Lucas of *Pride and Prejudice*, and Miss Bates of *Emma* are victims of societies that exploit women's vulnerability. Yet, their stories are sidelights to the main action which affirms the independence and power of women.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, powerful women try to control the future of the younger generation. Willoughby and the Ferrars brothers are financially dependent on Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Ferrars, respectively, as is Frank Churchill on his aunt. Lady Catherine de Bourgh tries unsuccessfully to stop the marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy, and Lady Russell persuades Anne to break her engagement to Frederick Wentworth. All five of these older women are influenced by considerations of wealth and status, and all of them possess money and position, but they are not all simple caricatures. Lady Russell and Mrs. Smith are concerned with their charges' well-being, and Mrs. Churchill truly loves Frank. Only Lady Catherine and Mrs. Ferrars are dominated by

thoroughly unworthy motives. They are feminine versions of patriarchs who incorporate typical patriarchal virtues and vices, and their presence in the novels ironically signifies that the works depict female-dominated societies; the conditions are familiar but they are altered to emphasize the power of women.

The replacement of powerful men by powerful women in five of Austen's six novels is matched by an absence of male concerns in them. The often repeated criticism of Jane Austen's failure to include in her novels the exciting, war-torn world in which she lived has provoked much debate, but as Donald Greene has suggested, this is a "myth of limitation".⁷ War, politics, and contemporary philosophical and social issues are omitted from her novels because they are subjects that tend to glorify, or at least emphasize, the power and effectuality of men. The novels of Richardson that focus on the experience of women are constantly shifting to the activities of men. The story of *Clarissa* is interrupted by the business in which Lovelace, especially, is engaged. The various stratagems he concocts to force her to act against her will are so carefully detailed that they subvert *Clarissa's* dilemma and have led to a continuing critical debate over the ambiguities of her situation.⁸ *Sir Charles Grandison*, the story of a good man, stresses Sir Charles's efficient management of his estate, family, and friends; his productive activity dwarfs Harriet's concerns and accentuates her passivity, just as Lovelace's dazzling contrivances emphasize *Clarissa's* helplessness. Richardson's one attempt to show a resourceful

woman who can resist a man's aggression led to the absurdities of *Pamela* where, if the heroine is strong, her adversary must be a foolish incompetent. Jane Austen avoids both alternatives in her novels by excluding as much she can of men's business. There are soldiers and sailors in her works, but their adventures are in the past or await them in some unspecified future. The action of *Persuasion* takes place during the peace of 1814 and *Pride and Prejudice's* war background is barely acknowledged. Male characters may run estates or businesses or be representatives of the legal or clerical professions, but they are rarely observed in pursuit of their occupations; it is hard to remember that William Elliot is a lawyer or Henry Tilney a clergyman. Many of Austen's heroes, finally, are curiously passive, not at all capable of solving knotty problems and arranging everyone's affairs. Edward and Robert Ferrars are dominated by their mother and are the pawns of Lucy Steele, while the intrepid Frederick Wentworth must be directed by Anne during the crisis at Lyme, and is released from his entanglement with Louisa Musgrove only by her engagement to Captain Benwick. Darcy, on the other hand, is capable of arranging the marriage of Lydia and Wickham and disposes of Jane and Bingley's romance as efficiently as Sir Charles, but he shares with Mr. Knightley a boyish bashfulness in matters of love. Both of these forthright heroes wait for the woman to signal her interest before they make their declarations. Male business, in the novels of Jane Austen, is a subdued and timorous affair.

Mansfield Park, however, does not downplay men's concerns. Sir Thomas's many responsibilities are clearly outlined. The day after his return from Antigua he has

to reinstate himself in all the wonted concerns of his Mansfield life, to see his steward and his bailiff — to examine and compute — and, in the intervals of business, to walk into his stables and his gardens, and nearest plantations; but active and methodical, he had not only done all this before he resumed his seat as master of the house at dinner, he had also set the carpenter to work in pulling down what had been so lately put up in the billiard room. (190)

Mrs. Norris's promotion of herself as Sir Thomas's deputy and surrogate also indicates the range of his duties. Servants must be watched and expenditures checked, visits and marriages arranged (188), livestock raised and dairies and nurseries tended (104). The estate has to be kept in repair and improved, livings filled, and the poor cared for. Moreover, Sir Thomas has responsibilities in Parliament and Antigua over and above those at home. He is the moral preceptor of everyone and the adjudicator of all disputes; he even thinks for his wife. That so much information should be provided about his activities is in itself significant. Sir Walter Elliot owns an estate comparable to Mansfield, but he occupies himself with his mirror and Debrett's, exerting himself only to veto the plan of economy which has been drawn up by Anne and Lady Russell. In the other novels, properties seem to run themselves. Darcy is "the best master" (249), according to his housekeeper, but his work at Pemberley is not detailed. More information is given about Mr. Knightley's occupations as a magistrate and landowner, but it is limited to ref-

erences to points of law, drains, and fields of turnip (100), while Frederick Wentworth's daring adventures are reduced to a few self-deprecatory anecdotes. Only Sir Thomas is a busy man, preoccupied with important and essential duties.

In addition, men's careers are great sources of interest in *Mansfield Park*. Edmund's future as a clergyman and the requirements of his profession are debated at length, and William's naval career is also a topic of discussion. That Jane Austen should devote so much attention to Edmund's ordination, and even declare it to be the subject of the novel has occasioned much comment.⁹ Her reference to ordination in a letter to Cassandra of 29 January 1813 may not be connected to the subject of the novel; it is as probable that she announces, as she often does in her letters, "a change of subject" at that moment, drops the subject of *Pride and Prejudice*, thanks Cassandra for obtaining some information about ordination, and then goes on to ask her about hedgerows.¹⁰ It is undeniable, however, that the topic figures prominently in the novel. Talk of ordination emphasizes Fanny's passivity and powerlessness. Edmund argues again and again that there can be dignity and dedication in his profession, and the debates highlight his sincerity and Mary Crawford's lively wit. Fanny's role in these discussions is to second Edmund while Mary Crawford charms him and the reader with her independence and vivacity. Thus the topic of ordination puts Fanny doubly in the shadows. Like Sir Thomas's business and William's adventures at sea, Edmund's ordination is made to seem important at

the expense of Fanny and her concerns. Edmund's career is the source of witty contention between him and Mary that enhances Mary at Fanny's expense. Male concerns, in *Mansfield Park*, are used to divert attention away from the heroine and to emphasize her insignificance. Next to Sir Walter Elliot, Fanny could not appear to be so passive and ineffectual; next to Mr. Collins, her good sense and quiet piety must be impressive. Situated as she is, however, amidst the accomplishments of Sir Thomas and the ideals of Edmund, Fanny can only appear to be less than she is.

Adding to Fanny Price's inferiority in *Mansfield Park* are the many male characters in the novel. Of all the other heroines, only Catherine Morland has brothers, and of them, only James figures in *Northanger Abbey*: his adventures parallel Catherine's. Fanny Price, in contrast, has natural brothers, including the beloved William, cousins whom she is raised to regard as brothers, a real father and an uncle who commands more respect and obedience from her than her real father. These men and boys all, in various ways, impinge on her peace and comfort and they all, moreover, have more than a few of the characteristics of Samuel Richardson's male characters. Henry Crawford, in particular, is a disciple of Lovelace and, as Jocelyn Harris has pointed out, of Sir Hargrave Pollexfen.¹¹ Like Frank Churchill and Willoughby, he enjoys toying with women, but unlike them he brings a cynical premeditation to his flirtations. Maria Bertram is pursued by Henry because she is safely engaged to another man, but Fanny Price is an especially attractive object be-

cause she disapproves of him (230). Like a Richardsonian rake, Henry is less interested in sexual conquest than in the knowledge that the woman is his possession. Fanny must, he says, “think as I think, be interested in all my possessions and pleasures, try to keep me longer at Mansfield, and feel when I go away that she shall never be happy again. I want nothing more” (231). Like Lovelace, he takes pleasure in devising stratagems that will put Fanny in his debt without her being aware of it, and he succeeds in presenting her with a necklace and in securing William’s promotion. He falls in love with Fanny by accident and means to force her to love him; his ultimate failure comes from the excesses he is led into by his rakish habits. Sir Thomas, similarly, has something of a Mr. Harlowe in him. He is severe and authoritarian, and he too resorts to manipulation when he sends Fanny off to Portsmouth, secure in the knowledge that the contrast between her parents’ home and Mansfield will make her reconsider her refusal of Henry. Sir Thomas and Edmund, meanwhile, bear more than a passing resemblance to Sir Charles Grandison. Moral and positive men, they share Sir Charles’s annoying habit of explaining away women’s fears and objections as misapprehensions. In general, the men and boys of *Mansfield Park* are ubiquitous and encroaching. Fanny’s younger brothers are so riotous that she and Susan take refuge from them in a small upstairs room; her father makes coarse jokes about her and otherwise ignores her. If Fanny is inclined to dread the presence of any man except Edmund, and at times welcomes his absence, it is because, to her, men are

both demanding and insensitive.

The heroines of the other novels do not share Fanny's fear of men because there are no Sir Thomases or Henry Crawfords in their worlds. Seducers and triflers appear in *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Persuasion*, but they prey on the foolish and naive and are motivated more by a wish for wealth and status than by sadistic desires. Nor do they force their attentions on the indifferent: when Elizabeth Bennet cools towards Wickham, he quickly turns elsewhere. Male relatives tend to be retiring or self-centred in the other novels. Mr. Woodhouse with his gruel and Mr. Bennet in his study typify the fathers of the heroines who, while they may be blamed for inattention to matters affecting their daughters, do not attempt to intimidate or coerce them. Brothers are few and unimportant. James Morland is involved in his own love affair, his younger brothers are rarely seen, and the Dashwoods' half-brother John is both hen-pecked and self-absorbed. Most of Jane Austen's heroines live in families of women and have no need to submit to the wills of male relatives. Ironically, their greatest problem is the scarcity of men.

Finally, it is noteworthy that only in *Mansfield Park* are women so thoroughly punished and oppressed by their society. There is no happily married older couple in *Mansfield Park*, no Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner, Mr. and Mrs. Weston, or Admiral and Mrs. Croft. These happily married women, like the mothers of Elinor Dashwood and Catherine Morland, have retained a spirit of individuality after their

marriages. Like the Crofts, they and their husbands enjoy “a happy independence” (168) in each other’s company. They are active and fulfilled women, committed to their husbands, but not diminished by them. Even erring women are permitted to survive their follies with some comfort in every novel except *Mansfield Park*. For every Eliza Williams who, like her mother before her, suffers at the hands of an unprincipled man, there is a Lucy Steele who triumphs by seducing men. Lydia marries her Wickham, Charlotte Lucas Collins finds contentment in her unpromising marriage, and Jane Fairfax is not ruined by her secret engagement. Even the pathetic Eliza Williams is rescued by Colonel Brandon, just as Mrs. Smith is assured of a happier future through the combined efforts of Anne and Frederick Wentworth. Female characters may be cruel or foolish, but their faults are not commonly traceable to the peculiar sexual dynamics of their society. Harriet Smith is corrupted more by Emma’s flattery than by her illegitimacy, for her natural father assumes responsibility for her care and education. Similarly, Lucy Steele and the three younger Bennet girls might be improved by a proper system of education, but then again each is confined within her own personality; an educated Lucy Steele could be no more than a sophisticated version of herself. If women are forced to be mercenary about marriage, then so are many men, and superior educational opportunities do not mean that there are fewer stupid men than women. The celebrated morality of Jane Austen which favours the self-aware and flexible and condemns the self-deluded and dogmatic¹² is not sharply divided along sexual

lines.

In *Mansfield Park*, however, there are no successful marriages, women suffer for their choices, and every female character bears the scars of being raised in a patriarchy. Among the older generation, the happiest marriage must belong to Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, but it can be so termed only in comparison with the unions of the Prices, the Grants, and the Crawfords. Lady Bertram's natural indolence and vanity are exaggerated by her marriage into apathy and simplemindedness. She is an intellectual and moral vacuum who requires her husband's guidance to think "justly on all important points" (449). Her position and Sir Thomas's far-reaching authority encourage her innate laziness to the point where even her emotions are atrophied. When illness and disgrace strike her family she can neither help nor console the afflicted. Like a child, she is either inconsolable over bad news or, if shielded from the worst, cannot conceive of less than complete recovery. Mrs. Bennet resembles her in this respect, but Mrs. Bennet is the butt of her sarcastic husband's jokes; she does not have the example of a worthy husband to teach her how to behave. Mrs. Bennet is an embarrassment in part because her husband fails in his duty towards her, but Lady Bertram is faulty because Sir Thomas fulfills his obligations as a husband. Sir Thomas has a wife who cannot concern herself with his wishes when he is away, or address herself to his comfort when he is not. Sadly, even her love for him must be expressed, when he returns to Mansfield after an absence of more than a year, by her

being “nearer agitation than she had been for the last twenty years”: she is “*almost* flustered for a few minutes,” puts down her work, moves her lap dog, and lets her husband have “all her attention and all the rest of her sofa” (179). Their marriage is, like Mansfield itself, harmonious and proper but hollow at the core.

The Bertrams’ marriage, though, is clearly superior to the other marriages in the novel, and for the same reasons that Mansfield is a superior home: harmony, regulation, propriety, and consideration are its hallmarks. Sir Thomas does not vent his anger on Lady Bertram as Dr. Grant does on his wife. Lady Bertram, similarly, considers her husband’s wishes when she can discover them without disturbing herself, unlike Mary Crawford’s aunt who willfully contradicts her husband’s desires. The mean-spirited combination of servility and officiousness that is exhibited by Mrs. Norris suggests that her marriage is not a source of pleasure to either of its partners, while the Prices are united only in their misery. The members of the younger generation do not make marriages that improve upon those of their parents. Nor, significantly, are any of their unions good enough to be inferior only to the perfect bliss of the hero and heroine. The irony that embellishes the description of the courtship and marriage of Fanny and Edmund makes that union an unreliable standard at best, but apart from that, the choices of Julia and Maria are clearly unhappy. Maria’s marriage ends in divorce, while Julia’s is only “a less desperate business than [Sir Thomas] had considered it at first” because there is hope that, under Sir

Thomas's guidance, Mr. Yates will become "at least tolerably domestic and quiet" (462). In *Mansfield Park* marriage is a "desperate business" that promises degrees of unhappiness rather than relative amounts of joy.

Married women are not the only ones who suffer for their decisions in *Mansfield Park*. The fate of the single woman is as grim as that of her married sister. Critics have spoken of the air of righteous retribution which lingers over the novel,¹³ but it is not that which determines the incarceration of Maria or the continued mercenariness of Mary Crawford. The diminished patriarchies of the other novels accept the transgressions of a Lydia Bennet or the pretensions of a Mrs. Elton. In the flourishing patriarchy of *Mansfield Park*, however, women who challenge or undermine its authority are punished for their presumption. Thus, Mrs. Norris, the prime offender among the women of the older generation, is shut away with Maria, the prime offender among the younger women, and not even Fanny can shed a tear when her aunt dies. No female character can profit from her experience. Mrs. Norris and Maria create their own hell with their mutual ill-temper, Mrs. Grant and Mary continue on in the old way, and Lady Bertram remains gratefully inert under the care of her new "stationary niece" (472) Susan, who is deprived of any happier fate. Of them all, it is Mary who has occasioned the most critical comment.¹⁴ As intelligent, sensitive, and innately kind as she is, she is incapable of reforming her tainted mind, and is condemned to a kind of purgatory in which she must continue her

search for a rich husband while longing for the values of Mansfield. Despite her possession of a personal fortune that enables her to choose a husband on other than monetary grounds, she resists the obvious lesson that her failed romance has produced. It is true that Henry does not reform either, but it is also true that he is more hardened and less kind than his sister; she speaks evil, but he performs it. Tom and Sir Thomas acquire knowledge of their past errors and some determination to take advantage of the good that is left to them. Mary Crawford and the other female offenders against the patriarchal order may gain no such understanding. As the conduct books warn, a woman's good name, once lost, may never be regained. In her other novels, Jane Austen demonstrates time and again that the fallen may recover themselves. Only in *Mansfield Park* does female insubordination result in irrecoverable losses of security and joy.

In truth, the choices women make in a patriarchy are not the absolute determinants of the happiness and success of their lives. If women are foolish or cruel in *Mansfield Park* it is the result of situations that are not under their control. Marianne Dashwood could follow the example and advice of Elinor and Emma could listen to Mr. Knightley; their would-be mentors are people they respect and admire. In *Mansfield Park*, though, the person who proves to be the model of correct behaviour is the insignificant Fanny Price who is, moreover, too saturated with the sense of her own inferiority to correct the behaviour of others. In addition, there are forces oper-

ating on the female characters of *Mansfield Park* that resist easy correction. These are the forces of patriarchal society as they are expressed within familial and sexual relationships.

Every female character in *Mansfield Park* is, to some extent, a victim of patriarchal society, taught to simultaneously respect and resist male authority, just as they are trained to both love and fear the men in their lives. These lessons are learned within the family and reinforced outside it, and so they are, unsurprisingly, deeply ingrained. For the older generation of women, patriarchal society means the deformation of ambition into officiousness, or the distortion of ladylike passivity into useless apathy. Mrs. Norris, who has both the taste and energy for management (390) is denied an outlet for her talents by the fact that she marries a wealthier man than her sister Frances and remains childless. Thus denied, and further restricted by the hegemony of Sir Thomas, she becomes the harridan of Mansfield, annoying everyone by her futile attempts to prove her own indispensability. Her conduct towards Sir Thomas is particularly revealing. When he seeks to reprove her for failing to stop the performance of *Lovers' Vows*, Mrs. Norris is

ashamed to confess having never seen any of the impropriety which was so glaring to Sir Thomas, and would not have admitted that her influence was insufficient, that she might have talked in vain. (188)

She deals with the situation by alternately praising herself for other achievements, flattering Sir Thomas, and evading the subject (189-90). Her hostility towards her brother-in-law, which is im-

plied by the abject humility with which she treats him, is caught by the scene of his homecoming:

Mrs. Norris was by no means to be compared in happiness to her sister she was vexed by the *manner* of his return. It had left her nothing to do. Instead of being sent for out of the room, and seeing him first, and having to spread the happy news throughout the house, Sir Thomas . . . had sought no confidant but the butler, and had been following him almost instantaneously into the drawing-room. Mrs. Norris felt herself defrauded of an office on which she had always depended. (179-180)

Sir Thomas will not eat and so she cannot vent her hostility on the butler and housekeeper; she must show it more directly by interrupting and ignoring Sir Thomas (180). Mrs. Norris is too active to be satisfied with the housekeeping and charitable duties that are her lot as a parson's wife and widow, but her attempts to usurp Sir Thomas's power doom her to frustration. Her consolations are harassing Fanny, a safe target, and teaching her illustrious nieces her tactics of evasion and flattery. She also passes on to them her implicit contempt for men which is manifested most clearly in her constant self-aggrandizement. Without her, she suggests, Mansfield would disintegrate; Sir Thomas's position rests on her unceasing labours. Mrs. Norris hates and envies men's power, but is forced to rely on it for her own importance, and she conveys this mixed message to her favourite nieces.

They learn their lesson well. Maria and Julia may have Sir Thomas as a moral example, but his severity and aloofness undermine his effectiveness with them. By leaving their daily care to

Mrs. Norris and his wife, he compounds his error. Mrs. Norris, as may be expected, dominates her nieces and from her they learn a dishonesty so radical that it poisons their lives. Thus Maria feels triumphant in lying to her father about her own happiness (201), while Julia is betrayed into a marriage she never intended by her “selfish alarm” that Maria’s adultery would mean severer restraints upon herself (466-467). Their upbringing teaches them to respect their father without esteeming him; they fear him as their father but are indifferent to him as a person. They have little opportunity to be other than they are. Trapped between Mrs. Norris and Sir Thomas, their mother and brothers uninvolved in their lives in any meaningful way, they grow up to become the discontented women they are bred to be.

Mary Crawford, similarly, is distorted by her upbringing. An orphan, she is adopted into a home so split by sexual tension that even children are enrolled in the war between husband and wife. From her uncle and aunt she learns that men and women are engaged in an endless struggle for advantage. This, more than her belief that mercenary marriages are good and necessary, cripples her life. Her debate with Edmund over his ordination is only partly related to the relative poverty in which he will live, since he will have an income of £700 a year which, with her £20,000 dowry, would enable them to live quite comfortably. As important as money is the question of her docility; Edmund wonders if she loves him “well enough to forgo what had been essential points — did she love him well enough to

make them no longer essential?"(255) In Mary's opinion, marriage is "a manoeuvring business" (46) that is founded on deceit. The wise woman bargains for herself before marriage, when she has power over her lover that she will not have over her husband. If she gains her "essential points" now, she has an advantage in the sexual war which will help sustain her when the eventual disappointments appear. Mary is negotiating for the continuance of the life to which she is accustomed — she might ask for a house in London, Fanny thinks (417) — so that she will not be without resources when her marriage sours. As touched as she is by the better standards of Mansfield, Mary is more influenced by her fears of how men behave once they are married. Her friend Janet was

sadly taken in; and yet there was nothing improper on her side; she did not run into the match inconsiderately, there was no want of foresight. She took three days to consider of his proposals; and during those three days asked the advice of every body connected with her, whose opinion was worth having This seems as if nothing were a security for matrimonial comfort! (361)

Janet follows the formula prescribed by the conduct books, but it does her no good, and Mary must conclude that most marriages are destined to be unhappy. She, no less than the Bertram girls, is a product of her environment, and her environment is also the patriarchy. Her uncle, though, is dissolute, and her aunt openly rebellious; Mary learns, then, not to flatter and evade, but to distrust and manoeuvre.

When men have the power to command obedience from

women, women have the traditional options of the subjugated. They may, like Mrs Norris, secretly undermine the values of the patriarchal system while publicly championing them, or they may, like Mary Crawford's aunt, infuse all relationships between men and women with bitter cynicism. They may, finally, follow Lady Bertram's lead and passively resist male authority. Lady Bertram can be ordered to do only so much. She must expect never to have her way in matters on which her husband is determined, but in numerous smaller affairs she cannot be moved. A combination of hypochondria and apathy can accomplish what servility or defiance cannot: Sir Thomas does without his wife in London and without her support at all times. "By dint of long talking on the subject, explaining and dwelling on the duty of Fanny's sometimes seeing her family," Sir Thomas persuades Lady Bertram to let Fanny go to Portsmouth. Her permission is obtained "rather from submission, however, than conviction" and in the privacy of her own thoughts the necessity of Fanny's departure is never acknowledged (370-371). Sir Thomas may, as the master of Mansfield, have his way in all things, but his wife's determined ignorance and apathy discourage him from opposing her in any but the most important matters.

In a similar fashion, Mrs. Price repays her husband's coarseness and intemperance with endless confusion that is always blamed on someone else. Mrs. Price is a unique character in Jane Austen's works for in her the reader has a rare glimpse of a figure familiar in Austen's letters: the woman who is worn out by constant childbear-

ing. Mr. and Mrs. Morland have a family of ten children, but few details are given besides the information that Mrs. Morland leaves Catherine much on her own since she is “so much occupied in lying-in and teaching her little ones” (15). Mary Musgrove is a harried mother, but her situation is largely her own fault inasmuch as Anne can handle her two children quite easily. Mrs. Price, in contrast, is very much a victim of her sexuality. The mother of eight children in eleven years of marriage (4-5), she is prompted to ask her sisters for help when she discovers she is pregnant for the ninth time. Depleted by the demands of her children, she subsides into a whining, inefficient woman who can satisfy no one. Mrs. Norris might “have been a more respectable mother of nine children, on a small income” (390), but as the phrasing suggests, even the redoubtable Mrs. Norris couldn’t have triumphed over the odds Mrs. Price faces.

All of the female characters of *Mansfield Park* are scarred by the sexual dynamics of their society. Mrs. Grant, who in Mary’s opinion is as perfect a wife as Sir Thomas is a husband (361), advises her sister:

You see the evil, but you do not see the consolation. There will be little rubs and disappointments everywhere, and we are all apt to expect too much; but then, if one scheme of happiness fails, human nature turns to another; if the first calculation is wrong, we make a second better; we find comfort somewhere — . (46)

Mrs. Grant is a good wife because she is content with little; it is noteworthy that she accepts Mary’s definition of marriage as a “take in” (46), protesting only that her sister does not acknowledge that

there is “comfort somewhere” for the deceived. While not as visibly deformed as the others, Mrs. Grant is pathetic in her minimal expectations of life. She humours her husband and receives in return his confidence “and a certain consideration for her judgment, which makes one feel there *is* attachment” (361). She has “a temper to love and be loved” (469), but enjoys a loving relationship only with her sister.

Mrs. Grant does avoid the hostility towards men that is expressed as much by Lady Bertram’s passivity as by Mrs. Norris’s officiousness. In Austen’s other novels hostility is not oriented solely along sexual lines: in *Pride and Prejudice* Lady Catherine de Bourgh is inimical to anyone who questions her right to determine his or her life; Darcy’s rudeness is determined by his inflated sense of self-importance; and Mr. Bennet’s contempt for his wife is neither extended nor confined to the female sex. Often, instances of sexual aggression turn out to have other motives. Lucy Steele preys on naive men, but she is motivated by financial concerns and has not been taught to make better use of her natural abilities (127). Wickham, too, needs money and he is further driven by his dislike of Darcy, while Frank Churchill’s flirtatiousness is explained, if not excused by, the delicacy of his situation with Jane and his aunt. Women are not bound by their childhood environments in the other novels. Indeed, *Mansfield Park* is unique in the amount of attention it devotes to the backgrounds of its characters; Mary Lascelles points out that Fanny Price is the only one of Austen’s heroines who

is introduced as a child.¹⁵ The other heroines are more than the sum of their heredity, environment, and education, and the outlines of their formative influences are indistinct. Elinor Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, and Anne Elliot have sisters who are their inferiors, but there are no particular reasons given for the differences. Anne's older sister Elizabeth has had three additional years of her worthy mother's care and the attentions of Lady Russell, but she is in every way her father's daughter, while Anne shows the benefit of both women's examples. There is no explanation at all for Elinor Dashwood's good sense beyond the assumption that she was born with it, and the Bennet girls' innate qualities determine the educations they receive and the uses to which they put them. The heroines of the other novels can simply be, without extended reference to the forces that shaped them, because the patriarchal forces are deliberately downplayed. Only *Mansfield Park* highlights the patriarchy and insists on its power by pointing to the ways in which it victimizes women. And the greatest victim of all is the heroine of the novel, Fanny Price.

NOTES

¹See the discussion in Avrom Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), pp. 10-17.

²Jocelyn Harris, " 'As if they had been living friends': *Sir Charles Grandison* into *Mansfield Park*", *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, LXXXIII, No. 3 (Autumn 1980), 360-405.

³Harris, 361-363.

⁴Harris, 361.

⁵Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Vol. III of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, 3rd ed., ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 326. All subsequent references to the novels of Jane Austen are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

⁶LeRoy W. Smith, "*Mansfield Park* : The Revolt of the 'Feminine' Woman" in *Jane Austen in a Social Context*, ed. David Monaghan (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1981), p. 146. Smith also finds *Mansfield Park* to be a novel about the evils of the patriarchy. However, while he notes the perversion of family and sexual relationships and the inadequacy of female education, he finds Fanny Price to be only a "*potential* victim" (p. 156) of the system which is renovated by her "revolt".

⁷Donald Greene, "The Myth of Limitation" in Joel C. Weinshemer, ed., *Jane Austen Today*, (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 142.

⁸Sue Warrick Doederlein, "Clarissa in the Hands of the Critics", *ECS*, XVI, No. 4 (Summer 1983), 406-408.

⁹See Fleishman, p. 19.

¹⁰This conclusion has also been reached by Michael Williams, *Jane Austen: Six Novels and Their Methods*, (Houndmills and London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 86), p. 84.

¹¹Harris, 362-363.

¹²Represented by F. B. Pinion, *A Jane Austen Companion*, (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1973), pp. 142-143.

¹³Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), p. 155.

¹⁴See Williams, p. 82.

¹⁵Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 215.

CHAPTER VI
SEXUAL DIFFERENCES:
THE HEROINES AND HEROES OF
JANE AUSTEN

Fanny Price is both the greatest victim of the patriarchy and its feminine ideal; to be the one she must be the other. Unlike any other female character in *Mansfield Park*, she is shaped by men to conform to their notion of a woman, and she absorbs her lessons well. She is a near-perfect masculine creation because she has no fostering mother or mother-substitute to teach her the tactics women use to subvert male hegemony. Her most influential teachers are male and she accepts their concept of the world and her place in it.

Fanny is born into a family which does not value her. The second eldest of nine children, Fanny is ignored by a mother who is not only preoccupied by constant childbearing, but who prefers her sons to her daughters.¹ Fanny is, in later years, unable “to recal [sic] anything approaching to tenderness in [her father’s] former treatment of herself” and retains only “a general impression of roughness and loudness” (389). Ignored by her mother, then, and intimidated by her father, she finds refuge with her older brother William who, as their mother’s favourite, is “her advocate . . . in every distress” (15). Fanny learns early that she is insignificant

while boys are important; she understands that although fathers are fearful beings, she can receive more love and protection from a brother than a mother.

When Fanny arrives at Mansfield at the age of ten she is poor, weak, and socially inferior, frightened of everything and yet desperately needing care. Mansfield confirms her past experience. Her Aunt Bertram, though kindly, is too indolent to nurture her, and Aunt Norris is the terror of Fanny's life. Her cousins Maria and Julia patronize her and increase her feelings of inferiority. Sir Thomas inspires awe and feelings of gratitude, but it is Edmund who replaces William as her friend and defender. Edmund's attentions are "of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind, and extending its pleasures Miss Lee taught her French, and heard her read her daily portion of History; but he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgment" (22). As Edmund later discovers, "her mind in so great a degree [had been] formed by his care" (470) that he must be pleased with it. Unlike Maria, Julia, or Mary, Fanny is not taught about the sexual dynamics of her society by members of her own sex; she is alienated from the older women of her family. Fanny is taught by Edmund and instructed by the example of Sir Thomas, and her emotional life is almost wholly subsumed by William and Edmund. From them she learns all she knows about being a woman.

The result is a heroine who is a composite of the feminine values endorsed by the authors of conduct books. In addition to being

principled, grateful, and soft-hearted, Fanny is obedient and submissive, humble and timid. She never tries to draw attention to herself and is usually occupied with attending to the comfort of others; she is mild, patient, and gentle. The more puzzling aspects of her characterization are also accounted for by the conduct books. If Fanny is humourless, it may be remembered that Dr. Gregory lectures women on the immodesty of enjoying wit.² If Fanny is physically delicate, that is allowed by all the authors of conduct books to be natural (Dr. Gregory even finds it desirable), and all of them recommend her regimen of moderate exercise on horseback.³ It may be noted that Fanny reads biographies and poetry rather than novels, and her intellectual attainments are neither flaunted nor pursued at the expense of domestic accomplishments.⁴ Finally, Fanny exhibits that natural disposition to religion that Gisborne considers characteristic of her sex.⁵ Fanny is close to being, as Edmund tells her, “the perfect model of a woman, which I have always believed you born for” (347).

The paradox attached to her perfection is that it renders her invisible. Since she is submissive and unassuming she is ignored; trained to be useful and obedient she is, therefore, exploited. She is too weak and insignificant to be included in her cousins’ amusements, but these very characteristics mean that she is not entitled to the luxuries the rest of the family takes for granted, while they make her particularly well-suited to perform endless errands and chores. Her modesty and self-effacement mean that she passes unnoticed in the society that claims to honour the feminine qualities

she possesses. It does honour these virtues — Edmund's words attest to that — but only in the abstract; the reality of a near-perfect Fanny is overshadowed by the wit and beauty of a Mary Crawford, or the assured brilliance of a Maria Bertram.

Moreover, the ideal implied by the conduct books is hardly wonderful in a different context. Avrom Fleishman is not exaggerating when he complains of "the usual display of bad temper" which dominates discussions of the heroine of *Mansfield Park*.⁶ Even Fanny's defenders admit that there is something annoying about her: Mary Lascelles contends that the reader cannot so much like Fanny as pity and be afraid for her as an inferior being, while Fleishman admits that she is hostile, snobbish, egoistic, and judgmental.⁷ To this list must be added Fanny's passivity and inflexibility; she is, seemingly, incapable of acting or changing. These faults are the inevitable accompaniments of her feminine virtues. Habitual obedience and submission engender passivity, just as her serious consideration of religious and moral principles encourages the development of a self-absorbed, censorious nature. As a person who is instructed in the subtleties that govern her relationship with Maria and Julia — Sir Thomas wishes "to see them very good friends, and would, on no account, authorize in my girls the smallest degree of arrogance towards their relation; but still they cannot be equals" (11) — it is not surprising that she is acutely aware of the minute gradations of status. Her own meagre position in the world depends on such distinctions and she supports them, to the point of snobbery,

rather than risk slipping into the chaotic anonymity of her Portsmouth home. Besides, as Mrs. Chapone declares, it is incumbent on the well-bred woman to avoid “those of low birth and education”; consorting with such people is not “a mark of humility”.⁸ Finally, Fanny’s hostility is hardly remarkable. Like the other female characters of *Mansfield Park* she is frustrated by patriarchal society, but unlike them she cannot express her hostility to men because she is too dependent on them.

With the exception of Fanny, women in the novel express some of their hostility to the men who are most identified with the inequities of the patriarchal order. Sir Thomas must put up with the passivity of his wife, the obtrusive servility of Mrs. Norris, and the indifference of his daughters; other husbands contend with varying degrees of apathy and outright rebellion, and Edmund feels the effects of Mary Crawford’s fear and distrust of men. All of these women can, and do, deflect part of their hostility on less worthy targets but safer targets such as Fanny, but they all manage to convey their dissatisfaction to the men in their lives. Fanny, however, trained to revere the men closest to her, and emotionally dependent on them, is unable to vent her hostility on them. Men are too important and too powerful, and Fanny too dependent, for her to acknowledge her hate for them even to herself. Thus, she develops the unattractive habit of hating the wrong person. When Edmund betrays her and their shared ideals to court Mary, Fanny cannot hate him. Instead, she transfers her hostility to Mary, rejecting her friendly

advances and coldly judging her every move. After receiving a letter from Edmund in which he rhapsodizes over Mary and explains that Sir Thomas will not fetch Fanny from Portsmouth until after Easter, although Lady Bertram misses her desperately, Fanny is

within half a minute of starting the idea, that Sir Thomas was quite unkind, both to her aunt and to herself. — As to the main subject of the letter — there was nothing in that to soothe irritation. She was almost vexed into displeasure, and anger, against Edmund. (424)

She checks “the tendency of these thoughts” and turns them in another direction. Instead of becoming angry at Edmund, she dismisses him as blind and rages bitterly against Mary:

She loves nobody but herself and her brother. “Her friends leading her astray for years!” She is quite as likely to have led *them* astray. They have all, perhaps, been corrupting one another; but if they are so much fonder of her than she is of them, she is the less likely to have been hurt, except by their flattery. (424)

When thoughts of Mary lead her again to Edmund, the soliloquy ends and she is “soon more softened and sorrowful. — [Edmund’s] warm regard, his kind expressions, his confidential treatment touched her strongly. He was only too good to everybody” (425). Fanny cannot be angry with Edmund and so Mary is made the scapegoat.

Fanny finds it difficult to express hostility to any man. She is “absolutely angry” (302) when Henry proposes to her, but her sense of the obligations he has placed her under and her “incurably gentle manner” conceal her emotion (327-328). In Portsmouth, most of Fanny’s disappointment with her family is blamed on her mother,

whom she feels is, “though she might scruple to make use of the words, . . . a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern . . . who had no talent, no conversation, [and] no affection towards herself” (390). Her father, to be sure, is judged as harshly as her mother: “He did not want abilities; but he had no curiosity, and no information beyond his profession . . . he swore and he drank, he was dirty and gross” (389). But Fanny is satisfied with less from her father, who has abilities that he wastes in idleness, while “she hoped much” (389) from a mother who is trying to cope with a large family on a small income without talent or training for her job. Fanny cannot excuse her mother, although the narrator points out that Mrs. Price conducts herself as well as Lady Bertram would in her situation. Most of Fanny’s anger over her reception at Portsmouth is directed to the safest target, regardless of its suitability.

When there is no safe target for Fanny’s hostility, as there usually is not at Mansfield since all of its women outrank her and are protected by Sir Thomas, she turns it against herself. Fanny is, consequently, chronically insecure and often depressed. As Edmund reminds her, “It is your disposition to be easily dejected, and to fancy difficulties greater than they are” (348). Her frail health may also be partly attributable to repressed anger. The headache that follows her rose-gathering in the hot sun also comes after Edmund has spent four days squiring Mary about the countryside on Fanny’s horse. In her letters, Jane Austen has a sharp eye for the consequences of repressed anger and unhappiness. Fanny Price is further

proof of her observations. The character of Fanny Price shows the negative side of the feminine ideal, with its hidden hostilities, passivity, and egoism. This side of Fanny is inevitable, given the virtues that turn her into “the perfect model of a woman”.

Fanny is, then, both near-perfect and seriously flawed. She is simultaneously the least valued member of Mansfield and the daughter Sir Thomas has always wanted, although his recognition of her worth is belated. She is awarded her treasured status at the end of the novel but, as Avrom Fleishman has said, it seems that circumstances, rather than any particular heroism of Fanny’s, bring about her elevation.⁹ Although Fanny is not a completely passive character, it is true that she is usually acted upon rather than active. Fanny is as near perfection in her sixteenth year as she is when she marries Edmund; her society’s perception of her changes, but she does not.

Fanny’s greatest virtue throughout the novel is her unswerving allegiance to the values she has been taught. The much-discussed *Lovers’ Vows* episode, while it incorporates themes of pretence and dishonesty and illustrates the dangers of flirtation, is not as great a mystery as it sometimes seems.¹⁰ Nor is it necessary to puzzle over Jane Austen’s attitudes towards private theatricals; she, as much as any member of her family, enjoyed and approved of them.¹¹ What is important is that at Mansfield, where he is master, Sir Thomas does not approve of them. Edmund reasons that their respect for their father should make it impossible for them to put on

a play:

As *we* are circumstanced, I must think it would be highly injudicious, and more than injudicious, to attempt any thing of the kind. It would show great want of feeling on my father's account, absent as he is, and in some degree of constant danger; and it would be imprudent, I think, with regard to Maria, whose situation is a very delicate one, considering every thing, extremely delicate. (125)

The first consideration is Sir Thomas's reaction, and if there is a possibility that a production would show a "want of feeling" towards him, the project must be doomed. The fact that a private theatrical has not been put on before at Mansfield suggests that Sir Thomas does not favour them, and that hint should, with Edmund's other objections, mean an end to the idea.

Fanny's reaction to the proposed theatrical illustrates that she has been well trained in the principle of subordination. On first hearing of the plan, she bears "Edmund company in every feeling throughout the whole" (128), and perseveres in her resistance even when she is urged to take the part of the Cottager's Wife. Her unaccustomed determination provokes self-doubt about "the truth and purity of her own scruples": it is possible that the claims of Sir Thomas are equalled by the united preference of her cousins and aunts, and she acknowledges that her terror of acting may be influencing her (153). For Fanny, the play raises questions about "her duty" that are more important than any other consideration (153). Fanny does not meditate on the larger moral questions posed by play-acting, only on the specific dilemma of whether "Edmund's

judgment, . . . his persuasion of Sir Thomas's disapprobation of the whole" is enough to justify her defiance of the wishes "of those to whom she owed the greatest complaisance" (153). When Edmund decides to join the cast, Fanny is shocked by his inconsistency because it is the question of consistency that has been agitating her, as she has wondered whether her defiance of her cousins' desires conflicted with her obligations to them, or if her pure motives were muddled by a fear of self-exposure. Edmund's willingness to assume "the appearance of inconsistency"(154) for the sake of Mary Crawford, who has no real claim upon him, is doubly shocking for Fanny since the man who has taught her her principles is violating them with his conduct. Typically, Fanny deflects her anger at Edmund onto Mary — "Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing" — and sinks into negation, no longer caring what happens since "it was all misery now " (156-157). Fanny has worried whether her perseverance in doing what she feels to be right is tainted with selfishness; Edmund does what he knows is wrong in order to gratify a barely justified selfish desire. Fanny, accustomed to the fact that most members of the family flout the rules with which she has been inculcated, is truly shaken by the defection of the man who has been her guide.

It is only after Edmund's defection that Fanny considers the immorality of private theatricals. Her possible inconsistency shrunk to insignificance by Edmund's behaviour, and her participation no longer solicited, she is left in "her jealousy and agitation"

to find more than enough reasons to disapprove of “a scheme which, considering only her uncle, she must condemn altogether” (159-160). The jealousy of Mr. Rushworth and Julia and the flirtations of Edmund and Mary and Maria and Henry are most evident to Fanny as she watches and listens. These events do not prove, however, that Fanny is right in any large moral sense. The jealousies and infatuations are well underway when the play is thought of; it encourages but is no more responsible for them than the visit to Sotherton (which Sir Thomas would have condoned). The issue remains Sir Thomas’s values, and Edmund is aware of this when he apologizes to his father:

‘We have all been more or less to blame,’ said he, ‘every one of us, excepting Fanny. Fanny is the only one who has judged correctly throughout, who has been consistent She never ceased to think of what was due to you.’ (187)

Sir Thomas, in return, tries to “forget how much he had been forgotten himself as soon as he could” (187). The play is an evil only insofar as its production forgets the deference due Sir Thomas and his values.

The *Lovers’ Vows* episode foreshadows the larger conflict of *Mansfield Park*, which is also precipitated by Fanny’s refusal to do what everyone wishes her to do. In both crises, Fanny’s decision is based on pure motives and complicated by less worthy ones. Both lead to a period of ostracism, and in both cases Fanny is slowly drawn into approving the idea she opposes, until her fate is abruptly determined by circumstances over which she has no control. The

extent of Fanny's heroism in these two situations cannot be measured by the standards of Jane Austen's other novels. Fanny never has to accept the humiliation of having judged wrongly, as do Elizabeth Bennet and Emma Woodhouse, and she is not called upon to perform nobly during a crisis, as are Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot. She is not even required to view the ruin of her dearest illusions, like Catherine Morland and Marianne Dashwood, and still go on to happiness. Fanny is heroic according to the standards of *Mansfield Park* ; she is as heroic as a "perfect model of a woman" may be. Thus, she defers to authority whenever she can, but when its demands conflict with a higher authority she will not yield. In keeping with her training, she rather resists than rebels, and her resistance is passive and negative. Her heroism seems weak and insignificant, but it is as strong as Fanny herself.

Fanny's second trial is by far the more serious of the two, for during it she must oppose every one including Sir Thomas. She has not even the consolation of knowing that Edmund agrees with her, no matter how he behaves. Fanny's refusal of Henry Crawford opens up for debate one of the major preoccupations of the conduct books: how may a woman be sure that the man she chooses to marry is worthy of her? The advice found in the conduct books on this subject is as contradictory as the situation in which Fanny finds herself. Mrs. Chapone warns that "such pains are usually taken to deceive" marriageable young women that they must rely on their parents' guidance.¹² This is clear enough, but Thomas Gisborne, who

has just given similar advice, comments that

there is scarcely any circumstance by which the sober judgement and the fixed principles of parents are so frequently perverted, as by a scheming eagerness respecting the settlement of their daughters in marriage.¹³

Elsewhere, Gisborne tells his readers not to accept under any circumstances a man of whose principles they are not assured,¹⁴ but he does not answer the questions that are raised by his two statements: how is an inexperienced young woman to know if a man's principles are good if he is a deceiver and her parents' ability to judge perverted? If, furthermore, she suspects his principles but her parents do not, is she justified in supporting her opinion against their wishes? Presumably, since a woman's future happiness is determined by her marriage, she is justified in refusing the man she suspects, but at the cost of throwing off lifelong habits of obedience and modesty. This is Fanny's situation with Henry Crawford and she pays dearly for deferring to an authority higher than Sir Thomas.

Fanny's motives for rejecting Henry's proposal are mixed for, like Harriet Byron, she is in love with a man who is all but engaged to another woman. Fanny, however, sincerely believes that Henry does not have good principles, and she neither esteems nor likes him. The one objection that might convince Sir Thomas to turn Henry away is the one objection she may not make, since criticizing her suitor's principles means betraying her cousins' behaviour as well. This she may not do, because her own principles forbid it.

Fanny knows of no actual improprieties, and so her tale of Henry, Maria, and Julia must reveal an unfeminine confidence in her own judgment, a willingness to spread scandal, and the presumption that she is qualified to condemn her superiors.¹⁵ If she risks all that, there is still “the appalling prospect of discussion, explanation, and probably non-conviction” (317). Deserving or not, Maria and Julia command Fanny’s respect and loyalty because she is not their equal; they come before her defense of herself. Fanny is left with no choice but quietly to refuse Henry’s proposal.

The heroines of Jane Austen’s other novels are free to make marital decisions without being subjected to the coercion that is exerted on Fanny Price. Elizabeth’s refusal of Mr. Collins excites her mother’s wrath, but Mrs. Bennet’s opinion means as little to her as Lady Catherine’s. The grasping Mrs. Ferrars can be brought around to agree to the engagement of Elinor and Edward, while other unhappy relatives merely bow to the inevitable (death, in Mrs. Churchill’s case!), or have the inevitable adjusted to suit their needs. The closest parallel to Fanny’s situation is that of Anne Elliot, but she does not so much submit to force as bow to reason. No one in the other novels has the power to do what Sir Edmund does: first to bribe Fanny with the warmth provided by a fire in the East Room and increased respect within the family, and then to intimidate her with her exile from them. The trip to Portsmouth is a device worthy of *Clarissa’s* Mr. Harlowe though, as an enlightened patriarch, Sir Thomas devises a plan less cruel than Mr. Harlowe’s scheme of solitary

confinement. It is also noteworthy that, as the narrator proclaims, Sir Thomas would have gained his ends if Henry and Edmund had both co-operated. The pains of Portsmouth do make Fanny appreciate Mansfield, and she is not the kind of heroine who can long resist the man who loves her and the man who commands her obedience. With Edmund wedded to Mary, Fanny must give way before the affection of Henry and the admonitions of Sir Thomas.

Fanny's trial comes to an end through the agency of a set of fortuitous circumstances. The resolution of this crisis confirms her moral superiority: she is proved right about Henry and Mary, and her cousins' conduct justifies her own. This is appropriate, since this time she has been guided by respect for moral and religious values that are better than Sir Thomas's values. Still, this is hardly a moral triumph for Fanny. Not even Edmund is aware of Fanny's feelings and suspicions, and there is, consequently, no one to congratulate her upon her sagacity. Fanny's moral superiority is also diminished by her passivity. She does little to avert the disasters that are looming, and apparently does little to ameliorate their consequences. There is some truth to Mary's and Mrs. Norris's charges that everything could have been avoided if Fanny had accepted Henry (456, 448). If Fanny had acted when he proposed, broken the codes that bound her and told Sir Thomas why she suspected Henry's principles, there might have been some chance of rescuing the situation. Elizabeth Bennet tramples convention underfoot when she defies Lady Catherine, and she tries to keep Lydia from going off to

Brighton; similarly, Anne Elliot breaks through her well-bred calm in her argument with Captain Harville, and she, too, warns her sister about Mrs. Clay. But Fanny cannot act. The rules that barely touch the other heroines make up her being.

Fanny's happiness depends on fortuitous circumstances because "the perfect model of a woman" has little control over her own destiny. She is, rather, a creature who is acted upon by her family and society and, ultimately, by the man who marries her. Fanny can win only by doing nothing, and her worth is recognized only when everything else proves to be meretricious. Fanny's value is determined by Mansfield's need of her. As the opening sentences of *Mansfield Park* state, a woman has no intrinsic value in a patriarchy; she is only as important as some man's attentions make her.

The contrasts between Fanny Price and the heroines of the other novels are obvious. Anne Elliot and Elinor Dashwood share her sense of propriety and her finely tuned morality, and both are, to some extent, mild and gentle, but their unassuming facades do not disguise their sharply critical intelligences. They are eminently well-suited to take care of themselves and, if given the chance, their families and friends, and they are neither awed nor intimidated by men. The remaining three heroines — Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma Woodhouse — are even further away from the ideal femininity of a Fanny Price. Lively, independent, and capable of the most shocking breaches of decorum, they share with Fanny only the possession of good principles; unlike her, though, they often lose

track of their principles in the rush of events. Their morality is, moreover, not the institutionalized morality of a Fanny Price. Their moral codes are not so much tested by their adventures as formed during them, and if all three learn that a little humility or charity has been wanting in their conduct, they are by no means converted to the conduct book ideal. All five heroines, finally, attempt to direct events which concern them with some success. Elizabeth's and Elinor's warnings about their sisters' behaviour may fall on deaf ears, but both heroines are instrumental in ameliorating the crises that follow. Catherine's and Emma's inclinations to pursue their illusions, while humiliating for them, are the reasons why Henry Tilney and George Knightley are drawn to them as mentors and, ultimately, lovers; indeed, Knightley's declaration to Emma is prompted by the clearing up of misconceptions caused by Emma's meddling. Anne Elliot's cool competence at Uppercross and Lyme brings her the renewed love of Frederick Wentworth, just as her opposed friendship with Mrs. Smith confirms her suspicions of William Elliot and Mrs. Clay. Circumstances favour the heroines of *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, but they help create their own luck.

It is significant that each of the heroines, with the exception of Fanny Price, is furnished with a childhood in which she has the unconditional love of at least one parent and the example of one or more worthy women. In every novel except *Mansfield Park*, few details are given about the heroines' childhoods, which makes it all

the more interesting that these two points should be common to them all except Fanny's. The security provided by parental love gives the heroines self-confidence, and the presence of a role model a standard against which they may measure their own strengths and weaknesses. These role models are not paragons of virtue. Lady Russell errs on the side of materialism while Mrs. Dashwood has an excess of sensibility, but both women are sensible enough to retain the respect of Anne and Elinor, respectively. Each worthy woman, in fact, inadvertently encourages, or fails to discourage, the one trait in the heroine's character that most needs correction. Lady Russell, for example, reinforces Anne's conservatism, while Mrs. Dashwood's romantic extravagance justifies Marianne's, and compels Elinor to be overly cautious and prudent. Mrs. Gardiner does nothing to curb Elizabeth's overestimation of her own understanding; indeed, Mrs. Gardiner's unswerving confidence in her niece's opinions is a source of embarrassment to Elizabeth at Pemberley and again after Lydia's elopement. Similarly, Mrs. Morland's "useful plain sense" (13) corrects her daughter's overheated imagination only after Catherine has learned that lesson on her own, and Mrs. Taylor is no small contributor to Emma's egoism, being "peculiarly interested in [Emma], in every pleasure, every scheme of hers; . . . and [having] such an affection for her as could never find fault" (6).

The more exemplary the model is, the harder it is to account for her relationship with the heroine, who is commonly surrounded by fools. Lady Russell's devotion to Anne is explained by her friend-

ship for Anne's mother, another excellent woman whose marriage to the contemptible Sir Walter is weakly ascribed to a "youthful infatuation" with his looks and rank (4). That Emma should be blessed with the "intelligent, well-informed, useful, gentle" and loving Miss Taylor as a governess is admitted to be an advantage "such as few possessed" (6), while Mrs. Gardiner's presence in a family distinguished by its lack of sense is the happy result of her marrying the brother who is superior in both education and nature to his two sisters. Mrs. Morland and Mrs. Dashwood, both more ordinary women, are plausibly incorporated into the stories as the heroines' mothers. The contrivances that ensure the influence of these worthy women on the heroines testify to their importance in the otherwise vague backgrounds of Catherine, Elinor and Marianne, Elizabeth, Emma, and Anne.

Only Fanny Price is the daughter of the patriarchy, born to a mother who prefers her sons to her daughters, and partly raised in a home which is the embodiment of the patriarchal ideal. Only Fanny is denied the love and approval of both parents, and only Fanny lacks the influence of at least one woman who could show by her example that women can lead happy, rational, and useful lives. Like the other female characters of *Mansfield Park*, Fanny is a victim of violence; the real danger women face in patriarchal society is the steady violence that is done to their spirits and wills from childhood on. The rapes, seductions, and coercions of Richardson's novels are the dramatic expressions of a society's determination to dominate its

women. The ordinary consequences of this domination are illustrated by the women of *Mansfield Park* : the self-defeating rebelliousness of the Bertram sisters, the apathy and ignorance of their mother, the frustrated ambition of Mrs. Norris, and the frightened cynicism of Mary Crawford who is attracted to, but cannot believe in, the decency of Edmund. Most of all, this violence to the will and spirit is exemplified by Fanny Price. Unlike the rest, she is not made secure by love, or taught to value herself; she has no woman to show her how to be a woman in a patriarchy. She is, therefore, free of the cynicism and slyness of her contemporaries, but she cannot share their independence or self-confidence. There is no safe place in *Mansfield Park* , no ground where a woman may be moral and active and spirited all at the same time. Not the least of the contradictions of the patriarchy is the choice it gives women to be either good nonentities or corrupted objects of attention.

The paradoxes of *Mansfield Park* result in the happiness of Fanny, a nonentity no longer, who is awarded the hand of Edmund, the hero of the novel and her heart. Normally, there is little to say about the heroes of Jane Austen's novels. They tend to be rather wooden creations, uniformly upright and honorable, and frequently cast in the role of the heroine's mentor. Like the heroines, they often belong to families which do not share their ideals. Edmund Bertram has these characteristics, but there are other similarities among the heroes which do not apply to him. The most significant aspect of the heroes' relationships with the heroines is that they

all, with the exception of Edmund, humble themselves before their proposals are concluded. Even Henry Tilney and Mr. Knightley, who are more sinned against than sinning, apologize, Henry for his father's rudeness, Knightley for his censure of Emma's behaviour. If Edward Ferrars's self-abasement can be justified by the fact that his errors are deepened by Elinor's irreproachable conduct, then the same cannot be argued in the situations of Darcy and Elizabeth, or Frederick and Anne. Darcy and Frederick eagerly assume all the blame for the estrangements that were at least equally the faults of Elizabeth and Anne. Frederick laments that Anne's termination of their engagement made him "too proud to ask again" in 1808, and concludes, with astonishing humility, that "I shut my eyes, and would not understand you, or do you justice. This is a recollection which ought to make me forgive everyone sooner than myself" (247). Darcy, similarly, is so adamant in his protestations that he and he alone is guilty of misconduct, that Elizabeth drops the subject rather than "quarrel for the greater share of blame annexed to that evening" (367). These orgies of self-recrimination are especially interesting in that they occur during the proposal scenes which are generally the first and last times that the heroes' innermost feelings are revealed. The hearts of these distant, superior beings are finally opened and within is not only the expected overpowering love, but an equally overpowering sense of shame. In part a satire of the unworthiness which a lover was supposed to declare when making his proposal,¹⁶ this exaggerated feeling of shame is also a signal

that the woman is receiving more than a conventional assurance of her husband's esteem and consideration. Elizabeth, Anne, and Elinor are established as their husbands' superiors, while the faultier Emma and Catherine are promised equal status. The heroes' self-abasement signifies that their marriages will be unions of equals.

Edmund Bertram is the only hero of a Jane Austen novel who contents himself with a conventional declaration of his own unworthiness: "She was of course only too good for him; but as nobody minds having what is too good for them, he was very steadily in pursuit of the blessing" (471). This is all, despite the fact that Edmund is as faulty as any of the other heroes, and has more cause for self-reproach than all but one or two. Edmund feels some remorse over his failed romance with Mary, but he is more ashamed of her than himself. It is quite beyond him to consider that he persisted in his courtship of Mary despite ample evidence that she was neither unmercenary nor highly principled; he is even less capable of realizing that his past treatment of Fanny has been insensitive or thoughtless, or that there has been some fault in the way he has been used to look at the world. Edmund's blindness to Fanny's suffering parallels that of Sir Charles Grandison's to Harriet Byron's. Both heroines experience great pain over the heroes' divided hearts, pain to which the men remain oblivious, and Edmund resembles Sir Charles in his complacent assumption that his second love accepts his view of the situation.¹⁷ The other heroes exaggerate their mistakes, but they recognize the truth of their own behaviour. Edmund,

on the other hand, exaggerates other people's errors and remains oblivious to the reality of what he has done.

Edmund is also unique in his attitude towards and aptitude for his profession. Two other heroes, Henry Tilney and Edward Ferrars, are clergymen whose duties ride lightly on their shoulders. Neither of them appears to have any particular zeal for his profession, and yet they possess, as Wendy Craik comments in *Jane Austen in Her Time*, excellent "principles of conduct and a proper combination of good sense and right feeling . . . as well as a strong sense of honour."¹⁸ Edmund is both more committed to and less suited for his clerical duties than Henry or Edward. He has good sense and right feeling, firm principles and a sense of honour, and adds to all that a thoughtful appreciation of the role of the clergy. All his seriousness, however, cannot prevent him from making and condoning several serious errors. As Avrom Fleishman points out, Edmund, like Henry and Edward, is improperly prepared for and inducted into the church, and then compounds his mistake by apparently accepting two livings, despite his and Sir Thomas's condemnation of the practice of pluralism.¹⁹ These offences are all the more reprehensible because Edmund brings personal dedication to his profession; he seems to be a better candidate for ordination than Henry or Edward, but his sober respect for his calling is not a sign that he understands its principles. In fact, his personal conduct suggests that he will be better able to preach to his flock than to guide them by his example. Edward Ferrars errs in entangling himself with Lucy Steele, but he

nobly stands by his engagement despite his family's extreme displeasure and his awareness that she is not the woman he wants. Moreover, Edward chooses his career with the knowledge that no preferment awaits him, and is thankful to receive Colonel Brandon's offer of a living worth £200 a year. Edmund, in contrast, is sure of £700 a year at Thornton Lacey, and as much again when the Mansfield living is returned to him. In the matter of holding two livings, as well as in his general conduct, Edmund does not, as Avrom Fleishman concludes, practice what he preaches.²⁰

Edmund's failure to follow his own advice is a constant feature of his character. He has, not just the appearance of inconsistency, but the fact of it. Edward Ferrars is betrayed into an entanglement with Lucy by his loneliness and immaturity, but he gains self-knowledge through his error. Every other hero, though capable of making mistakes, is rescued from them by his innate good sense. Only Edmund makes mistake after mistake and remains content with his inconsistency. The moral, if not legal, heir of Sir Thomas, Edmund embodies the ideals of the patriarchy and, like everything else associated with it, he reflects its contradictions. Thus, as the mentor of Fanny, Edmund is the man who knows her best and understands her least; he is the one who respects her most, and yet he is capable of ignoring her most elementary needs. If patriarchal society's women are distorted by the inherent dishonesty of their roles, its men are similarly corrupted by dishonesty of a different kind. Since men are much freer than women to do as they

wish, they need not resort to subterfuge and deceit. Instead, they act as they wish and justify their behaviour according to their principles. Thus, Henry Crawford, who lives by a rake's code, rationalizes his flirtations by claiming that he cannot harm a woman who does not wish to run a risk, while Tom Bertram finds an excuse for everything he wants to do in the fact of his being the eldest son. To silence all objections Sir Charles Grandison need only explain how his unseemly haste in switching his attentions from Clementina to Harriet is, in fact, completely consistent with his principles, and the male characters of *Mansfield Park* share his arrogance, if not his unfailing righteousness. In Edmund's case, the dishonesty cuts very deep because his principles are superior to his brother's or his friend's. His emotions and his moral code are at odds and he cannot admit the discrepancy between them. Henry Crawford mocks his own sophistry, but Edmund is unaware that his excuses are transparent.

Edmund's blindness is particularly noticeable in his relationships with Fanny and Mary. Pleased with Fanny who is, after all, very much his own creation, he is nonetheless fascinated by the vivacious Mary Crawford and must explain the attraction by dwelling on her elusive moral qualities. Fanny, discussing Mary with Edmund, puts her finger on the source of Mary's power over him: she is entertaining and "extremely pretty" (63). But Edmund evades this judgment by allowing only that she has a "wonderful play of feature" on her countenance (63). He then launches into an analysis of her conversation that is designed to ease his doubts about its impropriety.

Her comments about her uncle may be indecorous, but he rejects Fanny's evaluation of them as "ungrateful." Mary's condemnation of the Admiral shows, on the contrary, a "most natural and amiable" gratitude to her aunt, who must be held responsible, furthermore, for Mary's faults (63). By the end of the conversation, Miss Crawford's warmth and liveliness have earned her the accolade of being "perfectly feminine, except in the instances we have been speaking of" (64). As Edmund has begun, so he continues to the end. He is never able to admit that his fascination with her is sexual, and is always attempting to explain it in moral and intellectual terms. Significantly, the final barrier to his falling in love with Fanny is sexual: "he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones" (470). Female sexuality is a problem for men in patriarchal society. In *Sir Charles Grandison*, the hero is "not insensible to Beauty: But the beauty of person *only*, never yet had power over more than my eye";²¹ the male characters of *Mansfield Park* echo this sentiment, but fail to act upon it. Like Edmund, the male characters know what constitutes perfect femininity, but their standards become flexible when they are confronted by beautiful eyes and graceful walks. Sir Thomas and Mr. Rushworth owe all their married happiness to the desires aroused by their wives' beauty, and show no signs of learning from their folly. Mr. Rushworth, the narrator predicts, will find another pretty girl who will probably deceive him, and if Sir Thomas realizes that he has mistaken handsome appearances for good characters in his daughters, he does not trace

that error to the mental contradiction that led him to choose Maria Ward as his wife. Edmund's contortions over Mary are unique only because the principles of femininity to which other men pay lip service are real to him, embodied in the cousin whose mind he has formed. In other respects, the contradiction he is experiencing is one common to his sex.

The heroes of the other novels do not have similar difficulties in reconciling a woman's appearance with her character. In the heroines they find both character and beauty, although the latter is rarely very striking. If the heroes are attracted to less worthy women, it is for other than sexual reasons. Edward Ferrars, lonely and inexperienced, is taken with Lucy Steele's amiable and obliging nature, and Frederick Wentworth's attentions to Louisa Musgrove are motivated in part by his desire to avenge himself on Anne. Although there are many foolish marriages in the other novels, relatively few are the result of a man's susceptibility to a woman's sexual charms. Many men marry for money and position, and some, like Mr. Collins, wed because it suits their position in life, while a few, like Mr. Allen of *Northanger Abbey* and Mr. Palmer of *Sense and Sensibility*, marry for no discernible reason, choosing women who lack beauty, charm, and character. Mr. Bennet is one man who lives to regret his infatuation with a pretty face; the only comparable situation reverses the roles by making Lady Elliot the victim of her regard for Sir Walter's perfect appearance and impeccable lineage. In the other novels, men may marry unhappily, but they are rarely lured into

sexual entanglements that contradict their principles. They find wives who, for the most part, satisfy their notions of femininity. Only in *Mansfield Park* are men so thoroughly betrayed by sexuality; only in *Mansfield Park* is the hero so helplessly trapped between his ideals and his sexual nature.

The contradictions of Edmund's character are not limited to his relationships with women. As a conscientious clergyman, he is flawed not only by the circumstances of his ordination and his subsequent acquisition of two livings, but by his practice of Christianity. Like Fanny, Edmund is, in many ways, the best of his world. He is considerate of the meek and humble, charitable in his judgments of others, and kind to the afflicted. He shares with Fanny, however, a devotion to the ideals of the patriarchy which sometimes conflicts with his Christian principles. His final interview with Mary is tainted by his horror of feminine independence. It is the horror of a man who, expecting to see a woman bowed down with "shame and wretchedness", finds instead that she displays "no reluctance, no horror, no feminine — shall I say? no modest loathings!" (454-455). He finds a woman who is full of opinions and plans, and who seeks to make the best of a situation that, to his eyes, is irredeemable. As she has so often before, Mary reveals that she does not think rightly. This time, however, her worldly opinions are accompanied by an unfeminine forthrightness and self-confidence which are not disguised as playfulness or liveliness. What finally convinces Edmund that she thinks as well as speaks evil is the manner in which she

conveys her opinion that the detection of Maria's folly, rather than the offence itself, is the greatest crime. It is her manner, Edmund repeats, that forces him to conclude that he has loved "the creature of my imagination, not Miss Crawford" (457-458). Mary's lack of principle, long evident to Fanny, becomes obvious to Edmund only when she displays it in a way that cannot be characterized, by any stretch of the imagination, as feminine. Edmund judges Mary, not just as a Christian and a clergyman who knows that human beings may think and act evilly, but as a man of his society who is convinced that a woman, once fallen, may never be reclaimed. Mary's fault is real, but Edmund's reaction to it is not prompted solely by moral outrage.

Edmund's parting words to Mary indicate his failure as a Christian. He wishes her well and hopes that she will "learn to think more justly and not owe the most valuable knowledge we could any of us acquire — the knowledge of ourselves and of our duty, to the lessons of affliction" (458-459). He then leaves her, secure in his own self-knowledge which is summed up in the words: "How have I been deceived! Equally in brother and sister deceived!" (459). It has taken Edmund little time to decide that even the feeble self-reproach implied by his admission that he has misunderstood or imagined the Mary he loved is unmerited. He has, rather, been deceived in Mary and Henry, and the ambiguity of the phrase leaves his participation in the deception safely unspecified. Edmund suffers but does not acquire "the most valuable knowledge"; he takes up his

clerical duties without the insight into his own foibles and frailties that would fit him for his task.

Henry Tilney and Edward Ferrars, in contrast, take with them into their parishes humbled spirits and painfully learned tolerances for human weakness. Edward, in particular, knows only too well how youth and inexperience may lead to folly and wrongdoing, and how a man may assist in an artful woman's deception of him. Enlightened by Lucy's elopement with Robert and Elinor's explanations, Edward finally believes Lucy "capable of the utmost meanness of wanton ill-nature" (366), but is so happy to be free of her that he wastes no time on self-pitying reproaches. His affection for Lucy has cooled by the time their engagement is broken, but Edward is more deliberately and thoroughly fooled than Edmund, the circumstances are no less humiliating, and the lady is at least as evil as Mary Crawford. In his conduct, if not in solemn speeches, Edward Ferrars proves himself more suited to taking orders than Edmund Bertram. Even Henry Tilney bids fair to do more honour to his profession than Edmund. Little as he has to condemn himself for, he feels most painfully the grasping cruelty of his father, and by informing Catherine of General Tilney's greed he relieves her of some of her humiliation. Like Edward Ferrars, Henry has intimate knowledge of human frailty; his choice of a wife shows that he has special gifts in understanding and forgiving youthful folly. Edmund Bertram is set apart from Edward and Henry by his self-deception, intolerance, and lack of fitness for his profession.

Edmund displays narrowness of mind and a lack of compassion, negative traits that set him apart from the heroes of the other novels. Darcy conquers his distaste for Lydia and his well-founded hatred for Wickham in order to bring about a marriage which is almost as indecent as the proposed union of Maria and Henry; Edmund, like Mr. Collins, condemns the very thought that a ruined woman may be rehabilitated, and there is no evidence that he disagrees with Sir Thomas's or Collins's notions of the proper way to deal with an erring woman. Mary, he admits, exhibited "half a wish of yielding to truths, half a sense of shame" after he repudiated her (458), and was still "quick to feel" (454) and "not so careless as she wanted to appear" (458). He throws away his great chance to display compassion and charity to her, however, and delivers a stiff, self-pitying rebuke which deserves her response:

A pretty good lecture upon my word. Was it part of your last sermon? At this rate, you will soon reform every body at Mansfield and Thornton Lacey; and when I hear of you next, it may be as a celebrated preacher in some great society of Methodists, or as a missionary in foreign parts."
(458)

Edmund is qualified to be a popular orator or a self-righteous missionary, but he will be, at best, adequate as the pastor of a country parish. His sense of compassion is limited to those few who are deemed worthy of it, and his mind remains narrow. That his self-deception endures is shown by his courtship of Fanny which is, as it was with Mary, the wooing of himself; whenever Edmund discovers a woman's worth he is really discovering his own desires. It is

Edmund's lack of self-knowledge, in particular, that makes him such an unusual hero of a Jane Austen novel, a lack that makes him fit for only that most unusual heroine, Fanny Price, in the patriarchy of *Mansfield Park*.

NOTES

¹Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Vol. III of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 389. All subsequent references to Jane Austen's novels are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

²Dr. Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters*, new ed., (London: Cadell and Davies, 1814), p. 36.

³Gregory, pp. 56-57, 54; Mrs. Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady*, new ed., (London: J. Walter and C. Dilly, 1797), p. 90; Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex*, 2nd ed. (London: T. Cadell, Jr., and W. Davies, 1797), pp. 249, 222.

⁴Gregory, pp. 54, 36-37; Gisborne, pp. 213-217, 269-271; Chapone, pp. 193-194.

⁵Gisborne, p. 248.

⁶Avrom Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967), p. 17.

⁷Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), pp. 214-215; Fleishman, pp. 45-46.

⁸Chapone, p. 93.

⁹Fleishman, p. 71.

¹⁰See Fleishman, p. 24; Michael Williams, *Jane Austen: Six Novels and Their Methods* (Houndmills and London: The Macmillan Press Limited, 1986), pp. 111-112; Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Strategies in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisi-

ana State University Press, 1973), pp. 81-88.

¹¹Her composition of "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man", which was designed for production in the Austen home, is proof that she not only liked but encouraged private theatricals. The authors of conduct books, however, did not. See Gisborne, p. 173-175.

¹²Chapone, p. 107.

¹³Gisborne, p. 388.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁵All of which are condemned in the conduct books. See Gisborne, p. 103, 110; Gregory, pp. 31-33, 38; Chapone, pp.170, 180, 73-74.

¹⁶Gregory, pp. 93-94.

¹⁷Jocelyn Harris, " 'As if they had been living friends': *Sir Charles Grandison* into *Mansfield Park*," *Bulletin of Research in the Humanities*, 83, No. 3 (Autumn 1980), 368.

¹⁸Wendy Craik, *Jane Austen in Her Time* (London: Nelson, 1969), p. 89.

¹⁹Fleishman, p. 21.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. with an introduction by Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), III, 53.

CHAPTER VII

PARADOXICAL CONCLUSIONS

The unusual emphasis on the patriarchy in *Mansfield Park* is linked to the novel's parody of Samuel Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*. Parody exists in Austen's other novels, but it is, in Mary Lascelles's words, parody that appeals "to an awareness of the world of illusion, rather than to an acquaintance with this or that novel, or school of novel-writing".¹ Only in *Mansfield Park* are one novel's themes and style both imitated and exploited. Unlike "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man", however, *Mansfield Park* does not parody Richardson's novel for the fun of pointing out its inconsistencies and incongruities; the parody is harnessed to a critical re-examination of Richardson's view of how women may prosper in a society that is hostile to them.

Mansfield Park has been called an unironic, and even an anti-ironic novel which seems to prove, as Lionel Trilling has observed, "that there are no two ways about anything".² In Austen's other novels, irony is celebrated and essential. The heroines share with the narrator an ironic perspective on life, and irony conditions the novels' plots. The heroines' careers usually turn on paired ironies, the first humiliating or disappointing, the second joyous and liberating. Thus, Emma's notion of the romance between Mr. Elton

and Harriet results in her embarrassing realization that she is the object of Mr. Elton's affections, but her equally mistaken belief that Mr. Knightley loves Harriet brings her the knowledge that she, not Harriet, is the woman he adores. Similarly, Elinor Dashwood must suffer through all the ironies of being her rival's confidante, only to win Edward when his brother is ensnared by the woman from whom he has intended to free Edward. In the other novels, irony is linked to activity and progression: it presents a false or contradictory situation, but the wise may infer from it the true and certain grounds on which to act. An ironic world is surprising, but not impenetrable, and it ultimately yields to the management of an intelligent woman.

In contrast, *Mansfield Park*, like the works of Samuel Richardson, concentrates on paradox rather than irony. In all of his novels, Richardson situates his heroines in paradoxical dilemmas which make it impossible for them to act. Clarissa, the exemplary young woman, the dutiful daughter, and the devout Christian is, as a result of these conditions, unable to do anything when her father insists on her marrying an unwelcome suitor. Open defiance, in the form of claiming her rights to her grandfather's property, violates her duties as a daughter and as a member of an hierarchical society, and yet compliance contradicts her Christian principles. She can only passively resist her family's demands until Lovelace forces another paradox upon her by engineering her escape into another prison. Paradoxes govern Clarissa's history to its conclusion be-

cause her femininity cannot be reconciled with her personal moral code; she dies, therefore, as both a ruined woman and the purest member of her society. Similarly, Harriet Byron is immobilized by the paradoxes of her femininity, which dictate that she must want to marry and yet fear men, just as she must develop her individuality without contravening any of the rules that govern women's behaviour. She must simultaneously yearn for Sir Charles and love her rival, and this situation symbolizes the contradictory roles women assume in a patriarchy. Charlotte is praised for her spirit and pressured into restraining it, and Clementina is free neither to marry against her religious beliefs, nor to pursue them to their logical end. Yet *Sir Charles Grandison* is a comedy, unlike *Clarissa*, and so these paradoxes are smoothed over, though not resolved, through the intervention of the hero and the contrivances of Richardson. Sir Charles reconciles everyone to the the paradoxes of life by his goodness; if few people get what they want, they all learn to like what they have after Sir Charles explains why it is to their advantage. Their problems are not resolved by his actions, but they are, suddenly, irrelevant.

The paradoxes of Richardson's novels resemble those found in the conduct books. In the conduct books, contradictory advice is found on almost every page: it is a woman's own fault if she marries an unprincipled man, but it is also true that it is all but impossible to find out if a man has, or only appears to have, a good character; she should be guided by her parents in choosing a husband, but is

warned that their judgment may be perverted in this situation as in no other; once married, she should mirror her husband's tastes and sentiments without, however, losing her individuality. In Richardson's novels and in the conduct books, the possibility of a woman acting with any certainty is forestalled by conflicting considerations that are both true. The result is a frustrating circularity of thought and action: choices that appear to be available are absorbed into the circles, and Richardson's heroines have no choice but to stand motionless within them. Passivity is their only option, since possible actions are quickly revealed to be impossible. Progress, for good or ill, results from the actions of men; women remain essentially motionless, escaping only to be imprisoned again, until they are finally released by the intervention of a higher power.

In *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen takes over the manner and the material of *Sir Charles Grandison* to create a novel that is partly a parody and partly a critique of Richardson's work. In her other novels, she downplays the paradoxes of women's lives by omitting or shading the conditions that produce them. Men's concerns, men's power, and restrictive definitions of femininity are all muted, and the characteristic irony of the works implies that ingenuity can explicate and, to some extent, control the perversities of life. In *Mansfield Park*, however, this characteristic irony is replaced by an emphasis on the paradoxes of Fanny's situation, just as the relatively benign societies of the other novels are replaced by a patriarchal system. *Mansfield Park* is Austen's answer to *Sir Char-*

les Grandison, and in it she shows that the greatest evil that befalls a woman in patriarchal society is that society's contradictory view of her femininity; in the conclusion of the novel, Austen mocks a resolution that resolves nothing at all.

Stasis and circularity are emphasized throughout *Mansfield Park*. In the first chapter, the history of thirty years is recounted in a way that affirms the inevitable consequences of youthful choices. The stories of the Ward sisters suggest that there are, indeed, no two ways about anything. There are no ironic surprises as there are in the opening chapters of the other novels, where the Henry Dashwoods' relationship to their aged uncle is carefully described, only to be made irrelevant by the disclosures of the old man's will, or where the history of the Elliot family is detailed so that it may be deflated by the appearance of the present Sir Walter. In these novels and the others, life is presented as an ironic joke: great families produce ignoble heirs; the antics of a three-year old child are rewarded while the devotion of worthy women is ignored; and a single, wealthy man is presumed to be looking for a wife by the parents of unmarried daughters. In *Mansfield Park*, however, the woman who makes an astonishingly great match remains astonishingly well-married, while her less fortunate sisters are, respectively, disappointed and desperate. Time brings no real changes and few surprises. Family quarrels are "the natural result" of circumstances and the people involved,³ and they are made up by equally natural and inevitable means. A cycle begun thirty years before by the impru-

dent marriage of Frances Ward is completed when her daughter, Fanny, is taken in by the family she disobliged. Fanny becomes one of three related girls who will marry in their turn, and the cycle begins anew.

The first chapter of *Mansfield Park* also introduces the paradoxes that govern Mansfield. The exchanges between Mrs. Norris and Sir Thomas show a woman who simultaneously depends on and subverts male authority, and a powerful and thoughtful man who allows himself to be manipulated by a selfish woman. Women who display their submissiveness in order to achieve their own ends, and men who are satisfied with the appearance of deference are two of the basic paradoxes of the patriarchy as it is drawn in *Mansfield Park*. Many more follow: Mansfield is both the model of harmony and a moral chaos; Sir Thomas's authority is both unquestionably obeyed and consistently flouted; Mansfield is both a self-sufficient monument to the best of English tradition, and a financially unstable institution that is dependent on the income derived from holdings of foreign land and slaves.

The paradoxes are, perhaps, most obvious in relation to the heroine, Fanny Price. Painfully inculcated with her insignificance as a woman in her Portsmouth home, at Mansfield she learns that she is further diminished by her inferior social status. Kept constantly busy performing errands and chores for the others, she is as constantly reproached for being idle and a burden on the Mansfield family. She is taught "that she is not a *Miss Bertram* " (11) and re-

proved for lacking her cousins' accomplishments and confidence; she is, finally, Edmund's "perfect model of a woman," but he and the other male characters recognize her worth reluctantly. Her life is one long series of paradoxes. As appalled as she is by Henry's proposal, she is nevertheless obligated to him for arranging her brother's promotion. She cannot defend her refusal of Henry to Sir Thomas without betraying her cousins and the deference and loyalty she, as an inferior, owes them; nor can she explain by owing to her love for Edmund, since that, too, would show her presumption as well as her unfeminine forwardness. She must listen silently and unwillingly to Edmund's rhapsodies over Mary because Edmund, despite his claims to the contrary, does not really value her opinion. He comes to her, the woman whose mind he has formed (64), to validate his own conclusions by hearing her echo them, and he hears that confirmation whether she agrees with him or not. She dares not alienate her only friend at Mansfield by vigorously contradicting him, and so must encourage, against her will, the romance that means the death of all her hopes. Even her moral triumph after the defections of Maria and Henry, Julia, and Mary is paradoxical for it is both unrecognized and undeclarable. No one congratulates her for her foresight and perceptiveness, since even Edmund believes that her opposition to marrying Henry springs from her maidenly fears and innocence, and she has communicated her suspicions of the others rarely, and in the vaguest terms. To declare her judgments after the fact would be indelicate at the best of times, but to do so amidst

the general gloom of Mansfield would be improper and unkind. Fanny is reduced to the paradoxical state of being sorry for the distress of the others, "but it was with a sorrow so founded on satisfaction, so tending to ease, and so much in harmony with every dearest sensation, that there are few who might not have been glad to exchange their greatest gaiety for it" (461).

The paradoxes of Fanny's life do not yield to an ironic perspective, for in a patriarchy irony is worse than useless. It is actually dangerous, for it gives its user the illusion that he or she is in control of a situation and can act as an independent agent. Mary and Henry Crawford, the only habitually ironic characters in *Mansfield Park*, are victims of their ironic viewpoints. Mary is well aware of the paradoxes that frustrate women like her aunt, her married friends, and Fanny, and yet she believes that she can escape them if she is wary and witty. Her playful inversions and epigrams should, she thinks, bring Edmund around to accepting her opinions and desires; he will see that his principles can accommodate her beliefs, just as his income, in combination with her dowry, can provide them with the things they both want. Edmund, of course, understands nothing of the sort. Mary succeeds in convincing him only that she may make a good clergyman's wife if the bad influences that encourage her unseemly levity are banished. Ironic wit is Mary's weapon against the world, and she fails to notice that her ironic jabs at Edmund's beliefs are deflected by serious responses. Her society is not flexible, and she is not independent of it; she is part of a rigid

system, and her attempts to loosen it up rebound on herself. Like Charlotte Grandison, she has “a lively mind” (64) which she uses to increase her own autonomy and freedom, but unlike Charlotte, she does not learn to curb her wit before it destroys her happiness. She is deluded into thinking that she can control her own life, and discovers that women control nothing. Her ironic wit and the feeling of mastery it gives her blind her to the fact that she is trapped in a society that believes, along with Sir Thomas, that “wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit . . . [is] in young women . . . offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence” (318).

Henry, too, is undone by his ironic perspective on life. In a conversation with his sisters, he plays with the prospect of flirting with Maria:

Miss Bertram is certainly the handsomest, and I have found her the most agreeable, but I shall always like Julia best, because you order me An engaged woman is always more agreeable than a disengaged. She is satisfied with herself. Her cares are over, and she feels that she may exert all her powers of pleasing without suspicion. All is safe with a lady engaged; no harm can be done. (45)

Henry, of course, is indicating that he will flirt with Maria because he likes her best; she is particularly attractive to him because her engagement to another man saves him from being put into a situation where he might have to propose to her. Henry uses irony to defend himself from the consequences of his actions, but he discovers that irony is not a shield. As a man, he may aspire to the mastery and

independence that are denied a woman, but Crawford exceeds his limits when he fancies himself both invulnerable and omnipotent. Irony is like a drug to Henry; it begins as his servant, but ends as his master. To win Fanny, he must abandon the ironic mode, but the habit is too strong. There is not enough “exultation” in conquering the affections of Fanny, and so he assures himself that a married woman, no less than an engaged woman, may be safely seduced, and ends up ensnared by his ironic assumptions (467-468). He is entangled with Maria “without the smallest inconstancy of mind towards her cousin”, and “he went off with her at last, because he could not help it, regretting Fanny, even at the moment” (468). Henry becomes an automaton who pursues two mutually exclusive goals simply because he believes he can have them both. If Mary puts herself above the rules that govern femininity, Henry imagines that he is above natural laws; irony leads them both to think that they are exceptional. They learn, too late, that they are not.

The condemnation of the witty and ironic Crawfords does not indicate that Jane Austen is turning on her characteristic mode of expression, as some critics have suggested.⁴ Rather, it indicates the nature of the relationship between *Mansfield Park* and *Sir Charles Grandison*. In *Sir Charles Grandison*, as in all of Richardson’s novels, the witty and the ironic are viewed suspiciously as the disturbers of the carefully balanced hierarchy of patriarchal society. If Charlotte is allowed to mock her husband and usurp his prerogative, there can be neither happiness nor order. She must be subdued, as

must all those who suspect that the truth of human relationships is the inverse of the received wisdom about them. What Jane Austen does in *Mansfield Park* is somewhat different: she shows that Henry and Mary are threats to the established order, but fails to convince the reader that society is much better than they are, or dramatically improved by their suppression. The Crawfords are victims as much as they are villains, and irony is not so much evil as useless, and dangerous to its user. This equivocal position is found throughout *Mansfield Park* because Jane Austen is not an admirer of the patriarchal society. In parodying *Sir Charles Grandison*, she chooses the same subject as Richardson, and reaches the same conclusions, but carefully emphasizes the discrepancies that Richardson tries to explain away. The “discordant subject”⁵ of her parody is the patriarchy as it appears to a woman, and she contends that it is, even at its best, seriously flawed. It is, above all, hostile to women; for a perfect model of a woman to succeed in it requires the greatest collusion of luck and circumstance that can be imagined by an author.

Mansfield Park is a skewed celebration of the patriarchal system. It reinforces the values of patriarchal society, but not before it exposes its weaknesses. Most importantly, perhaps, Jane Austen insists in *Mansfield Park* that Richardson’s vision of dominant yet sensitive men and submissive but contented women is impossible. Harriet Byron, simultaneously vivacious and humble, individualistic and decorous, as she is in the beginning of *Sir Charles*

Grandison, is transmuted into the spiritless and punctilious Fanny Price because a woman has little chance of becoming a perfect combination of spirit and active principle. Fanny is the proper heroine of a novel about patriarchal society because she reflects the misogyny that underlies its idealization of women; Fanny has absorbed all the lessons her society has to teach about being a woman. Fanny does not dwindle into a meek and colourless heroine, as Harriet Byron does after her abduction. Rather, she begins that way, having already learned that she is neither free nor secure in her world.

Similarly, in her portraits of male characters Austen refutes the notion that a Sir Charles is possible, or even desirable. Sir Thomas and Edmund together incorporate aspects of Sir Charles, Sir Thomas being the tireless master of Mansfield and the judicious manager of people's lives, and Edmund the sympathetic friend and reformer. Yet neither succeeds in his role and their flaws are those of Sir Charles: arrogance, insensitivity, dogmatism, and the callousness that accompanies great power. Virtuous they are, but virtue is not enough to transform Mansfield into a paradise. Significantly, Edmund's and Sir Thomas's greatest failures occur in their relationships with women, the area in which Sir Charles excels. Like Sir Charles, they handle women with a mixture of firmness and cajolery, but with far different results. Sir Charles forces Charlotte to marry and eventually respect Lord G., and reaps her gratitude for his endeavours on her behalf. When Sir Thomas, however, attempts to discover Maria's feelings for Mr. Rushworth, the episode is a de-

pressing example of deceit and complacency. Although he offers “with solemn kindness” to release Maria from her engagement, he is all too easily satisfied by her assurances that she wishes to continue it (200). “It was an alliance which he could not have relinquished without pain” and he is “very happy to think anything of his daughter’s disposition that was most favourable for the purpose” (201). Sir Thomas’s attempt to understand his daughter’s feelings is sincere but cursory, and he is satisfied to accept her statement over his certain knowledge that “her behaviour to Mr. Rushworth was careless and cold. She could not, did not like him” (200). Sir Thomas follows the ritual of deferring to a woman’s feelings in the matter of her marriage, as does Sir Charles, but neither of them is concerned with much more than the proper form. The concern shown over a woman’s happiness in *Mansfield Park* and *Sir Charles Grandison* is superficial; for the master, it is more important for his marriageable daughter or sister to accept the arrangements that have been made for her, than for her to be genuinely happy about them.

Edmund displays the insensitivity of men towards women’s feelings even more obviously than Sir Thomas, since he is the confidant of Fanny and the only inhabitant of Mansfield who can claim to understand her. While he is capable of real kindness, he is also consistently unable to respond to her in ways that are true to her feelings and situation. Edmund sees himself as Fanny’s mentor, and his conversations with her stress the moral and the educative; he sees

her, meanwhile, as a pleasing reflection of his teachings and always hears himself in her opinions. He is, therefore, quite unable to distinguish between the morbid terrors of a little girl and the genuine concerns of a young woman. When Fanny is threatened with a move to Mrs. Norris's house, he discounts it as "a nominal change" (27), and blandly assures his cousin that Mrs. Norris will treat her kindly (26). Living with Mrs. Norris is equated with learning to ride the old grey pony, despite the real horror of Mrs. Norris; he does not acknowledge that Fanny's fear of her monstrous aunt is more than a childish freak. When Edmund falls in love with Mary, his insensitivity to Fanny increases. It becomes more apparent that his talks with Fanny have little reference to her; not only does he misinterpret her discomfort as delicacy or sympathy, but he hears in her silences and awkward words the most perfect approbation of everything he says. "You can bear me witness, Fanny, that I have never been blinded" (270), he exclaims, and never understands that she witnesses nothing but his self-deception.

The gap between Edmund's perception of Fanny and her actual situation is most obvious after she has refused Henry Crawford. In her conversation with Edmund about Henry's proposal, Fanny is as forthright as she can be, and Edmund's obtuseness cannot be put down to her evasiveness. She tells him that she and Crawford are too dissimilar to be happy together, that she believes him to be unprincipled, and that no man, however agreeable, will be acceptable to every woman. These logical, strongly worded objections are dis-

missed or twisted by Edmund to suit his perception of her as a timid, fearful, creature of habit. She and Henry are not dissimilar, to begin with; even if their tempers are different, that is an advantage in a marriage. If Henry flirted with Maria and Julia, he is no worse than any of those involved in the play. Besides, his love for Fanny wipes out any past errors, and she will help him think correctly in the future. Finally, Fanny's passionate declaration that a woman cannot love a man just because he loves her merely confirms Edmund's belief that it is "the novelty of Crawford's addresses" that is against him (354). Edmund manipulates Fanny's statements because he does not take her seriously. As far as he is concerned, her doubts are, as always, phantasms. He goes so far as to lament that he had not known of Henry's intentions before he declared them:

Between us, we should have won you. My theoretical and his practical knowledge together, could not have failed. He should have worked upon my plans. (348)

Although Edmund is convinced that he is motivated by his wish to make Fanny happy, he is only interested in persuading her to adopt his idea of what will make her happy. His dear cousin is a woman, after all, and women need to be shown where their happiness lies.

This conversation about marriage is one of many in *Mansfield Park*. Following the lead of *Sir Charles Grandison*, Austen recreates its debates on marriage in *Mansfield Park*. She includes much discussion of femininity in this novel, and she also picks up Richardson's theme of education. Debates about marriage and femininity are rare in Austen's other novels, and usually ironic, but in

Mansfield Park they are pervasive, serious, and reminiscent of the conduct books and *Sir Charles Grandison*. It is affirmed repeatedly, for example, that a woman has little chance of marrying for love; Sir Thomas and Edmund are echoing the conduct books when they declare that a woman's esteem for the man she marries will turn to love if he loves her. Mary's belief that nothing is "a security for matrimonial comfort" (361) is drawn from her worldly experience and is, apparently, refuted by the union of Fanny and Edmund. The definitions of femininity are as conventional as the views of marriage. Sweetness, warmth, good principles, and modesty, untinctured by any hint of "independence of spirit" (318), create the ideal woman for Edmund, Sir Thomas, and Henry. The conclusion of *Mansfield Park* upholds all of these conclusions about women and marriage: sweet, warm, upright, and modest Fanny is the perfect daughter and wife, and if she, as the heroine, marries the man she loves, she is properly "timid, anxious, [and] doubting" before Edmund's ardor, and decorously refrains from revealing her love for him until "a later period" (471).

Austen, however, does not simply affirm these opinions about women and marriage. The feminine ideals men admire are one thing, but men's behaviour is another. In *Sir Charles Grandison*, the hero practices what he preaches. Sir Charles admires women who possess the qualities he thinks they should have, but the male characters of *Mansfield Park* constantly confuse attractiveness with virtue, and assertiveness with vice. Mary's beauty convinces Edmund

that she is the essence of femininity, and Sir Thomas and Henry begin to appreciate Fanny's character when her complexion and figure improve. Fanny rises in Sir Thomas's esteem until she turns down Henry's proposal. Then, she suddenly reveals herself to be wilful, perverse, and odiously independent, as well as selfish, ungrateful, disrespectful, and undutiful (319). Edmund is also shocked when she insists that she will never accept Henry: "Never, Fanny, so very determined and positive! This is not like yourself, your rational self!" (347) A woman's virtue is really determined by her beauty and compliance: if she has the first, she must be flagrantly defiant before she is condemned. Maria, Julia, and Mary, despite their many transgressions, are doomed only when they flaunt their independence. If Fanny is the ideal woman by the end of the novel, it is by default; it matters less that she really possesses the feminine virtues than that the rebelliousness of the other women makes hers insignificant.

The opinions about marriage are also undermined. It is clear that no one in the novel knows how to establish the mutual understanding that should precede a happy marriage for they are all, in different ways, committed to deceit and rationalization. Mary believes that courtship is a time when each person tries to fool the other, and is shown to hold false views, but Edmund, too, thinks that it is all right for a woman to be coerced and manipulated into marriage. Sir Thomas will overlook the absence of mutual esteem in a marriage if the match is prestigious enough. The complex issues

involving marriage that are dissected in *Sir Charles Grandison* are present in *Mansfield Park* : the characters discuss the importance of love in marriage, whether a similarity of taste and temper between husband and wife is desirable or necessary, and the relative significance of wealth and status. There are debates about the problem of religious differences, and the rights of parents to choose, and daughters to veto, husbands for their daughters. The courtship and marriage of Fanny and Edmund seems to resolve these questions, but it is a curiously unauthoritative resolution.

The entire courtship of Fanny and Edmund is relegated to little more than a page in the final chapter of the novel. The final chapter of *Mansfield Park*, like the narrative conclusions of Austen's other novels, shows the author's "marked self-consciousness, her deliberate emphasis on the artifices and transparent inevitability of her 'happy' endings."⁶ Lloyd W. Brown goes on to argue that this self-consciousness results from the author's need to combine comedy and morality in her conclusions; since the matter of the novel, including the morality, is effectively completed with the achievement of an understanding between the hero and heroine, Austen can use the final chapter to impress upon the reader the superiority of her fiction.⁷ Thus, the narrative conclusions of Jane Austen's novels are parodic, overturning conventional moral judgments, and mixing hyperbole and mundane details into the descriptions of the heroines' marriages. Again, however, *Mansfield Park* is different from the other novels because it is parodying a specific

work, and its uniqueness is particularly evident in the way it handles Fanny's romance.

Not only the marriage, but the entire courtship of Fanny and Edmund is parodied. The story of their courtship is told from Edmund's point of view, and it is clear that he talks himself into loving Fanny as surely as he did with Mary. While still in the grip of his infatuation with his first love, he notices that there is "an object" that can fill his "vacant affections" (470). That object, of course, is Fanny, and he realizes that she is as desirable as Mary. She is, in fact, more desirable than Mary, because she is less of a challenge:

Loving, guiding, protecting her as he had been doing ever since her being ten years old, her mind in so great a degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness, (470)

he sees that she will make a perfect wife. There will be no need to change her to suit him, for she is already his shadow, totally dependent on him and convinced of his superiority. The only thing she lacks is Mary's sexual charms, but he finds that "being always with her, and always talking confidentially, and his feelings exactly in that favourable state which a recent disappointment gives," he can quickly "learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones" (470). It is entirely appropriate that Fanny's response to Edmund's growing passion is hidden, for it is irrelevant. Fanny is a passive participant in a romance which does not really belong to her; Edmund acts upon her and creates their love story on his own.

The falseness of this happy ending is emphasized by the interjections of the narrator who refuses to date the time it took for Edmund to cure “unconquerable passions” and transfer “unchanging attachments” (470). It happens “exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier” (470). It is as natural for Edmund to love again so soon, as it is for Sir Charles; the narrator’s tone and diction suggest that there is nothing romantic about the hero’s substitution of one woman for another, however “natural” it may be.

The marriage of Edmund and Fanny scarcely seems to be ideal, based as it is upon Edmund’s continuing lack of self-knowledge and Fanny’s continuing passivity. The debates about marriage appear to be resolved: it is good to choose a wife who shares your tastes and temper; love is important, but so is esteem; mercenary values are discredited, but the approval of family is desirable. The love story of Edmund and Fanny establishes a marriage of inequality, and indicates that a happy marriage comes to she who waits, just as *Sir Charles Grandison’s* tale of Sir Charles and Harriet does, but it does so without conviction. This romance is tacked on to the novel, and it does not convince.

Austen also takes over from *Sir Charles Grandison* the theme of education. Much is made of the faulty education received by the Bertram girls, and Mary Crawford’s wickedness is ascribed to her faulty training, while Fanny, presumably, shows the effect of a good education. Yet this theme is distorted in *Mansfield Park*, for

Fanny is preserved not by her formal schooling or Edmund's lessons, but by her peculiar situation as an isolated, insignificant girl. If Fanny follows an "active principle" (468) while her cousins do not, it is because she is lonely and frightened enough to absorb the consolations of religion. She alone understands the importance of duty because she is constantly reminded of her duty to everyone, and for similar reasons she comprehends the concepts of gratitude, obedience, and humility. Maria, Julia, and Mary could have received educations that stressed the virtues, just as they could have learned fewer accomplishments and more self-discipline, but moral training would not have made much difference. As long as they were nurtured by dissatisfied women and raised to be women of consequence, something would always be "wanting *within* " (463). Mrs. Norris's indulgence and Sir Thomas's severity worked together to produce an evil environment for Maria and Julia, but Sir Thomas will always be strict and Mrs. Norris will only be replaced by another unhappy woman. Sir Thomas's realization of his mistakes with his daughters results in his curious decision to give the erring Maria "every encouragement to do right" (465), by sending her away with Mrs. Norris. He does not seem to recognize that this combination of his severity and the influence of Mrs. Norris will not help Maria "to do right". Sir Thomas's conclusions about education are just, but mean little when the society in which he lives continues to produce unwillingly submissive women and arbitrarily powerful men. Environment is more responsible than education for the fates of Maria,

Julia, Mary, and Fanny. The sense of being unimportant, the habit of depending on the guidance of Edmund, and the necessity of submitting to the wills of others give Fanny her good principles; the others lack them because they are wealthy and prominent girls who have been nurtured by women and trained to subvert male authority.

The paradoxes that restrict women to passivity or fruitless rebellion influence every aspect of *Mansfield Park*. Themes are developed and concluded, the action resolved, and characters are sorted and judged, but doubts and contradictions arise on every side. If the novel affirms traditional values and conventional femininity, why does it emphasize the flaws of both? Conversely, if it condemns these things, why do both Fanny and Mansfield, unreformed, triumph? *Mansfield Park* is written in a spirit of contradiction: it imitates and criticizes *Sir Charles Grandison*. As a result, its conclusions may not be taken literally or even ironically. Fanny and Edmund's marriage is neither the symbol of perfect love nor a satire of conduct book romance, but both: it is the best kind of sexual relationship that can be formed in a patriarchy and a rather pathetic union which is based on a man's desire to marry and a woman's passive inequality. Similarly, Sir Thomas's recognition of his errors is praiseworthy, even if it is not followed by any significant change in his behaviour. He remains what he has always been, a worthy patriarch, and if he can admit that he, the master of Mansfield who is always right, has been wrong, it is not to be expected that this new self-knowledge will significantly alter his approach to his duties.

The promise that a new cycle is beginning when Fanny arrives at Mansfield is fulfilled; she has the good luck to make a match she is "at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to"; her cousin Julia elopes with a friend of her brother's and forms a marriage which turns out to be "not contemptible"; and Maria chooses "to disoblige her family" and does it so thoroughly that she, like her Aunt Frances before her, is cut off from her family (3). Changes occur at Mansfield, but everything remains more or less the same, and the characters are reduced to some form of immobility. Mary Crawford is again living with her sister and still looking for a husband, but her hunt is frustrating because she can neither relinquish her worldly ideas nor overcome her affection and respect for Edmund and his ideals. Henry, though he too continues his fashionable life, is left to the torments of self-reproach and wretchedness that preclude any hope of future comfort. Maria and Mrs. Norris are trapped in a perpetual hell of "mutual punishment" (465), Julia, who longed to escape the restraints of Mansfield, is restricted by the authority of her husband who is, in turn, guided by Sir Thomas, and Tom settles down as his father's aide. A new "stationary niece" (472) is supplied for Lady Bertram, just as a new daughter is found for Sir Thomas, and new Price children are assisted on in the world, repaying Sir Thomas's benevolence to them, and leading him to ponder "the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure" (473). Fanny and Edmund hurry back to Mansfield as soon as possible, partly because

they need the extra income, and partly because they “feel their distance from the parental abode an inconvenience” (473). Their marriage is a continuation of their former relationship, and Fanny is as necessary to Sir Thomas’s comfort as she had been to her aunt’s. Finally, Mansfield parsonage becomes “as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else, within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park, had long been” (473).

The changes at Mansfield appear especially superficial in relation to the conclusions of the other novels which invariably signal that significant changes will occur. All of the heroines except Fanny Price form establishments with their husbands which avoid the errors of the old order and, to some extent, correct them. Elizabeth and Darcy’s Pemberley is the best example. There, the Wickhams of the world are shut out, while Kitty is taught to be more sensible and Georgiana, less inhibited. In every novel except *Mansfield Park*, some reformation or redress is affected through the marriage of the hero and heroine. Mrs. Smith is helped and Lady Russell takes up “a new set of opinions and hopes” (249) in *Persuasion*, while Elinor and Edward’s home at Delaford becomes the setting for Marianne’s “extraordinary fate” (378) and the amelioration of Colonel Brandon’s sorrows. In *Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*, the faulty heroines benefit the most from their marriages. Most of the follies of Highbury have flowed from Emma herself, and so Knightley’s presence at Hartfield promises that snobbery, unkindness, and meddlesomeness will be curbed, if not obliterated. Simi-

larly, Henry Tilney will complete Catherine's education, and help her avoid the errors that have resulted from her ignorance and inexperience. In contrast, little emerges from the union of the hero and heroine of *Mansfield Park* except the happiness and security of Fanny. Their marriage is absorbed back into Mansfield, and they retain their secondary positions; they remain in the parsonage and Tom will succeed his father as the master of the estate. Unlike Emma and Catherine, Fanny will not change under the influence of her husband. Emma and Catherine are loved despite their weaknesses, but Edmund loves Fanny for her weaknesses, for the helplessness and dependency that require his guidance and protection and will be fostered by him. If, as it seems, Edmund takes over the Mansfield living without relinquishing Thornton Lacey, it is clear that a gap between ideals and practice still exists at Mansfield, despite the apparent purge it has undergone. Mansfield may be no worse, but it is certainly no better. It, and everyone connected with it, are only as "thoroughly perfect" as they have ever been.

The other novels do not impose immobility on their characters as *Mansfield Park* does. The good and the intelligent are not always adequately compensated: Mrs. Smith of *Persuasion* enjoys the friendship of the Wentworths and more money, but her health remains poor; Jane Fairfax deserves a better husband than Frank Churchill; and Charlotte Lucas is punished for her unromantic view of marriage. On the other hand, the foolish and the degenerate often do quite well for themselves. Mr. Collins and Harriet Smith wind up

with excellent mates, and Wickham, Willoughby, and Lucy Steele, seducers and manipulators all, enjoy the money they acquire and a fair degree of happiness as well. In *Mansfield Park*, however, the sinful are banished from Mansfield and wracked with regret, while the virtuous are rewarded with a home on the estate and a future of unparalleled happiness; those in between these extremes suffer for their errors but regain their peace. This careful systematization of reward and punishment is very characteristic of Richardson's fiction, as is its inevitability. Also reminiscent of Richardson's novels is the sensation that the action and the characters have come full circle, to end pretty much as they began. "A Letter to a Lady", appended to *Sir Charles Grandison*, disposes of the characters according to their worth: "Miss ORME is a good girl, and must be happy", while "Lady BETTY WILLIAMS" is "deservedly unhappy".⁸ Sir Charles is as good a husband as he is a friend, son, and brother, and Sir Hargrave's dying gesture of regard for Harriet is as cruel as his abduction of her (462); births, deaths, and marriages notwithstanding, the characters are essentially unchanged.

In most of Jane Austen's novels, the heroine's marriage is a breakthrough into a new and better life, and almost all of the characters improve their situations; they are better off, if not better, than they were in the beginning of the novel. In *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte has the home and family she wanted while her husband has an excellent wife. Lydia is married as well as she could hope to be, and Wickham has secured an income and, unbelievably, the assis-

tance of Darcy in his career. Mr. Bennet has a refuge from the inanities of his wife, and she knows the bliss of having three handsome sons-in-law. It is much the same in the other novels. Willoughby may regret Marianne, but he too has the money he needs, and his marriage has some bright spots, while Lucy Steele enjoys her wealth as well as the approbation of Mrs. Ferrars. Marriage to Frank Churchill may have its trials for Jane Fairfax, but it is better than being a poor spinster, and Mrs. and Miss Bates will profit from it too. If Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot are still vain, and still exiled from Kellynch Hall, even they are improved by the departure of Mrs. Clay, and they have the consolation of their great cousins. Only in *Mansfield Park* does all the activity and discovery fail to lead anywhere. Mary, Henry, and Maria, single and high-spirited when the novel begins, are single when it ends, and they have lost much and gained nothing except bitter remorse. Mrs. Norris is deprived of love, respect, and influence, and her change of abode simply concentrates her frustrations; she is now the scourge of one instead of many, and her nastiness is repaid in kind. Julia is married, but it brings her neither the consequence nor the autonomy from Mansfield that she sought, while her mother is still lethargic and still in need of constant attention. Susan and Tom are the most improved. In Susan's case, though, the change is minimal. She trades the squalor of Portsmouth for the harmony of Mansfield, but her role is the same in both houses. Susan and Tom become useful to Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram as a surrogate Fanny and Edmund, while the happily married

cousins gain one another's love and respect which, to some extent, they have always enjoyed. Sir Thomas puts up with his wife, loves and guides his two daughters and two sons, and enjoys running his estate without the help of Mrs. Norris. There is no breakthrough here, nothing new and different; adjustments have been made, but things are pretty much as they were.

If most of Jane Austen's novels suggest analogies with dances in which the opening and closing figures display different pairings and patterns,⁹ *Mansfield Park* does not. The dancers are interrupted in their movements and are eventually locked into positions that are almost identical to their original situations. When Austen recreates *Sir Charles Grandison* in *Mansfield Park* she is faithful to and yet critical of its values. Mansfield has the perfection of its type, but it is a relative, rather than an absolute, perfection. Even when it is in good order, as it is by the end of the novel, there are signs that it is flawed. Mansfield remains a static, circular society, limited by the paradoxes that define it and by its own rigidity. If there is comparatively little of Austen's characteristic irony in *Mansfield Park* — the irony shared by the narrator and the heroine, the ironies that shape the plot — it is because in this novel the flexibility of mind denoted by irony has no value. The irony and satire of Jane Austen's letters to Cassandra express the writer's freedom from "the true art of letter-writing" and all that implies of decorum, propriety, sincerity, and other feminine virtues. The irony and satire of the letters also suggest that the writer is unconcerned

with truth: facts are turned upon their heads and exploited for their comic potential. As it is in the letters to Cassandra, so it is in all of the novels except *Mansfield Park*. The irony of the novels succeeds and is valuable because the realities of being a woman in a patriarchal society are ignored or subverted. Flexibility and humour are not bent back on their possessors by the rigidity of the world in which they live. Rather, irony opens up the world and makes it a place of opportunity for the witty and intelligent; it denotes the nimbleness and alertness that make a good dancer.

In contrast, *Mansfield Park* displays the seriousness of Samuel Richardson or of Jane Austen when she is writing to her niece Fanny about Fanny's relationship with Mr. J. Plumtre. Writing to Fanny about her momentous decision, Austen avoids irony and discusses the matter sincerely and with full attention to the proprieties. There is no room in these letters for humour or flexibility because there are only two alternatives, and the choice of either has serious consequences. Using irony in this situation entails the terrible risk of being misunderstood, or of implying that the question can be taken lightly. Similarly, in *Mansfield Park*, seriousness and literalness are the appropriate responses to a world in which every decision is momentous and far-reaching. Following Richardson's lead, Austen eschews several of her habits in writing *Mansfield Park*, habits which, in her other novels, signal that she is depicting the possible rather than the true and the real.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen avoids caustic summaries of

characters like Miss Bates or Sir John and Lady Middleton, preferring a more discreet approach. The witty generalizations and inversions that stud the descriptions of the Middletons, Miss Bates, Sir Walter Elliot, Mr. Collins and many others are not present in *Mansfield Park*. The monstrous Mrs. Norris and the buffoonish Mr. Rushworth are spared the comic denunciation accorded Mrs. Bennet. Mr. Rushworth is introduced simply as “a heavy young man with not more than common sense; but as there was nothing disagreeable in his figure or address, [Maria] was well pleased with her conquest” (38). More fun is had with the estimable Miss Bates than with this ridiculous example of humanity. In *Mansfield Park*, Austen, like Richardson, lets the characters define themselves with little authorial intervention, while in her other novels she rarely resists the opportunity to supplement the characters’ actions with some witty words of her own. Indeed, the descriptions of characters are seized as opportunities for satire which exploits the author’s humorous control of her material. Only in *Mansfield Park* does Austen sacrifice wit to authorial discretion, in the style of Richardson; in the other novels, she happily sacrifices discretion to wit.

Similarly, Austen avoids ironic meditations on human nature and society in *Mansfield Park*. If *Sense and Sensibility* can aver that “in every formal visit a child ought to be of the party, by way of provision for discourse” (31), and *Pride and Prejudice* that “it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (3), *Mansfield Park*

counters with: "But there certainly are not so many men of large fortune in the world, as there are pretty woman to deserve them" (3). When Mary Crawford introduces ironic maxims, furthermore, they are immediately contradicted. Even when the reference is as innocent as her contention that "the true manly style" of a brother's letter is a salutation, two banal sentences, and a signature, there is a grave reminder that Fanny's brother William is an excellent correspondent (59-60). Observations like "personal size and mental sorrow have certainly no necessary proportions" (68) provoke laughter and, sometimes, dismay in *Persuasion* and the other novels, but they are rare in *Mansfield Park*, which substitutes for them sober reflections on nature, education, and human error. Facts cannot be turned on their heads and exploited for their comic potential in *Mansfield Park* because this novel is acknowledging truths that cannot be taken lightly.

Only in the last chapter of *Mansfield Park* does Austen's characteristic irony assert itself in, most notably, the opening paragraph and the description of Fanny and Edmund's romance. Its presence in these two places is significant because it signals the abandonment of truth and discretion exactly where they should be most prominent. Instead, the prevailing sobriety is broken by the irony and by the unusual employment of direct speech, in order to signal that this conclusion is imposed on the novel by the unwilling author. Similar acknowledgments are made at the ends of all of the novels, but they are less disruptive in the other works where ironic tone and

diction are present throughout. Moreover, the disavowal of the conclusion of *Mansfield Park* is unusually cold and careless,¹⁰ while the attack on the process by which the hero and heroine come to an understanding is found in no other novel by Jane Austen. It is not unusual for the author to disclaim interest in the process by which engaged couples become married and in the moral which must be affixed to the novel. In *Persuasion*, the final chapter begins:

Who can be in doubt of what followed? When any two young people take it into their heads to marry, they are pretty sure by perseverance to carry their point, be they ever so poor, or ever so imprudent, or ever so little likely to be necessary to each other's ultimate comfort. This may be bad morality to conclude with, but I believe it to be truth. (248)

In *Mansfield Park*, however, more than the inevitable marriage is dismissed, while impatience is expressed over the necessity of ending the novel at all.

The action of the novel ends abruptly. The fates of Maria, Julia, and Henry are unknown, and Edmund is free of Mary but not yet in love with Fanny. This bears a curious resemblance to *Sir Charles Grandison* which, as Richardson admits, may seem "to conclude a little abruptly" (467). To atone for this apparent fault, Richardson appended a rather peevish "Letter to a Lady" to the last volume, in which he steps out of his disguise as an editor and briefly outlines the destinies of his characters, arguing all the while that this continuation is unnecessary. "All that can be expected in such a work [as *Sir Charles Grandison*], if its ending is proposed to afford the

most complete scene of felicity of which human life is capable, must be to leave the principal characters happy, and the rest with fair prospects of being so" (470). Jane Austen begins the final chapter of her novel with these words:

Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious topics as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest. (461)

Like Richardson, who begins his "Letter to A Lady" with the declaration that "I have no intention of pursuing further the History of Sir CHARLES GRANDISON" (467), and then goes on to do just that, Austen refuses to dwell on the "odious subjects" of guilt and misery, only to devote the next twelve pages to the suffering of everybody except Fanny. Her rejection of guilt and misery also reflects on the novel as a whole, which is devoid of innocence or joy. Furthermore, she uses language much like Richardson's to announce her pronounced dissatisfaction with the need to continue; apparently, the novel is over for her at this point, before everyone is brought to a "scene of felicity". This is significant because if the novel is complete, the romance of Fanny and Edmund is extraneous to it, a concession to fictional forms rather than the summation of its themes. If the culminating points of the other novels are reached when the hero and heroine communicate their mutual love and respect as equals, then the culmination of *Mansfield Park* occurs when Edmund tells Fanny about his final interview with Mary, while she listens, wide-eyed, to the revelations she has known about all along, and tactfully agrees

with all but his wildest conclusions. She also shades the truth a bit when she distorts Mary's joking references to how she would prefer Mr. Bertram to Mr. Edmund Bertram if Tom should die, into a "hint" that Mary's wish for a reconciliation was prompted by her hope that Edmund would become the heir of Sir Thomas (459). The rational resolution of the story of a heroine like Fanny in a patriarchy like Mansfield, then, is her return to the estate as the companion of Lady Bertram and the valued, if still misunderstood and hypocritical, friend of Edmund. Anything more than that is the result of the author's obligation to raise her heroine to the heights of human happiness.

Fanny's romance, which is undermined by the introduction to the chapter, is sunk by the ironies that embellish the description of it. The arch tone of the passage is matched by its hyperbole. Expressions like "unconquerable passions" and "unchanging attachments" (470), are followed by coy admissions of the failure of extravagant language: Edmund's "happiness in knowing himself to have been so long the beloved of such a heart must have been a delightful happiness", while no one can "presume to give the feelings" of Fanny (471). There are only so many ways of saying happy, and Austen tires of the game long before Richardson, although even he is unusually flippant in his conclusion, applauding his generosity in leaving the fate of Clementina undecided, so that his readers may have the fun of arguing over it, and declaring that the fates of several characters are irrelevant (468-469). Austen, of course, goes

further; her handling of the romance of Fanny and Edmund implies that it, too, is irrelevant and artificial.

By the end of *Mansfield Park* everything is, apparently, neatly resolved. Traditional feminine virtues are validated, as are the values of patriarchal society. The good are rewarded, and the evil are punished. More importantly, *Mansfield Park* affirms, as *Sir Charles Grandison* does, that the paradoxes that immobilize women need not make them miserable. Both novels suggest that the only sure way for a woman to be happy is to gracefully submit to the will of a good man. Happiness is not so much achieved by women as awarded to them; it is incumbent on them to derive satisfaction from their situations, however unpleasant, so that they may deserve their ultimate rewards. Yet in *Mansfield Park*, these conclusions do not resolve the questions raised by the novel. Austen ostentatiously imposes a happy ending on her story, along with some strong morals about education, self-discipline, and active principle, and makes little effort to reconcile the questions and the answers. For example, the moral of the Portsmouth episode is, apparently, to be found in the excellence of Susan, Fanny, and William, and in “the general well-doing and success of the older members of the [Price] family” which prove “the advantages of early hardship and discipline, and the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure” (473). Is Fanny’s disappointment over her family hereby revealed as an indictment of her snobbishness? If the chaos of Portsmouth produces such marvels, can the order of Mansfield be a greater good?

This facile tribute to the values of the middle class — to the values of Samuel Richardson — ignores the hopeless squalor of the Price home, and the fact that the Price children cannot succeed unless their “early hardship” is followed by their speedy liberation from it. A life of struggle, like a woman’s life, is not a blessing unless there is a fairy godparent present to raise the deserving to their just desserts. Thus, while it is true that “the consciousness of being born to struggle and endure” is an advantage in life, it is also true that unrelieved hardship leads to nothing but more hardship. The conclusion of *Mansfield Park* is just another paradox in a book that is filled with them. *Mansfield Park* is in itself a paradox. It establishes impossible, because they are contradictory, propositions, and declares them all to be true.

NOTES

¹Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 55.

²Lionel Trilling, "Mansfield Park" in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: "Sense and Sensibility", "Pride and Prejudice", and "Mansfield Park"* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), pp. 230, 217-218.

³Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, Vol. III of *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 3rd ed., 5 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 4. All subsequent references to Jane Austen's novels are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

⁴See, besides Trilling, p. 230, Kingsley Amis " 'What Became of Jane Austen?': *Mansfield Park* " in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: "Sense and Sensibility", "Pride and Prejudice", and "Mansfield Park"* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), p.242.

⁵M. H. Abrams, "Parody" in *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed., (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), p. 18.

⁶Lloyd W. Brown, *Bits of Ivory: Narrative Techniques in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), pp. 222-223.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁸Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. with an introduction by Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), III, 469. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text.

⁹Brigid Brophy, "A Remorseless Realist" in B. C. Southam, ed., *Jane Austen: "Sense and Sensibility", "Pride and Prejudice", and "Mansfield Park"* (London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1976), pp. 190-191.

¹⁰Lascelles, p. 76.

CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSION:
JANE AUSTEN'S GARDEN

The paradoxes of *Mansfield Park* are found in no other novel by Jane Austen, just as no other novel by her has a heroine like Fanny Price. *Mansfield Park* is the problem novel in Austen's canon, but the problem it poses illuminates her other works. In *Mansfield Park* Austen dwells on the conditions she omits from her other works; the novelist uneasily attempts to create romantic comedy out of facts that are neither sentimental nor cheerful. Austen forces the novel to a happy ending, as Richardson does in *Sir Charles Grandison*, but she, unlike her predecessor, is not satisfied with the contradictions that remain.

It is not a coincidence that in the novels that follow *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* and *Persuasion*, there are sensitive portraits of women who, like Fanny Price, have few options. Mrs. and Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax in *Emma*, and Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, are something new for Jane Austen. The novels that precede *Mansfield Park*, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, have a number of female characters who are forced into unpleasant situations. Yet the pathos of their lives is explained away or ignored. Women who must marry, such as Isabella Thorpe and Lucy Steele, are shown to be unnecessarily dishonest and calculating,

while Charlotte Lucas combines a desire for a family with a pragmatic point of view and makes herself quite comfortable as the wife of Mr. Collins. The widowed Mrs. Dashwood is not oppressed by her reduced circumstances, and spinsters are not pitiable. Eliza Williams, seduced and abandoned, is little more than a name, and the reader is reassured by the knowledge that Colonel Brandon will look after her. The widowed and single female characters of Austen's last two novels, however, are treated differently. Mrs. and Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, and Mrs. Smith, through no fault of their own, lead lives that are, at best, awkward and humiliating. They are not flawless, but the injustice of their situations is manifest. While both *Emma* and *Persuasion* mark a return to Austen's ironic mode, the presence in them of these characters indicates an attempt on her part to write about some of the darker realities of women's lives that she has hitherto ignored. These women do not deserve their fates, and the happy endings to which they are brought are also less than they deserve.

The heroines of Jane Austen's last two novels also reflect the author's experience of *Mansfield Park*. Both Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot are solitary in a way that the other heroines are not, cut off from their contemporaries and families by an unbridgeable gulf of competence and intelligence. One is valued too much for her abilities, the other too little, and their novels tell the stories of their rescues from their respective fates. Emma is on her way to becoming a monster, a patriarch in petticoats without the training

or judgment to exercise wisely the power she thinks she commands. Anne Elliot's fate is the more mundane one of the faded spinster who is neither loved nor appreciated despite her obvious warmth and intelligence. Unlike Catherine Morland, Elinor Dashwood, and Elizabeth Bennet, who are generally satisfied with their families and situations, Emma and Anne are troubled by their lives; they are frustrated and threatened by the increasing isolation they face. They are opposite sides of the same coin: the capable unmarried woman for whom there is no place in society. In the safe place that Austen creates for them, they win through to happiness; but hovering in the background are Mrs. and Miss Bates, Jane Fairfax, and Mrs. Smith as reminders of what happens to women without their advantages and luck.

In "Sir Charles Grandison or The Happy Man" Austen ridicules the typical heroine of Samuel Richardson, who is praised for her spirit and intelligence but shows few signs of either quality. As attractive as Jane Austen's own portraits of strong, thoughtful women are, however, their presumed realism must be reevaluated. Jane Austen did not simply transfer the women and men and society she saw every day onto her paper. Instead, she envisioned a society she did not know in order to create woman-centred comedies that excluded the fears and dangers of women's lives.

Charlotte Bronte compared an Austen novel to a neatly fenced and cared-for garden, and noted her own preference for wilder terrain.¹ The image of a garden is an apt one, and useful in

explaining the relationship between Austen and Richardson.

Richardson creates a jungle of fear for his heroines, who hardly dare to take a step; danger lurks on every side. It is exaggerated, perhaps, and artificially exotic in spots, but it is a place that women of the eighteenth century recognized and understood. Pamela, Clarissa, Harriet, and Clementina are challenged by dilemmas with which eighteenth-century women were familiar: situations in which each alternative is unacceptable because of the inherent contradictions of the feminine role. Richardson, neither a sadist nor a reactionary, wrote about women's lives with an honesty to which women of the time responded. As the authors of conduct books never tired of pointing out, and as social historians are concluding, there were good reasons for women's fears of men and marriage; Richardson was the first to take this material and shape it into art.

Jane Austen was one of the women who responded to Richardson's work with admiration and respect for the fidelity with which he rendered women's lives. Her work is a continuation of his exploration of the situation of a marriageable young woman, and she, too, understands the significance of the heroine's choice. If he heightens some of the dangers, however, and tries to wedge his heroine's happiness into a militantly patriarchal society, she chooses another way. His jungle is partially cleared and a garden created in the middle of it.

Jane Austen's garden is no less and no more real than Richardson's jungle. If he exaggerates, she understates, and her

drawing rooms with their effortless wit, elegance, and polish are as exotic as his bordellos and Italian castles. Opportunities for feminine independence and self-definition may have been present in her society, but in a very limited form. The historical evidence, including Austen's own letters, suggests that the possibilities she describes in her novels were less visible than the fears and frustrations Richardson records. Even in Jane Austen's novels, the abductions, seductions, and oppressions of women continue, but only on the periphery of the heroine's world. The safe place the Austen heroine inhabits is ringed with danger; the jungle has been pushed back, but it is still there.

NOTES

¹Mrs. Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life and Works of Charlotte Bronte and Her Sisters*, with an introduction and notes by Clement K. Shorter, 7 vols., (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1905), VII, 352.

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