

## **INFORMATION TO USERS**

**This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.**

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.**

**In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.**

**Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps.**

**Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.**

**ProQuest Information and Learning  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
800-521-0600**

**UMI<sup>®</sup>**



**Jane Austen and the Virtues**

**by Sarah Louise Baxter Emsley**

**Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**in English**

**at**

**Dalhousie University**

**Halifax, Nova Scotia**

**February 14, 2002**

**© Copyright by Sarah Louise Baxter Emsley, 2002**



**National Library  
of Canada**

**Acquisitions and  
Bibliographic Services**

**395 Wellington Street  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada**

**Bibliothèque nationale  
du Canada**

**Acquisitions et  
services bibliographiques**

**395, rue Wellington  
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4  
Canada**

*Your file Votre référence*

*Our file Notre référence*

**The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.**

**The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.**

**L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque nationale du Canada de reproduire, prêter, distribuer ou vendre des copies de cette thèse sous la forme de microfiche/film, de reproduction sur papier ou sur format électronique.**

**L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur qui protège cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.**

0-612-67659-5

**Canada**



**DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY**  
**FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES**

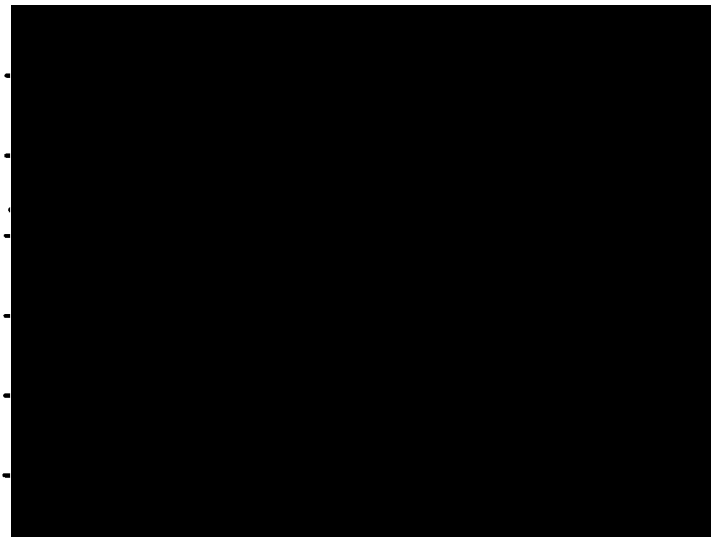
The undersigned hereby certify that they have read and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance a thesis entitled “Jane Austen and the Virtues” by Sarah Louise Baxter Emsley, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

**Dated:** March 22, 2002

**External Examiner:**

**Research Supervisor:**

**Examining Committee:**

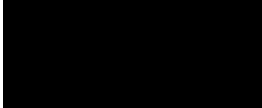


**DALHOUSIE UNIVERSITY**

**DATE:** March 22, 2002

**AUTHOR:** Sarah Louise Baxter Emsley  
**TITLE:** "Jane Austen and the Virtues"  
**DEPARTMENT:** English  
**DEGREE:** PhD  
**CONVOCATION:** Spring  
**YEAR:** 2002

Permission is herewith granted to Dalhousie University to circulate and to have copied for non-commercial purposes, at its discretion, the above title upon request of individuals or institutions.



Signature of Author

The author reserves other publication rights, and neither the thesis nor extensive extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's written permission.

The author attests that permission has been obtained for the use of any copyrighted material appearing in this thesis (other than brief excerpts requiring only proper acknowledgement in scholarly writing), and that all such use is clearly acknowledged.

**Dedication Page**

**For my parents**

## Table of Contents

Signature Page.....	ii
Copyright Agreement Form.....	iii
Dedication Page.....	iv
Abstract.....	vi
References to Jane Austen’s Works.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Introduction: “Jane Austen and the Virtues”.....	1
Chapter One: “The Virtues According to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Austen”.....	26
Chapter Two: “ <i>Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey</i> : Propriety’s Claims on Prudence”...	88
Chapter Three: “ <i>Sense and Sensibility</i> : ‘Know your own happiness’”.....	113
Chapter Four: “ <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> and the Beauty of Justice”.....	155
Chapter Five: “The Habits of ‘a well-judging young woman’ in <i>Mansfield Park</i> ”.....	192
Chapter Six: “‘To think and be miserable’: Learning the Art of Charity in <i>Emma</i> ”.....	236
Chapter Seven: “The Unity of the Virtues in <i>Persuasion</i> ”.....	261
Conclusion: “After Austen”.....	282
Bibliography.....	301

## Abstract

Recent feminist and post-structuralist criticism of Jane Austen has questioned her reputation as an ideological conservative, and has attempted to demonstrate ways in which Austen's novels subvert authority and represent a secular world of ethical relativism. The present study challenges such criticism, and seeks to establish that Austen's novels, while critical and often satirical about society, nevertheless accept and promote the importance of tradition, specifically of the classical and Christian traditions of the virtues. Through a survey in Chapter One of the tradition of the virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice, temperance, charity, hope, and faith, this thesis argues that Jane Austen's heroines ask the philosophical question "How should I live my life?" and that the answers they find are consistent with an Aristotelian and Thomist, rather than a utilitarian or Kantian, approach to ethics; that is, Austen's fiction stresses the moral education of character as preparation for ethical action. In the last several years literary theory has begun to focus on ethics, and moral philosophy has begun to turn to literature in order to illuminate what has been called "virtue ethics"; literary criticism, I believe, needs now to turn once more to ancient theories about the virtues in order to understand literature, ethics, and life, and the present study of Austen's novels is an attempt to do just that.

I argue that Austen writes from a firm foundation of Christian faith, and thus for her virtuous characters there is a point to moral education. The eponymous heroine of *Lady Susan* is her only vicious heroine, and in Chapter Two I contrast the worldly, calculating, distorted version of prudence practised in that novel, with the virtuous prudence, or practical wisdom, that Austen explores through the development of Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*. In Chapters Three and Four, on *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* respectively, I explore what happens when tensions arise between competing virtues, and suggest that the practice of balancing such tensions is an indication of how flexible Austen's conservatism is. *Sense and Sensibility* demonstrates how fortitude can help characters to "know their own happiness," while *Pride and Prejudice* focuses on the role of love in the pursuit of justice. In Chapter Four I suggest that the "regulated hatred" D.W. Harding saw in Austen's novels might be better understood as "righteous anger." Chapter Five looks at the value of habit in *Mansfield Park*, and the importance of balancing habits temperately; here I argue that Fanny Price's active habits of mind make her Austen's contemplative heroine. In Chapter Six I argue that the misery of thinking leads Emma Woodhouse to learn how to be in charity with her neighbours, and in Chapter Seven I look at strength and hope in *Persuasion*, concluding that Austen's argument for flexibility within a firm tradition of the virtues is most explicit in this novel. *Persuasion* thus offers an account of the unity and harmony of the classical and theological virtues achieved by Jane Austen. The Conclusion points to writers after Austen who take up the question of virtue, including George Eliot, Henry James, and Edith Wharton.

## References to Jane Austen's Works

References to Jane Austen's works are to the following editions:

*The Novels of Jane Austen*. 5 vols. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford UP, 1932-34.

*Jane Austen: Minor Works*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford UP, 1954.

*Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. Deirdre Le Faye. London: Oxford UP, 1995.

Abbreviations used:

<i>PP</i>	<i>Pride and Prejudice</i>
<i>SS</i>	<i>Sense and Sensibility</i>
<i>NA</i>	<i>Northanger Abbey</i>
<i>MP</i>	<i>Mansfield Park</i>
<i>E</i>	<i>Emma</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Persuasion</i>
<i>MW</i>	<i>Minor Works</i>
<i>Letters</i>	<i>Jane Austen's Letters</i>

### **Acknowledgements**

I am grateful for the opportunities available to me at Dalhousie and in Halifax generally: the support and encouragement of many people has made living and working here a pleasant experience. To borrow Jane Austen's comments about the Halifax family in "Catharine," I think that the city of Halifax is "most charming" and "I beleive [has] scarcely [its] Equal in the World." I should like to thank the faculty, students, and staff (past and present) of the Department of English, and I am particularly grateful to Caroline Sequeira, Lynn Lantz, and Gretchen Mosher for their support. Many thanks to the examiners for my comprehensive exam, Drs. Bruce Greenfield, Marjorie Stone, and Hubert Morgan; the members of my thesis committee, Drs. Judith Thompson and David McNeil; and my supervisor, Dr. Rohan Maitzen. I am especially thankful to Dr. Juliet McMaster for serving as my external examiner.

My thanks are due to the Izaak Walton Killam Trust and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for the generous financial support provided to me over the three and a half years of my programme. For welcoming me as an auditor in their classes I thank Russell Perkin (Catholicism and Literature), Dennis House (Aristotle; Ancient Philosophy), Kenneth Kierans (The Dialectic of Enlightenment), and especially Neil Robertson (The Development of Aesthetic Theory in the Early Modern Period). I am grateful to the staff of the Killam Library, particularly Ian Colford, Fran Nowakowski, Jane Archibald, Andrew Finch, and Karen Machan; the staff of the Document Delivery Department; and the staff of King's College Library. For ordering numerous Austen-related books for me, I also thank Sarah, Mike, Brett, and Nicholas at Bookmark. The Faculty of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie and the Dalhousie Association of Graduate Students provided travel grants for me to attend the AGM of the Jane Austen Society of North America (JASNA) in Colorado Springs. The Research Development Fund at Dalhousie awarded funds for a research trip to London, Oxford, and Chawton, and I should like to thank the staff of the British Library and the Bodleian Library for their assistance, as well as Honor Lewington for well-informed tours of Oxford, Chawton, and Winchester.

I am pleased to be a member of JASNA, and I owe a debt of gratitude to Joan Ray and Marcia Folsom, conference coordinators, for the opportunity to present papers on *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice* in Colorado Springs and Boston; to JASNA audiences for debate, suggestions, and encouragement; and to Laurie Kaplan for publishing an early version of a section of Chapter Four in *Persuasions* 22 (2000). All who study Jane Austen's works are indebted to her editor R.W. Chapman. I have found the work of many Austen critics, especially Anne Ruderman, David Gallop, David Fott, Susan Morgan, John Wiltshire, Marilyn Butler, Bruce Stovel, and Juliet McMaster, to be tremendously helpful. For conversation and correspondence about Jane Austen and the virtues I am thankful to Janet Bailey, Bethie Baxter, Tom Baxter, Edie Baxter, John Baxter, Lorraine Baxter, Nick Ayling, Rob Drummond, Richard Hoffpauir, David Jeffrey, Bob Martin, Steven Burns, Victor Li, Michael Prince, Peter Erb, Elizabeth Boyd, Janet Friesen, Paul Friesen, David Skelton, Mary Skelton, Sharon Hamilton, Allan Mitchell, Lyn Bennett, Markus Poetzsch, Norma Murphy, Margaret Arnold, Helen Baxter, and the late Christopher Drummond. My greatest debt is to Jason Emsley, for everything, and for on-going conversations about education, love, and justice.

## **Introduction: Jane Austen and the Virtues**

**“ . . . whatever people may say to the contrary, there is certainly nothing like virtue for making us what we ought to be. . . .”**

**—Jane Austen, “Catharine”**



When Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr. Darcy's first proposal, both characters struggle against their anger in an effort to remain civil. Does this scene represent Jane Austen's view of the need for virtue to triumph over vice, for politeness to conquer anger, or is the morality of the exchange a more complex one? When Mr. Knightley chastises Emma Woodhouse for her cruel joke at the expense of Miss Bates, yet finds his dear Emma ultimately "perfect in spite of her faults," is he exemplifying a patriarchal view of female virtue in which women are expected to be angelic and submissive in order to be treasured by men, or can his reproof be considered fair in light of Austen's emphasis on the necessity of right understanding and careful judgement? And when Anne Elliott questions Captain Wentworth's reliance on the universal value of "firmness of character" and wonders whether he recognizes that "like all other qualities of mind it should have its proportions and limits," is she arguing for a relativist view of character and virtue, or is she calling on a tradition in which virtue may be an absolute standard, yet at the same time a flexible practice?

A number of Austen's critics have seen her as a conservative moralist and an advocate of rigid traditionalist principles.<sup>1</sup> Yet while Austen may well be ideologically conservative, and is undeniably interested in the moral life of her characters, to say that her moral system is one of rigid pre-judgements is to limit severely the scope of her art.

---

<sup>1</sup> Prominent among such critics is Marilyn Butler, who concludes her study of *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975; rev. ed. 1987) by arguing that "Jane Austen is conservative in a sense no longer current. Her morality is preconceived and inflexible" (298). Alistair Duckworth, for example, also argues for Austen's staunch conservatism and her relatively straightforward "affirmation of inherited structures" (*The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* [1971; rev. ed. 1994] 23). Although I disagree at a number of points with Butler's and Duckworth's specific arguments, I am indebted to their work on Austen's conservatism, and my argument therefore is intended to explicate further and modify the idea that this conservatism is inherently inflexible.

It is widely agreed by now that although Austen's literal focus in her novels remained on her "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" (*Letters* 401), her artistic vision of human life and character reaches much further than it at first appears to do.<sup>2</sup> To label Austen simply as a conservative moralist is inadequate, and can imply a critic's negative judgement of the code of conduct that operates in the novels. Similarly, to label her as a radical reformer who anticipates the feminist debates of our own time is also inadequate, even as it often implies a positive judgement of her work. An understanding of what it means for her to be a moralist will require a fuller exploration of her philosophy, theory, and artistic practice, as well as an assessment of her place within the tradition of philosophy and art. Like other recent critics, such as Anne Ruderman (1996), David Gallop (1999), and David Fott (1999), who have stressed that to consider Austen a moralist does not necessarily mean that she is a philosopher or an ethical theorist, I am concerned to investigate the philosophical underpinnings of her fiction rather than to explicate didactic lessons that emerge from the novels. Ruderman's book *The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen* and Gallop's article "Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic" both focus on the philosophical context of Austen's novels, and my work draws on their analysis of Austen's Aristotelianism; however, I believe that the

---

<sup>2</sup> While a number of critics have been interested in expanding the political context of the novels and implications of Austen's attitude toward it (see for example Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* [1988], and Isobel Armstrong, Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* [1990]), some have argued instead that we find the breadth of her art in her thorough understanding of the family and social life (see Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen: Social Change and Literary Form* [1979], David Monaghan, *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision* [1980], and Brian Crick, "Jane Austen and the 'Relative Situation': What Became of Mrs. Norris's 'Morally Impossible' in *Mansfield Park*?" [1999]) or in her dramatic representation of character and action (see George Whalley, "Jane Austen: Poet" [1976]).

theological context of the novels is also important.<sup>3</sup> Thus, building on Fott's article "Prudence and Persuasion: Jane Austen on Virtue in Democratizing Eras," I investigate both Aristotelian and Christian influences on Austen.<sup>4</sup> I think it is crucial in an exploration of the meaning of morality in Jane Austen's work to leave available the possibility that to be conservative is not always to have a closed mind, and that to be interested in moral virtue is not always to be inflexible or absolutist. The possibility of being ideologically conservative, yet open-minded and flexible, is, I think, realized in Austen's fiction.

In a recent article, "Jane Austen and the Sin of Pride" (1999), Jesse Wolfe attempts to situate Austen in a moral context that both reflects the increasing secularisation of her time, and anticipates the atheism of the future. Wolfe claims to "translate" Austen's moral "sense" from imaginative into expository form, thus implying that Austen was, in fact, an ethical theorist. This article would have Austen as responsible not only for incorporating, but even for initiating, a transition from a metaphysical Christian ethic to a secular moral ethic, and Wolfe finds in Austen's novels a psychology in which pride is the prime secular sin of self-centredness from which characters can be rescued only by faith in the salvation that comes from "internal dialogue" (115), not by faith in Christian grace and redemption. The writer whom Wolfe argues Austen anticipates is Iris Murdoch: "Modern psychology, says Murdoch, has

---

<sup>3</sup> Ruderman's book offers an excellent analysis of the importance of moderation in Austen's novels, and her emphasis on virtue as primarily happiness rather than power is especially helpful. Both Ruderman and Gallop analyze Austen as an Aristotelian writer, but neither of them investigates the religious influence on her novels.

<sup>4</sup> Although I follow Fott in finding both classical and Christian influences in Austen's work, my argument differs significantly from his, most notably in my contention that some of Austen's heroines reach philosophical wisdom.

provided us with a doctrine of original sin more useful than its religious source" (113). Murdoch, says Wolfe, "codifies the atheism which I find anticipated in Austen" (112), and the two writers "reciprocally illuminate one another," as Austen points the way to a secular world of Freud and Sartre that Murdoch inherits (127).<sup>5</sup>

Can Jane Austen seriously be considered as the precursor of Freud and Sartre, breaking with Christian morality to inaugurate a modern secular ethic? In sharp contrast to Wolfe, Alasdair MacIntyre in his book *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981) has argued that while Austen's historical age was indeed the time when a transition of this sort began to take place, she, far from being implicated in the shift away from traditional conceptions of morality, is in fact one of the few people who identify "that social sphere within which the practice of the virtues is able to continue" (239), even while "[i]n most of the public and most of the private world the classical and medieval virtues are replaced by the meagre substitutes which modern morality affords" (243). MacIntyre and Wolfe are clearly at odds with each other in their assessment both of Austen's novels and of her position in the history of ideas. Where does Austen belong then, in this controversy over whether she is among the first representatives of the new morality or the last of the old? How does her moral view accord with the morality expressed by her contemporaries, both novelists and theorists? And how does it respond to the moral traditions of the past? Related to these questions are conflicts as well over

---

<sup>5</sup> Edward Neill similarly argues that *Mansfield Park*, for example, is "eminently self-deconstructing, patriarchy and the great good place being left in ruins by a textual perspective which seems to anticipate the mischievous wisdom of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche" (*The Politics of Jane Austen* [1999] x).

whether she is a prim, snobbish, morally corrupt maiden aunt,<sup>6</sup> a bitter and subversive old maid,<sup>7</sup> a pre-feminist romantic or radical,<sup>8</sup> or a critic and a reformer manqué of women's cultural and political status.<sup>9</sup> There have also been critical debates over whether she represents an eighteenth-century distrust of enthusiasm in Christian faith,<sup>10</sup> an early nineteenth-century evangelical temper,<sup>11</sup> or a world in which there is no personal God, whether one confesses him privately or publicly.<sup>12</sup> Jane Austen is a transitional figure<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> See D.H. Lawrence, "A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover" (1953), and Kingsley Amis, *What Became of Jane Austen? and Other Questions* (1970).

<sup>7</sup> See Marvin Mudrick, *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery* (1952), and John Halperin, *The Life of Jane Austen* (1984).

<sup>8</sup> See Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (1953), Nina Auerbach, "Evolution and Revolution in *Persuasion*" (1972), and Susan Morgan, *In The Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (1980).

<sup>9</sup> See Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (1984); also Claudia L. Johnson and Isobel Armstrong.

<sup>10</sup> David Monaghan's article "*Mansfield Park* and Evangelicalism: A Reassessment" (1978) refutes claims that Austen's novels are Evangelical, suggesting instead that perhaps "the novel is in part a direct criticism of the movement" (230). Bruce Stovel argues that "Given her orthodox beliefs, it is not surprising that Jane Austen's letters reveal her Augustan (and Augustinian) scorn for the new, evangelising, subjective forms of Christianity: 'We do not much like Mr. Cooper's new Sermons; they are fuller of Regeneration and Conversion than ever—with the addition of his Zeal in the cause of the Bible Society'" ("The Sentient Target of Death': Jane Austen's Prayers" [1996] 196).

<sup>11</sup> Warren Roberts argues in *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (1979) that Austen's last three novels are influenced by Evangelical thought, whereas the first three exhibit classical influences (142-43; 153). Butler argues that *Mansfield Park* is the first novel to show the Evangelical influence, and, indeed, that it is "the one thoroughgoing Evangelical novel Austen wrote" ("History, Politics, and Religion" 205).

<sup>12</sup> See for example Lawrence Lerner, *The Truth-tellers* (1967), Avrom Fleishman, *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis* (1967), and H.W. Garrod, "Jane Austen: A Depreciation" (1928). Gallop believes that Austen is not religious or mystical (97).

<sup>13</sup> Like Duckworth, I think that "Jane Austen's fiction is intermediate, and in no way more importantly so than in her attitude to the problems of individual identity and morality." He writes, "Existing at a point of transition between two centuries, she may also be seen as situated between two texts: 'Therefore that ye shall rise, the Lord sends down' and 'Gott ist tot'" (*Improvement* 24-25). While I agree with Duckworth's

at the intersection of centuries in the midst of political and religious controversy: how shall we read her work?

Looking at Austen's contemporary context, some critics have argued that a historicized view of Austen will reveal that she is subversive, undermining contemporary absolutist ideals of virtuous conduct even as she appears to represent the conservative moral order. In her book *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984), Mary Poovey instances Elizabeth Bennet as an example of such subversion: "As the outspoken champion of the prerogatives of individual desire, Elizabeth Bennet should jeopardise both the social order, which demands self-denial, and the moral order, which is based on absolute Christian principles. Yet, despite the dangers she seems to embody, Elizabeth Bennet was Jane Austen's special favourite" (194). Poovey takes Elizabeth's perspectives on the changes in human character—"But people themselves alter so much that there is something new to be observed in them for ever" (*PP* 42-43)—to mean that for Austen, virtue is negotiable and relative, open to interpretation and not always governable: "*Pride and Prejudice* depicts a world riven by ethical relativity, a fact that both mocks any pretence to absolute moral standards and enhances the quality of everyday life in a small country village" (194); "Judgement is always inflected—modulated—by personal desire, Austen suggests, just as vision is always governed by perspective. 'Principles' are often merely prejudices, and prejudices simply project one's own interests on to the shifting scene outside so as to defend and reinforce the self" (195). Poovey's appeals to an historical, strict moral order against which Austen defines

---

assessment of Austen's unique vantage point, my reading of what she does in that position is quite different.

and develops her own supposedly relativist world resemble Wolfe's argument for Austen's originality in that both critics set Austen ahead of her time as a new radical.

I believe that Austen *was* doing something unusual for her time, and that she does respond to and in many ways react against the morality of her contemporaries, but I think it is unlikely that the novels can be made to support Poovey's claim that judgement is always governed by desire in the interest of the self. This may be true at some or even many points in Austen's fiction, but it is not ultimately true of her admirable characters, especially her heroines, and it does not reflect her conclusions about human nature in general. Austen does not condone a world of ethical relativity. Poovey's conclusions point to one of the dangers of the historicist project: trying to place authors in their own time too often means reading them as anticipators of our own, as if everyone worth studying in the past necessarily looked to our present. Far from cleverly anticipating and affirming the self-interest and ethical relativism and secularism of our time, Jane Austen saw the dangers of contemporary absolutist morality and perhaps also of future relativism, and, instead of affirming either, reached back to a stronger tradition of ethical debate and moral life.

The present study examines critical questions and conflicts about Austen's ethical standpoint in relation to philosophical, theological, and literary ideas that may have influenced her work, from classical and Christian writings to the moral ideas of her contemporaries, both theorists and novelists. What is Jane Austen's conception of the moral life? What is it that informs her exploration of virtue and the virtues? And why is it important for readers to understand how moral and ethical questions are expressed in the novels? Although these questions are not new ones, the persistent presence and

production of articles and studies that offer widely divergent readings of the foundation of Austen's moral and artistic vision mean that the questions are still open. Particularly if Austen is called upon, simultaneously, to exemplify the extremes of both traditional, classical, Christian morality, and modern, rational morality, it is worth asking to what extent these extremes appear in her novels, and whether she can ultimately be claimed by one side or the other. I think that her work is much closer to the classical and Christian traditions, and therefore, testing MacIntyre's assertion that "It is her uniting of Christian and Aristotelian themes in a determinate social context that makes Jane Austen the last great effective imaginative voice of the tradition of thought about, and practice of, the virtues" (240), I assess the extent to which Austen draws on, criticizes, and remakes this tradition.

How might Austen have come in contact with the philosophical and theological concepts that inform her worldview? What might she have read, and what do we know with certainty that she read? To what extent does her focus on virtue appear as part of a conscious literary technique or system, and to what extent is it simply a part of the way she approaches the world? In what degrees do her heroines learn practical wisdom (*phronesis*), or the higher wisdom of *sophia*? What makes her heroines happy, and what is the difference between happiness and contentment? How can the perfections of virtue be represented in a dramatically interesting way, and does Jane Austen succeed in making the virtues interesting? A number of critics have argued that Austen draws on the classical virtues; some have attributed her ethical standpoint to the Christian virtues.<sup>14</sup> If

---

<sup>14</sup> See John Graham Rowell's unpublished dissertation, "Virtue and Moral Authority in Jane Austen's Fiction" (1988), as well as the work of Ruderman, Gallop, and Fott. In addition to Fott, C.S. Lewis, William Jarvis, and Bruce Stovel have argued that Austen's



**Austen unifies the classical and Christian virtues, as I argue, building on MacIntyre's suggestion, how does she do so?**

**My strategy in this project is to analyze the process of moral education in the novels, highlighting the ways in which Austen's heroines come to learn about the ethical life first as a moment of philosophical illumination, and thereafter as a lifetime dedication to practising careful judgement and considered moral action. As Austen's novels make clear, there is a point to moral education. It is possible to correct moral failings and learn from mistakes. Focussing on Austen's seven completed novels, including the brilliant short novel *Lady Susan*, I examine primarily the lives of the heroines, while incorporating commentary from time to time on secondary characters. Prior to explicating the novels in depth, I survey the classical and theological traditions of the virtues. Then I venture into a more detailed analysis of the novels, reading them in light of the tradition Austen inherits, and reading human life in light of the brilliance she brings to ethical thought. Each chapter begins with a relevant epigraph from Austen's juvenilia, which I quote, out of context, in a lighthearted mood with the intention of highlighting her early preoccupation with the concept of virtue, rather than with the intention of tracing specific connections between the juvenilia and the particular novel under discussion.<sup>15</sup> In studying each of the novels, I have not adopted a predetermined idea about which virtues are emphasized, but have tried to let the text reveal which virtues are most prominent.**

---

**outlook is fundamentally Christian. See Lewis's "A Note on Jane Austen" (1954), Jarvis's *Jane Austen and Religion* (1996), and Stovel's two excellent articles on Austen's prayers, "'A Nation Improving in Religion': Jane Austen's Prayers and Their Place in Her Life and Art" (1994), and "'The Sentient Target of Death': Jane Austen's Prayers" (1996). Duckworth believes that ultimately Austen's work reflects religious principles, but he does not analyze this theological context (26-27).**

Although I began by thinking that I might be able to identify one of the seven virtues with each of the seven texts, I soon abandoned this plan. For example, although I initially suspected that *Sense and Sensibility* might be about temperance (and balance), and *Mansfield Park* might be about sustaining faith, I quickly learned that the major virtues in the novels were much more subtle than that. I do, however, believe that Austen, like Fielding, had a particular virtue in mind while writing each novel.<sup>16</sup>

I approach the major completed novels, *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion*, in this roughly chronological order of composition, as many critics do. There have been some harsh criticisms of books treating Austen in “six chapters of explication preceded by a brief introduction providing a hypothesis.”<sup>17</sup> But as Roger Gard says of his book *Jane Austen's Novels: The Art of Clarity* (1992), I feel quite comfortable saying of my own project that “though the present work is not exactly in the six-chapter form, it would not *mind* being described in that way” (3). Treating the novels one at a time seems to me preferable to, and clearer than, organizing them by theme or other means. I do not undertake systematic analysis of Austen’s letters or of the fragments *Sanditon* and *The Watsons*; neither do I include the juvenilia—with one exception. I accept the early short novel *Lady Susan* as the seventh novel, as Fay Weldon calls it (31), and I treat it first,

---

<sup>15</sup> The exception here is the epigraph to the conclusion, from George Eliot’s *Silas Marner*, which I invoke in a more serious mood.

<sup>16</sup> It may seem as if studying the relative frequency in each novel of words that describe virtue could test this theory, but in fact concordances to Austen’s work are not particularly helpful here. For example, consider the number of ways “hope” and “love” can be used without explicit reference to virtuous behaviour. Thus I have relied on close readings of the novels to illuminate the virtues I believe Austen was focussing on.

<sup>17</sup> See Duckworth, *Jane Austen: New Perspectives* (1983) 48; also Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* xxxvi.

along with *Northanger Abbey*, as an early example of Austen's working out of what ethical and unethical behaviour mean. It is, besides, almost irresistible to begin a study of Austen and the virtues by looking at the deliciously vicious heroine of this short work.

But first it is necessary to provide an overview of the tradition of the virtues. Chapter One, then, entitled "The Virtues According to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Austen," surveys the classical virtues, the biblical virtues, and the tradition of ethical thought founded upon the union of the four cardinal virtues of justice, temperance, courage, and fortitude with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. I begin with the question of why so many writers in our own time have been turning to what has been called "virtue ethics" in both philosophy and literature, and my analysis of the classical tradition of the virtues takes into account recent arguments, such as that of Julia Annas in *The Morality of Happiness* (1993), that ancient theories about virtue cannot simply be translated into the present or even the relatively recent past of Austen's world.<sup>18</sup> I focus on the virtues as outlined in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, and on Plato's ideas of virtue in the *Meno*, the *Phaedo*, and the *Symposium*. Outlining some of the main ideas of Aristotle's *Ethics*, including the doctrine of the mean and the concept of virtue as a process and a practice, I raise questions about why we turn back to these ancient theories, and I also raise the question Plato asks in the *Meno*: is virtue something that can be taught? To begin to answer this question I then summarize some of the arguments of the

---

<sup>18</sup> The term "virtue ethics" has gained currency in recent decades, but it is not a term that would have been familiar to Aristotle, Aquinas, or Austen, and it is at best a vague term. It is clearer to speak of "virtues" or of "ethics." The awkward term "virtue ethics" appears to have emerged as part of an effort to distinguish a way of talking about ethical life in which the virtues of character figure prominently, from ways of talking about ethics in which utility, principles, or acts are emphasized.

*Symposium* concerning the role erotic love plays in one's education into aesthetic and ethical awareness.

The second part of this chapter moves on to a consideration of the biblical virtues, with particular reference to St. Augustine's *City of God*, and then through the commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on *The Virtues*, I move towards a summary of how classical and Christian virtues came to be thought of as a unified tradition, in the work of the medieval scholastics. Taking Dante's *Divine Comedy* as well as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* as literary examples of the schematization and dramatic representation of a range of virtues and vices, I suggest that Austen was probably inspired primarily by literary re-imaginings of the tradition, but that the outlines of Aristotelian and Thomist thought are visible in her work as well. I argue that although it is possible that Austen read Aristotle, Aquinas, Dante, and Chaucer, it is almost certain that she inherits the classical and theological virtues through her reading of and active engagement with Shakespeare's plays.<sup>19</sup> Although Austen inherits ideas from previous writers, she also creates the tradition that leads to her, renewing old ideas in her fiction. F.R. Leavis writes that "her relation to tradition is a creative one. She not only makes tradition for those coming after, but her achievement has for us a retroactive effect: as we look back

---

<sup>19</sup> Park Honan also suggests that Austen is part of a tradition that includes Dante and Shakespeare (and, in his case, Cervantes rather than Chaucer) because "Her portrayals are so accurate and clear that her works have become tests of truth in Western culture, refreshing and clarifying us" (*Jane Austen: Her Life* [1987] 403). Like Honan, I think that she ranks in greatness with these writers. He stresses that part of her power comes from her "technical mastery, intensity, lightness." I want to extend his idea that "Flexibility had become her keynote" (403) to include not only her flexibility as a novelist, but also her powerful understanding of the difficult flexibility of the ethical life. Just as I compare Jane Austen to Dante in her understanding of human nature, Dorothy Sayers has likened Dante to Austen in his "dry and delicate and satirical" humour, and in

beyond her we see in what goes before, and see because of her, potentialities and significances brought out in such a way that, for us, she creates the tradition we see leading down to her" (*The Great Tradition* [1960] 5).<sup>20</sup> Austen's work, he says, "like the work of all great creative writers, gives a meaning to the past" (5). As Jorge Luis Borges writes, for example, "The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors."<sup>21</sup> From Aristotle to Shakespeare to Samuel Johnson, with a good measure of biblical tradition in between, this necessarily brief summary of classical and Christian virtue highlights central concepts about what the virtues are, how they work, and how we come to know and practise them.

In order to demonstrate the difference between heroines who possess "virtue" and heroines who practise a range of "the virtues," this chapter then surveys some of the ways female virtue is characterized in novels of Austen's time. Austen's "Plan of a Novel" caricatures a potential fictional father and daughter: "He, the most excellent Man that can be imagined, perfect in Character, Temper, and Manners...—Heroine a faultless character herself—, perfectly good, with much tenderness and sentiment, and not the least Wit" (*MW* 428). Austen's best heroines combine the virtues with ready wit, which

---

his "charming self-mockery which has no parallel that I know of outside the pages of Jane Austen" (62-63).

<sup>20</sup> Contrary to contemporary misrepresentations of Leavis's theory of *The Great Tradition* that suggest he sees novelists in a rigid linear system of inheritance and indebtedness, this comment on Austen reveals his theory as non-linear, even circular, in its willingness to revisit and revalue earlier writers in light of later creative achievement.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Kiely takes this quotation from Borges as the epigraph for his book *Reverse Tradition: Postmodern Fictions and the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (1993). Kiely's imaginative book explores ways in which recent fiction effectively remakes interpretations of past works.

Aristotle identifies as one of the virtues of social life.<sup>22</sup> But for many of the virtuous heroines in contemporary novels by writers such as Ann Radcliffe, Eliza Fenwick, Elizabeth Inchbald, and Samuel Richardson, virtue and wit are mutually exclusive.<sup>23</sup> The chapter concludes with an analysis of the importance of moral judgement.

In Chapter Two, “*Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey: Propriety’s Claims on Prudence*,” I argue that these two early novels reveal Austen trying out opposing perspectives on human nature through the use of different narrative techniques. In *Lady Susan*, Austen creates a heroine who is prudent in the sense of worldly wisdom and worldly calculation. Prudence here is a matter of strategy, manipulation, and coercion, and in its excessive form, prudence gives way to the vices of covetousness and selfishness. Lady Susan studies the forms of propriety even while calculating to manipulate morality. Catherine Morland, on the other hand, is ignorant of many of propriety’s outward forms, yet she has an innate sense of honesty and honour; the course of *Northanger Abbey* aims to teach her how to reconcile the form and the essence of propriety. *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey* are naturally less polished than the later

---

<sup>22</sup> More work needs to be done on the virtues of Austen’s male characters, especially on those who are “most excellent men” without being entirely perfect. Fanny’s brother William Price, as well as Captain Wentworth, would be particularly interesting as representative of the virtues of the navy. In his book *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (1994; rev. ed. 1996), Roger Sales highlights the need for further attention to “Austen’s explorations of different masculine identities” (xvii), and he analyses the figure of the Regency dandy in relation to her novels. Ivor Morris takes up the distinction between the proper pride of a hero and the vanity of a dandy in “Jane Austen and Her Men” (2001). He suggests in his conclusion that “in all probability Jane Austen’s understanding of men exceeded that of her women.” However, further study of the identity of the virtuous hero is needed, as well as further study of the virtuous patriarch.

<sup>23</sup> In *Secresy* (1795), Fenwick’s wise and witty Caroline Ashburn is an exception, but the virtue of Caroline’s friend Sibella depends wholly on her chastity, and therefore not at all on wit.

novels, and the moral world they represent is much less complex, but they serve as useful examples of Austen's early attempts to explore the first of the virtues, prudence, the virtue without which no other virtue is possible. Without the wisdom and courage that come with prudence, it is not possible to begin to practise the other virtues.

My third chapter, on "*Sense and Sensibility*: 'Know your own happiness,'" initiates a discussion of the tensions that arise when one begins to practise more than one virtue and discovers that it is difficult to keep them simultaneously in balance. These tensions are at the heart of what I believe is Austen's flexible conservatism: what Elinor Dashwood knows and what her sister Marianne discovers is that to be moral, one must be active, not passive, and exercise one's judgement constantly to find an ethical balance in social life. The negotiation of this balance is what Marianne learns to call "practis[ing] the civilities" (*SS* 295). Marianne and Elinor are not Austen's liveliest or wittiest heroines, but they both possess spirit and intelligence as well as perfectly good character. In contrast to the many critics of *Sense and Sensibility* who claim that passionate Marianne is betrayed by the narrator's desire to educate her into behaving more like her reserved sister, and in contrast too to those who argue that each heroine's virtue is improved by being tempered by the other's ruling force—that is, that while Marianne must indeed learn some of Elinor's sense, it is beneficial as well for Elinor to adopt some of Marianne's strong feeling—I argue both that Elinor is less static than she is usually supposed to be, and that there is ultimately something she needs to learn from Marianne apart from sensibility, and that is divine grace. Through an exploration of the worth of fortitude and the importance of knowing where happiness lies, my line of argument

comes to new conclusions about what the ending of *Sense and Sensibility* means for Elinor, Marianne, and the representation of virtues in the novel.

The idea in *Sense and Sensibility* of coming to know one's own happiness is also a crucial part of the development of *Pride and Prejudice*, in which both Elizabeth and Darcy learn what constitutes the fulfilment of their intelligence and their capacity to love, and thus are able to bring about justice within the world of the novel. My analysis of "*Pride and Prejudice* and the Beauty of Justice" begins by countering feminist assumptions that the education of Elizabeth Bennet involves humiliation into submission to patriarchal expectations. I argue instead that because both Elizabeth and Darcy must undergo the painful process of learning to admit their mistakes and rectify their wrong judgements, the novel is in fact centrally concerned with the role of love in the pursuit of justice. Looking in particular at the first proposal scene at Hunsford, I analyze the recurrent problem of tensions among competing virtues, and I focus on the ways in which such concepts as anger, prejudice, and discrimination, while certainly potentially dangerous, are not necessarily completely incompatible with the virtues. I argue that *Pride and Prejudice*, in its masterly dramatization of the philosophical awakening to justice that both Darcy and Elizabeth experience, is Jane Austen's greatest novel.

From the virtue of justice in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen turned, I think, to the virtue of temperance in *Mansfield Park*. As do all the novels, *Mansfield Park* displays many virtues that compete for prominence and perfection and at times Austen's focus is on Fanny's heroic fortitude under pressure, or on the value of faith, as for example in the Sotherton Chapel scene where Fanny and Edmund defend the importance of household prayers and clerical guidance in spiritual life. But it seems to me that the question of



balance in this novel involves not only a harmonious balance among the virtues, but also the possibility of balancing desires temperately; hence in Chapter Five, “The Habits of ‘a well-judging young woman’ in *Mansfield Park*,” the virtue I focus on is temperance, and its association with the cultivation or deterioration of habit. Fanny Price is consistently virtuous, in the way that Radcliffe’s or Richardson’s heroines are, but she is not static; she desires growth and development. *Mansfield Park* is a fundamentally serious investigation of holding to moral principles in the midst of moral decay, but it is also a playful novel whose comic thrust sometimes even involves bawdy humour. Throughout my analysis of *Mansfield Park* I emphasize the significance of habit with respect to moral behaviour as well as to comedic mirth, and I argue that Fanny is Austen’s contemplative heroine.

In contrast to Fanny, whom Austen treats seriously, Emma Woodhouse is the heroine she determines to mock from the beginning. In Chapter Six, “‘To think and be miserable’: Learning the Art of Charity in *Emma*,” I analyze the painful process Emma is subjected to by her own conscience, prompted at times by Mr. Knightley, before she reaches a point at which she understands how the virtue of charity works. At first Emma’s charity consists in good works; later she comes to recognize that charity has to do first with attitude and then with action, and she learns to practise uniting charitable words and actions towards others, as a priority above trying to ensure that she is in narcissistic love and charity with herself. Like Elizabeth Bennet, Emma experiences a profound awakening to philosophical contemplation. This mode of existence has already become a habit for Fanny Price before her character is revealed in any detail, and although Catherine Morland does learn something in *Northanger Abbey*, it has to do with

the practical and prudent world rather than with the philosophical world. Lady Susan is not interested in any philosophy other than the philosophy of getting ahead, and the only things she learns are the subtleties of manipulation. *Emma* is second only to *Pride and Prejudice* in its brilliant dramatic representation of the awakening to moral wisdom. A number of critics have argued that *Emma* is Austen's masterpiece,<sup>24</sup> yet the way Emma's moral education is diffused because it is partly directed by the already almost perfect Mr. Knightley detracts from its narrative power. The figure of Mr. Knightley functions for Emma in the way that the figure of Elinor functions for Marianne: each provides a moral standard for the less morally aware heroine, and consequently takes some of the drama out of the heroine's discovery of the moral life for herself.

Anne Elliot resembles Mr. Knightley and Elinor Dashwood more than she does Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet. Like Fanny Price, too, she is always already virtuous. Anne and Fanny, like Mr. Knightley and Elinor, do experience tests of their virtue, their patience, their fortitude—but there is never any real danger for any of them that they will stray very far from the virtuous path. Elizabeth's passion—at first for Wickham, and for wit at the expense of justice—and Emma's imagination—regarding Frank Churchill and Harriet Smith especially—are constant reminders that these heroines' powers might also constitute their failings, and that is what makes their triumphant engagement with the philosophical pursuit of wisdom and virtue so

---

<sup>24</sup> As an example of how widespread this belief is, the title of the 1999 Annual General Meeting of the Jane Austen Society of North America, "*Emma*: Austen at Her Peak," is a statement of a common critical consensus, not a question about whether or not *Emma* is the best of the novels. Butler calls *Emma* not only Austen's best novel, but "Easily the most brilliant novel of the period, and one of the most brilliant of all English novels" (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* 274).

compelling and instructive. Like St. Augustine, they must confess their past transgressions before they can move on to a wiser and more blessed life.

Anne is already living that life, even if it is not an entirely happy life. Rather than beginning *in medias res*, in *Persuasion* Austen starts her story long after the crucial test of strength has passed. Anne may have failed to assert her claims to romantic happiness with Wentworth, in opposition to Lady Russell's practical and financial persuasions, but she has learned how to be strong in the face of disappointed love. It is not, therefore, in the moment of Wentworth's proposal or Anne's anguished refusal that the dramatic interest of their story lies, it is in the process by which Anne learns to sustain not only stoic fortitude, but also a more profoundly Christian hope.<sup>25</sup> Chapter Seven, "The Unity of the Virtues in *Persuasion*," examines the qualities of firmness, flexibility, and fortitude in light of Anne's constancy, to demonstrate the value of woman's constancy and to interrogate MacIntyre's claim that Austen extends the tradition of the virtues through her development of the centrality of constancy. While I agree with MacIntyre that constancy is important to Austen's heroines, I think that what is more fundamental to both her male and her female characters, and indeed to the whole vision of human nature expressed in her novels, is faith. Constancy, after all, is not the root of virtues, but the outgrowth of

---

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert and Gubar argue that "When the heroines are able to live Christian lives, doing unto others as they would be done [sic], the daughters are ready to become wives" (*The Madwoman in the Attic* [1979; rev. ed. 2000] 163); their implication is that this is a negative process involving humiliation and submission. As I shall argue below, especially in Chapters Four and Six on *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma* respectively, the process of moral education is not humiliating, though it is humbling. But Anne is living a Christian life long before her marriage, just as Fanny is. When an Austen heroine begins to live a Christian life, she is ready to be herself. Faith does not require the submersion of the individual in the collective: it can involve participation in a community, but Austen's heroines are more, not less, themselves once their moral awareness is heightened.

virtue. It is a sub-category. I don't mean that MacIntyre suggests constancy is the eighth virtue, canonized by Austen (and then promptly forgotten by nineteenth- and twentieth-century novelists). But I think he gives it more weight than Austen does. What the value of constancy in *Persuasion* points to is the fundamental importance of faith, Christian faith, in all the novels. There is no point to moral education if people cannot be redeemed, and that is why faith in redemption is so important in Austen's work. Faith ideally inspires moral growth.

The question of the extent to which Austen's art is Christian has perplexed many of her critics. Archbishop Richard Whately in 1821 dubbed her a Christian writer, but noted that she is very reticent about religion: he wrote that she had "the merit (in our judgement most essential) of being evidently a Christian writer: a merit which is much enhanced, both on the score of good taste, and practical utility, by her religion being not at all obtrusive . . . . In fact she is more sparing of it than would be thought desirable by some persons" (95). Such reticence has led a number of writers to question Austen's faith, at least as it is represented in her work. Margaret Oliphant, writing in *Blackwood's* in 1870, suggested that Austen's way of making allowances for the human weaknesses of her characters was yet "not charity, and its toleration has none of the sweetness which proceeds from that highest of Christian graces." She qualified this by saying that "It is not absolute contempt either, but only a softened tone of disbelief—amusement, nay enjoyment, of all those humours of humanity which are so quaint to look at as soon as you dissociate them from any rigid standard for right and wrong" (217).

In the twentieth century, for example, Lawrence Lerner includes Austen, along with George Eliot and D.H. Lawrence, in his book *The Truth-tellers* (1967); he argues that

for these writers there is morality but no personal, Christian God. Jesse Wolfe argues against C.S. Lewis's belief that Christianity informs Austen's work, criticizing his interpretation because it "means believing that the eye of God plays a significant role in the Dashwood, or the Woodhouse, or the Elliot drama; that God is, so to speak, a living character in these novels" (112). Yet surely it is not necessary to include God in the cast of characters in order for Christian faith and morality to play a role in the action of a novel. Certainly the character of the clergy is prominent in the novels, from the pompous Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* to the conscientious Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, and yet members of the clergy are often mocked, and the heroines and heroes of the novels are rarely seen to talk about the Church, let alone discuss their faith in God. Nevertheless, there are many indications throughout the novels that these characters are neither simply neo-classical figures who exist in a world where the cardinal virtues are the common ideal, nor Enlightened sceptics who inhabit a world where virtue is an external goal rarely achieved.

John Odmark writes that the "religious dimension of Jane Austen's fiction has usually been neglected, with the result that the author's system of moral values has been misinterpreted" (*An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels* [1981] 16). An exploration of how religion forms the grounding of everyday life for Austen's characters can help to explain moral decisions in the novels. As Stuart M. Tave rightly suggests,

Of the three duties, to God, to one's neighbors, to oneself, specified in the Book of Common Prayer and innumerable sermons and moral essays, duty to God would not be for Jane Austen the proper subject of the novelist; but the other duties are, and they become gravely important, not as they might

be in a later nineteenth-century novelist, because they are substitutes for religion, but because they are daily expressions of it in common life.

*(Some Words of Jane Austen [1973] 112-13)*

Gene Koppel has analyzed *The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels* (1988); William Jarvis's book *Jane Austen and Religion* (1996) investigates religion in Austen's life as well as in her works; and Irene Collins provides a valuable and comprehensive survey of the role of the clergy in Austen's novels in her 1994 book *Jane Austen and the Clergy*. These works, however, explain the role of religion, not faith, in the novels.

In his two articles on the prayers Austen composed, Bruce Stovel has argued convincingly for the pervasive presence in her writing of a strong Christian faith. Stovel writes that "The most important thing [the prayers] tell us is also the most obvious: that Jane Austen had a deep and sincere religious faith," and he says that in both the prayers and the novels "morality and religion coincide." Invoking Whately's judgement of Austen's work, Stovel concludes that "Whately's conception of the interdependence of fiction, morality and religion is, I believe, shared by Austen herself" ("The Sentient Target of Death': Jane Austen's Prayers" [1996] 199; 195; 202). C.S. Lewis's argument about *Sense and Sensibility* invokes Marianne's statement that she will need to make "atonement to my God"; as I shall argue in Chapter Three, I believe he is right to see the importance of confession as central to the climax of *Sense and Sensibility*.<sup>26</sup> Jane Austen's world, both the world she lived in and the world she created, was and is

---

<sup>26</sup> Lewis writes that in Austen's moral world "All is hard, clear, definable; by some modern standards, even naively so. The hardness is, of course, for oneself, not for one's neighbours." That moral principles are "hard, clear, definable" does not mean that they are rigid prejudgements, however. The emphasis on self-knowledge means that

grounded in the idea of Christian grace. That is why her irony, like Chaucer's or Shakespeare's, is never simply cruel, but is a tool for criticizing the weaknesses of people and society, while the author remains confident that the potential for wholeness and healing exists, through the grace that is available only with faith.

In contrast to critics who have argued that Austen represents primarily the classical virtues, some of whom have argued that she does this in a purely secular way, and in contrast to those who would claim her as primarily a Christian writer, I argue in this dissertation that in her novels Jane Austen represents a union of the classical and the theological virtues, deftly negotiating the tensions among the virtues, dramatically portraying the moments at which her characters achieve practical knowledge, and higher wisdom, and pointing toward the understanding and acceptance of divine grace. David Fott discusses both classical and Christian virtue in the novels, and suggests that it is up to the reader to determine whether or not Austen reconciles Aristotelianism and Christianity. Like MacIntyre, however, I argue that her reconciliation of the two is not indeterminate but clear and conclusive.<sup>27</sup> Through detailed analysis of the seven completed novels, in relation to discussions of both the new tradition of Enlightenment morality that Austen rejected and the ancient and ongoing tradition of classical and Christian morality that she embraced, I investigate Austen's creative engagement with, and her inspired remaking of, tradition.

---

"Contrasted with the world of modern fiction, Jane Austen's is at once less soft and less cruel" (363).

<sup>27</sup> Gene Koppel's focus is on Christian morality, but he too argues that Austen's "natural-law morality fuses both classical and Christian elements, and remains essentially the same in all six novels" (128 n.27).

The concluding chapter of the dissertation is a coda entitled "After Austen." This chapter returns to MacIntyre's claim that Austen is "the last great representative" of "the tradition of the virtues," and offers an analysis of some of the possible candidates for the continuation of that tradition, including such writers as George Eliot, Henry James, and Edith Wharton. I ask questions about the transmutation of "the virtues" into the ideal of "Victorian virtue," and consider other nineteenth-century writers interested in virtue and social life. I also look briefly at the Catholic tradition in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, and offer suggestions for further research on the novel and the tradition of the virtues. Through looking at possible literary inheritors of Austen's ethical mode, I work towards an assessment of the value of her artistic achievement. Is Austen the last representative of the tradition of the virtues, or is she the last *great* representative? Although I think that some of the great writers after Austen, especially Eliot, James, and Wharton, represent significant parts of the tradition, MacIntyre is probably right that Austen's novels represent the tradition of the virtues as a coherent and harmonious whole in a way that has not since been equalled.



## **Chapter One: The Virtues According to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Austen**

**“Arm yourself my amiable Young Freind with all the philosophy you are Mistress of.”**

**—Jane Austen, “Love and Freindship”**

How useful is it to turn to ancient theories of virtue to understand early nineteenth-century literary texts? I believe that this approach can elucidate aspects of the texts that readers—especially some postmodern readers—often overlook, and so this chapter begins with a discussion of the ethical turn in literary theory, an investigation of the terms “ethics” and “morality,” and a definition of “virtue ethics” as it has emerged in recent studies in philosophy and literature. The chapter then surveys what other critics have said about connections between Austen and Aristotle, including the ways she may have come to understand the idea of the ethical life as outlined by him and expanded upon by other philosophers, theologians, and imaginative writers in the Aristotelian and Christian tradition. Next I explore Aristotle’s formulation of the ethical life in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*, as well as Plato’s list of the four cardinal virtues in the *Republic* and the important distinction he makes between ordinary virtue and the philosopher’s virtue. My focus here is on the emphasis ancient theories of virtue place on the process of practising virtue as an activity. For Aristotle, virtue is a disposition and is chosen, acquired, and practised through habit; although the process is important, there is a goal or end (*telos*) in view.

The theories of ancient philosophers with regard to the practice of virtue were adopted and adapted by early Christian thinkers to become part of the theological tradition. I look at the three biblical virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the ways in which St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and other writers saw the theological virtues in tension or in harmony with the classical virtues. Throughout my survey of classical and theological writings, I turn to Austen’s novels for examples so as to unite this theoretical chapter directly with the literary analysis in subsequent chapters. The chapter

concludes with an analysis of some eighteenth-century novelists and their representation of virtue, particularly female virtue. I connect some of these writers with the influence of Hume's theory that virtue is inspired by the passions and, to a lesser extent, with the influence of Kant's idea that the moral life is founded solely on the rule of reason.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to novelists and thinkers who locate virtue in either feeling or duty, however, Austen finds, praises, and cultivates the virtues in character. For her fictional characters, virtue (or its absence) is demonstrated through their Aristotelian or Christian moral deliberations and judgement (or lack thereof), and thus I argue that Austen participates in a tradition of the virtues that stresses character and action, and that her understanding of that tradition includes a complex understanding of equality.

### Literature and Ethics

It is difficult to understand ancient ethical thought in a modern context; how is it that questions about Jane Austen and virtue may be answered by the philosophers of ancient Greece? Ultimately, classical theories are not merely historical documents, but illustrations of ideas debated in many centuries. Austen wrote at a time when the language of virtue as a unified tradition of ethical contemplation was more readily available, and thus theories about the virtues can help to explain her work. Alasdair MacIntyre is not the only one to argue that Austen distanced herself from the contemporary predominance of ethical theories grounded in sentiment or in reason rather than in tradition. Simon Haines, for example, argues that Austen, along with Scott,

---

<sup>28</sup> Kant's influence becomes much stronger in the nineteenth-century novel, as can be seen for example in George Eliot's insistence on the absolute and peremptory nature of

Edgeworth, and Peacock, was among the few writers between the 1790s and the 1820s who escaped “that central Cartesian self, with its search for a theoretical account of the world and, often, its sceptical disillusionment with the eventual failure of the search” (“Deepening the Self: The Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature” [1998] 38). In his *Discourse on Method* (1637), Rene Descartes had proposed that the beginning of the new philosophy was to suspend belief in all things, at least temporarily, in order to work out a rational explanation for existence.<sup>29</sup> Haines suggests that in contrast to these novelists, most of the English poets of the time failed to escape (38).<sup>30</sup> Austen was doing something different from most of her contemporaries: this is one of the reasons why she is variously claimed by the fields of Victorian and Eighteenth-century literature, as well as by the Romantic period, where, chronologically, but not necessarily ideologically, she belongs.<sup>31</sup> She has also been claimed by neo-Aristotelian literary critics and philosophers

---

moral duty. Eliot’s articulation of her belief in duty above all can be found in her conversation with F.W.H. Meyers as described in his *Essays—Modern* (1883) 259-69.

<sup>29</sup> Descartes writes, “For a long time I had noticed that in matters of morality one must sometimes follow opinions that one knows to be quite uncertain, just as if they were indubitable, . . . but because I then desired to devote myself exclusively to the search for the truth, I thought it necessary that I do exactly the opposite, and that I reject as absolutely false everything in which I could imagine the least doubt, in order to see whether, after this process, something in my beliefs remained that was entirely indubitable” (18).

<sup>30</sup> In *Mechanism and the Novel: Science in the Narrative Process* (1993), Martha A. Turner argues that unlike most nineteenth-century novelists, Austen represents a teleological and Aristotelian view of the world, and that the drive toward closure in *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies the workings of a pre-mechanistic world. Turner writes, “Assumptions about reality implicit in Austen’s plots and characterization are more akin to an Aristotelian model than a natural theological one” (44). It is indeed likely that Austen’s narrative structure as well as her ethical standpoint is influenced by Aristotle, and it would be worth studying in more detail the area Turner defines.

<sup>31</sup> I’m aware of the controversies over defining these fields of literary study, and have simplified the labels here to make the point that although Austen clearly belongs in a period called “British Literature, 1780-1830,” it isn’t so clear that she is part of a “Romantic Movement.” For a detailed analysis of these divisions, see Susan J.

such as MacIntyre, Ruderman, Gallop, and Fott, as a neo-Aristotelian herself, and thus it is worth exploring further how the use of ancient theories of virtue can help readers understand the ethical world of Austen's novels.

Why talk about the virtues in literature? So often, especially in sentimental novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, "virtue" is presented as the extreme case, the purest white, and the clearest path to goodness. Heroines in particular are portrayed as either innocent and virtuous or fallen and damned; whether in the religious or secular sense, they exist in a Calvinist world. But human behaviour is more complex than this, and the most interesting literary characters are not always either clearly virtuous or clearly vicious, so that we can easily distinguish which ones to imitate. To talk about virtue in Austen's novels involves a way of looking at moral behaviour that is complicated, finely nuanced, and above all dependent on both tradition and individual judgement. For her the virtuous life involves the ordinary person's reflection on the ethical question "How should I live my life?" It is not simply a matter of portraying the clearest virtue or the darkest vice.

Although later Hellenistic schools theorized about ethics, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* is the text that deals most explicitly with the ethical life. Commenting on philosophy before Aristotle, Julia Annas points out in *The Morality of Happiness* (1993) that "There is no Platonic dialogue which is 'about ethics' in the way that the *Nicomachean Ethics* is about ethics" (18), and although the Sophists, especially Protagoras, Antiphon, and Democritus, discussed ethical theories, their extant writings are too fragmentary to offer a coherent picture of what they thought about ethics (17).

---

Wolfson's article on "Our Puny Boundaries: Why the Craving for Carving Up the

Annas thus chooses to focus on Aristotle and writers after him, as defining the framework of and alterations to Greek ethics. While I shall touch briefly on some of Plato's dialogues, and on Aristotle's *Eudemian Ethics*, I shall focus on the *Nicomachean Ethics* as the most complete text that lays the foundations for ethical debate in Western civilization—though, as Annas reminds us, “the framework of ancient ethics is different from what we expect of modern theories, since it is not hierarchical and complete” (131). This reminder serves as a significant corrective to criticism of Austen that sees her morality as conservative, canonical, and complete. Incompleteness does not imply chaos, and Austen's virtuous characters participate in a continuous process of working toward coherent ethical answers.

### Virtue Ethics

A number of moral philosophers have turned to ancient theories of the virtues as a way of understanding the problems of late twentieth and early twenty-first century life. Jean Porter suggests that “Virtue ethics, understood as a process of systematic, critical reflection on the virtues and related topics, is particularly likely to emerge in conditions of social change, when received traditions of the virtues undergo development and criticism” (“Virtue Ethics” [2001] 96). As Rosalind Hursthouse defines it, the term “virtue ethics” was “initially introduced to distinguish an approach in normative ethics which emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to an approach which emphasizes duties or rule (deontology) or one which emphasizes the consequences of actions (utilitarianism)” (*On Virtue Ethics* [1999] 1). Hursthouse writes that philosophers

---

Nineteenth Century?” (2001).

dissatisfied with deontology and utilitarianism have looked for a way of understanding the ethical life that takes into consideration “motives and moral character” primarily, as well as “moral education, moral wisdom or discernment, friendship and family relationships, a deep concept of happiness, the role of the emotions in our moral life, and the question of what sort of person I should be, and of how we should live” (3). Focussing on the virtues means paying attention to the character of the individual, but also to the place of the individual within the community.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century, more and more attention has been paid to the virtues, with philosophers such as Philippa Foot, Bernard Williams, John McDowell, Martha Nussbaum, and Michael Slote, as well as MacIntyre, advocating the importance of ancient ethical theories. Elizabeth Anscombe’s landmark essay “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958) revived debate about how to understand moral behaviour, and launched a series of philosophical discussions about whether moral theory should provide procedures for what a person should do, or offer guidance for what kind of person he or she should be.<sup>32</sup> “Virtue ethics” has to do not just with the consequences of a person’s action, but also with the whole context of his or her own life: it focuses on life-long preparation for virtuous action rather than on deliberation in the case of each ethical question. Addressing the problem of how to live so as to be ready to act ethically instead of the problem of how to make specific choices, “virtue ethics” aims at the education of character more than at obedience to rules of conduct.

Annas writes that “ancient ethical theory begins with the agent’s concern for her own life as a whole,” suggesting that “Modern moral theories, by contrast, often begin by

specifying morality as a concern for others; morality is often introduced as a point of view contrasting with egoism” (127).<sup>33</sup> This focus in ancient ethical theory on the agent’s own life does not necessarily indicate selfishness: the idea is that by understanding one’s own life first one becomes better able to understand the lives of others so as to act virtuously in relation to them. Rowan Williams offers a way to understand this form of self-knowledge with regard to other people: “self knowledge is far more than lonely introspection. We discover who we are, in significant part, by meditating on the relations in which we already stand” (“Making Moral Decisions” [2001] 5). Current thought about the virtues is usually (although not exclusively) along the lines of Aristotle’s ethics; “neo-Aristotelian” “virtue ethics” is accorded its prefix partly because, as Hursthouse explains, “its proponents allow themselves to regard Aristotle as just plain wrong on slaves and women, and also because we do not restrict ourselves to Aristotle’s list of virtues” (8). She adds that charity, for example, is now considered to be on the list, although it wasn’t an Aristotelian concept.

Annas argues that in focussing on ancient theories of the virtues it is necessary to beware of the potential pitfalls of choosing between teleological and deontological ethics: she says to choose one or the other in isolation is to take “a modern journey with a medieval map,” and she suggests that we need to recognize that it may be “an artificially neat map combining detail in places with large unsatisfactory areas, unexplored and

---

<sup>32</sup> See Porter 107, and Christine McKinnon, *Character, Virtue Theory, and the Vices* (1999) 1.

<sup>33</sup> For further analysis of virtue as sympathetic identification with others, see my discussion of George Eliot in the conclusion.



assigned only to monsters” (4).<sup>34</sup> That the ancient map is incomplete may be dangerous; yet the fact that there is a map means that the territory is not entirely unknown. Aristotle offers a starting point on the journey; Aquinas outlines the route further; and perhaps Austen, as I shall argue, can help to fill in some of the areas unknown to either of them. Charles Larmore, in *The Morals of Modernity* (1996), identifies that “one of the most salient features of Anglo-American ethics today is a dissatisfaction with the dominant obligation-centred strands of modern ethics—Kantian and utilitarian—and a wish to return to ancient and medieval theories of virtue” (3). Larmore calls neo-Aristotelianism merely nostalgic and insists that “insuperable difficulties stand in the way of such a return to ancient models” (11), but Annas, on the other hand, acknowledges potential difficulties while suggesting that with such an awareness of the gaps on the map it is still possible to proceed.

At the same time that philosophers have begun to talk more about the place of the virtues in moral philosophy, a significant number of philosophers, including Martha Nussbaum, Richard Rorty, and Alasdair MacIntyre, have also begun to turn more often to literature for illustrative examples of the ethical life.<sup>35</sup> Some of their critics, such as Andrew Gibson, have gone so far as to suggest that they “might arguably be seen as delivering philosophy over into the hands of literature” (*Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas* [1999]). Yet criticism like this suggests a fear of

---

<sup>34</sup> Hursthouse suggests that virtue ethics, deontology, and utilitarianism are not inevitably mutually exclusive theories, citing for example “the revived interest in Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue, the elaboration of character-based versions of Kantianism and utilitarianism, and the utilitarian Peter Singer’s latest book on ‘How are we to live?’” (3)—but to reconcile the ancient and modern maps is beyond the scope of the present study.

<sup>35</sup> See Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge* (1990), Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), and MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (1981; rev. ed. 1984).

interdisciplinarity strangely at odds with postmodern literary theory's interest in plurality and subjectivism. Literary theorists have, in the last decade, identified a turn in literary theory towards ethical questions as well: David Parker, for example, suggests in his introduction to an essay collection entitled *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory* (1998) that "the turn to the ethical in literary studies is closely connected to a turn to the literary within ethics" (14). While literary theory can sound naïve in presuming to have discovered something entirely new in turning to ethics<sup>36</sup>—since there have been critics interested in the ethical questions of literature for much longer than just the last ten years—or in backpedalling, as Parker points out, to claim that even poststructuralism was always "crypto-ethical" (8), it is nevertheless important that there has been a *fin-de-siècle* resurgence of interest in ethics in philosophical, literary, and theoretical studies.

One of the major reasons for the ethical turn in literary theory, it has been suggested, is that theorist Paul de Man's collaboration in Nazism was discovered: Geoffrey Galt Harpham writes in his book *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism of the Just Society* (1999) that "On or about December 1, 1987, the nature of literary theory changed" (20). In the aftermath of this news, Harpham says, it was clear that "ethics was on the agenda" (21), and everyone from Jacques Derrida to Julia Kristeva "turned" (24): "Even the theory of postmodernism, which originally defined itself in opposition to such aspects of 'modernity' as Jürgen Habermas's neo-Kantian 'discourse ethics,' subsequently advanced its own ethic" (24). Since this "turn" in literary theory,

---

<sup>36</sup> For an example of literary theorists hopping on the ethical bandwagon, see *The Turn to Ethics* (2000), edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. See also my review of this collection of essays in *The Dalhousie Review* (2000).

“deconstruction has begun to present its way of reading texts, its rigorous resistance to dogma, as an ethical imperative” (Parker 7).<sup>37</sup>

### Ethics and Morality

Harpham himself advocates the idea that ethics always resists closure: he argues that “Articulating perplexity, rather than guiding, is what ethics is all about” (27). Traditionally, morality is distinguished from ethics in that it has to do with doing right or wrong, or believing certain things about right and wrong, while ethics involves the study of that doing or believing. It is true that ethics is not fixed in the way that morality is; ethics has to do with reflection, sustained questioning, and an openness to reevaluation. But Harpham’s argument that ethics “sustains an august reticence, a principled irresolution” and that it thrives in “the strictly undecidable” that “suffers determination by morality” (55-56) is excessive in its focus on playful indeterminacy. For him, ethics is, or should be, “disinterested,” while morality is inescapably “interested.” Although ethics is indeed the open-minded contemplation of the moral life, Bernard Williams is right to point out that the relativist’s “midair position,” theoretically separate from responsibility, is impossible in practice (*Morality* [1972] 29).

Casting ethics (playful and indeterminate) as good and morality (fixed, bound, and ideological) as bad polarizes two things that are ideally complementary. In Gibson’s formulation of the field, following Harpham, ethics “operates a kind of play within morality, holds it open, hopes to restrain it from violence or the will to domination,

---

<sup>37</sup> Parker points to recent books by Barbara Johnson (*A World of Difference* [1987]) and Hillis Miller (*The Ethics of Reading* [1987]), as well as to the work of Derrida, Kristeva, and de Man (7).

subjects it to a ‘kind of auto-deconstruction’” (15). I want to distinguish between the new post-structural ethics that claims all reflection, including the political, as ethics (outlined by Harpham and Gibson, as well as Lawrence Buell,<sup>38</sup> for example, and for quite a different purpose, but in the same manner, Wayne C. Booth<sup>39</sup>), and ethics as outlined by Annas, MacIntyre, and others in which the good is not merely a contingency, but a central focus of that reflection. Lisa Sowle Cahill’s definition links ethics and morality much more closely and positively: she writes that “‘Ethics’ refers to interpretation of ideals and norms for moral behaviour, at both the individual and the societal levels” (“Gender and Christian Ethics” [2001] 113). What I mean by ethics has to do with the contemplation of the moral life, the good life as a whole: it is not an ethics of either hard cases or indeterminate play.

Williams notes in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985), that one of the problems of talking about morality and ethics is that “The word ‘virtue’ has for the most part acquired comic or otherwise undesirable associations, and few now use it except philosophers” (9). Annette Baier is one philosopher who objects to what she calls the “old” and “patriarchal” approach to ethics that involves Aristotle and Aquinas, and she argues that “No feminist with any sense of etymology is likely to select the word ‘virtue’ for whatever sort of moral excellence she is endorsing, but we have not settled on a better word” (“Ethics in Many Different Voices” [1998] 249). But the word “virtue” has not lost its usefulness, even for feminists, although it certainly has negative associations with

---

<sup>38</sup> See Buell, “What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics” (2000).

<sup>39</sup> See Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). Booth reaches for the earlier meaning of “virtue” as “power” or “strength,” and therefore reads “ethics” as including “the entire range of effects on the ‘character’ or ‘person’ or ‘self.’ ‘Moral judgments,” he says, “are only a small part of it” (*Company* 8).

both male power (“virtù”) and, sometimes exclusively, female chastity. Baier’s objection presumably stems from the latter definition of virtue as chastity, but the fact that “virtue” has been used for the extremes of perceived sexual difference need not render it unusable for the quality or qualities of moral excellence that are available to both men and women.<sup>40</sup> Reclaiming a range of virtues to replace gendered stereotypes is a useful endeavour—it is not necessary to reject the word “virtue” outright. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>41</sup> even for Christopher Marlowe, whose plays often represent the masculine power of “virtù”, the actions of female characters may complicate conventional definitions of “virtue” and “virtù”—rejecting the words means eliminating the tensions, the complexities, and the sometimes subversive things that writers and their characters do with the concept of virtue. Tracing the history of the term “moral,” MacIntyre notes the beginnings of its association with “moral virtue” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; prior to that it had meant, more or less, “practical.” It was not until the late seventeenth century that the word took on the more restricted association with sexual behaviour (MacIntyre 38-39). The word “virtue” has been associated with power and strength, with efficacy, and with excellence.

Even apart from postmodern assumptions about the negative connotations of the English word “virtue,” there is still the question of translation: specifically, when Aristotle speaks of “aretē,” he is dealing with a kind of “excellence” that is usually translated as “virtue.” As Philippa Foot reminds us,

---

<sup>40</sup> For example, Cahill argues that the example of female Christian martyrs demonstrates that virtue as power is determined by character, not biology (118).

<sup>41</sup> See “‘I cannot love, to be an emperress’: Women and Honour in *Tamburlaine*” (2000).

When we talk about the virtues we are not taking as our subject everything to which Aristotle gave the name *aretē* or Aquinas *virtus*, and consequently not everything called a virtue in translations of these authors. ‘The virtues’ to us are the moral virtues whereas *aretē* and *virtus* refer also to arts, and even to excellences of the speculative intellect whose domain is theory rather than practice. (*Virtues and Vices* [1978] 2)

Nevertheless, Aristotle and Aquinas were addressing the problem of how to be good, and with an awareness of differences between moral goodness and excellence in the arts, it is possible to talk about the powers and possibilities of the virtues. Aristotle is very much concerned in the *Nicomachean Ethics* with the importance of choice in the exercise of virtue—he says that this kind of excellence is “in our power” and “voluntary” (1113b), distinguishing voluntary and involuntary excellences—and “The human *aretai*, from Plato onwards, are quite routinely taken to be courage, temperance, intelligence and justice, with other virtues as subdivisions of these” (Annas 130). Jane Austen emphasizes the importance of personal responsibility for choices, and she is interested in the development of good qualities. Beginning with the idea that ancient theories about virtue, along with ethics in the writings of medieval and early modern writers, will be useful in explicating Austen’s novels, I shall turn now to look at the writers who may have informed her ethical view.

### Austen’s Reading

Austen’s concept of the virtues is closely related to Aristotle’s formulation of the virtuous mean: whether she illuminates his principles or he anticipates her

characterizations of virtue, the two follow similar patterns of thinking about virtue. A number of Austen's critics, including MacIntyre (1981) and Allan Bloom (1993), have identified Austen's affinities with ancient writers, and many of them, from Richard Whately in 1821, to Gilbert Ryle in 1966, D.D. Devlin in 1975, John Graham Rowell in 1988, Anne Crippen Ruderman in 1995, David Fott and David Gallop in 1999, and Lorrie Clark in 2000 have named her an Aristotelian.<sup>42</sup> While Fott sees her fiction exemplifying and re-vivifying Aristotelian principles, Gallop, intriguingly, suggests that perhaps it is more the case that Aristotle anticipates Austen. This latter possibility helps get around the question of whether or not Austen actually read Aristotle, or, for that matter, any other philosophy, for as Whately and Ryle both point out, it is difficult to determine the source of Austen's Aristotelianism. (Of course, it would be even more difficult to carry any further an answer as to how Aristotle acquired Austenian principles.) Whately says, "We know not whether Miss Austin [sic] ever had access to the precepts of Aristotle, but there are few, if any writers of fiction who have illustrated them more successfully" (96). Although Fott and Gallop have cited this remark in connection with Austen's ethics, Whately is more likely referring to the principles of Aristotle's *Poetics* rather than to those of the *Ethics*, as he is discussing Austen's command of action and probability. George Whalley, in "Jane Austen: Poet" (1975) also discusses the ways in which Austen's prose fiction exemplifies the "dynamic and radical" view of tragedy that

---

<sup>42</sup> Richard Simpson, writing in 1870, tended to see her as a Platonist. Gallop first likens her to Plato before aligning her with Aristotle (96), but his reasoning is flawed. He suggests that Austen's characters, like Plato's, illustrate abstract concepts, as in *Pride*, *Prejudice*, *Sense*, *Sensibility*, *Persuasion*, and display personal growth, but his acceptance of these titles as didactic formulae for Austen's characters neglects the complexities of the novels and perpetuates an interpretation that has long been called into question by

Aristotle held (113). Whether she was influenced by the ideas of the *Ethics*, the *Poetics*, or both, it is difficult to know if she read Aristotle or acquired Aristotelian principles indirectly.

Ryle speculates that Austen was, “whether she knew it or not, a Shaftesburian;” that is, that she inherited Aristotelianism through the influence of Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury and author of *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue, or Merit* (1699).<sup>43</sup> Devlin argues instead that Johnson and Bishop Butler are the sources for Austen’s classical conception of virtue, objecting that “Shaftesburian sentiment is close to selfishness, and in Jane Austen’s work often signals it,” and that “Shaftesbury does not distinguish between the aesthetic and the moral.” Aligning Shaftesbury more with Hume and Hutcheson than with Aristotle, Devlin concludes that freedom of will is important for Austen in a way that scarcely matters to Shaftesbury (*Jane Austen and Education* [1975] 52-62; 74). Gallop’s recourse to his Coleridgean epigraph, “Every man is born an Aristotelian or a Platonist,” as a solution to the problem of establishing how Austen knew Aristotle is understandable: he concludes that “Coleridge himself has fortunately relieved us of any need to prove that Jane Austen acquired knowledge of Aristotle during her lifetime,” as she must have been born an Aristotelian (106).

Like Devlin, Gallop says that Ryle’s case for the inheritance of Aristotelian thought from Shaftesbury is weak (Gallop 109 n. 22), but Gallop’s own reasoning in

---

Austen critics. While I invoke some of Plato’s ideas about ethics in this chapter, I conclude that Austen has more in common with Aristotle.

<sup>43</sup> Ryle writes that “Shaftesbury had opened a window through which a relatively few people in the eighteenth century inhaled some air with Aristotelian oxygen in it. Jane Austen had sniffed this oxygen. It may be that she did not know who had opened the window. But I shall put an edge on the issue by surmizing, incidentally, that she did know” (“Jane Austen and the Moralists” [1968] 122).



arguing that Austen hadn't read Shaftesbury is inconsistent. He thinks it unlikely that Austen's letter to the Reverend James Stanier Clarke, the Prince Regent's librarian, downplays *both* her knowledge of foreign languages and her knowledge of philosophy. When Austen wrote to Clarke to refuse his suggested theme—the story of a naval clergyman much like himself—for her next novel, she wrote modestly of herself as a woman “who knows only her own Mother tongue and has read very little in that” (*Letters* 11 December 1815). Gallop points out that Austen did in fact know French (106), but then he evidences the absence of classical allusion in the novels to argue for the unlikelihood of her having read even translations of the classics. She knew more than just her mother tongue, which indicates that it is possible she read a great deal in languages other than her own. This reading may have included classical authors, but even if it didn't, her reading could still possibly have included Shaftesbury, or other writers on the ethical life. F.R. Leavis writes that “she read all there was to read, and took all that was useful to her” (5). Frank Bradbrook concludes in his study of *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors* (1967) that “Though the exact extent of Jane Austen's reading can never be known . . . it is probably more comprehensive than has been suspected” (139), and I believe this is still true.

If she was being excessively modest about her knowledge of languages, why would we necessarily assume that her modest assessment of her reading is adequate? It would be like accepting Anne Elliot's claim after, as her cousin says, “translat[ing] at sight these inverted, transposed, curtailed Italian lines, into clear, comprehensible, elegant English,” that “I do not pretend to understand the language. I am a very poor Italian

scholar” (P 186).<sup>44</sup> Austen’s family read aloud to each other and discussed human nature; her brothers attended Oxford and received a classical education; and Austen read more than “only novels.” Margaret Doody notes in “Jane Austen’s Reading” (1986) that aside from a brief classical allusion in *Mansfield Park*, in Austen’s novels “There is not one other reference to any classical myth, story, or character” and that “There is no other novelist, male or female, of her time of whom this is true” (355). Although Doody argues that “There is nothing of the Ancient discernible in [Austen’s] composition,” saying that “We must not confuse her own classical nature [i.e., the sense of balance and harmony in her style of writing] with any interest on her part in antiquity or in classical literature in the stricter sense” (355), the absence of classical allusions in the novels does not necessarily mean that Austen was not interested in the ideas of classical writers.

Basing her argument partly on classical allusions found in the juvenilia, Mary DeForest has suggested that Austen may in fact have had something of a classical education (“Jane Austen and the Anti-Heroic Tradition” [1988]). More recently, in an article called “Jane Austen: Closet Classicist” (2000), DeForest has argued that Austen probably did learn Greek and Latin from her father, who, after all, tutored other people’s children in these and other subjects.<sup>45</sup> DeForest suggests that Austen’s caricature of Lady Jane Grey—“an amiable young woman and famous for reading Greek while other people were hunting,” who “wrote a Sentence in Latin & another in Greek on seeing the dead Body of her Husband accidentally passing that way” (MW 142; 144)—“may well be a humorous portrait of Austen herself” (“Closet Classicist” 101). If Austen did know

---

<sup>44</sup> Mr. Elliot is also trying to flatter Anne, of course, but even the narrator has told us, more plainly, that “in the interval succeeding an Italian song, she explained the words of the song to Mr. Elliot” (P 185).

Greek, she might have read Aristotle's *Ethics*, and if, like Anne Elliot, she knew Italian, she might also have read Dante's *Divine Comedy*. But translations of both Aristotle and Dante would have been available. Dante's journey through *Purgatory*, with its close analysis in Cantos 9 through 28 of the hierarchy of vices and virtues, is an especially powerful example of the classical and theological virtues in imaginative literature. It is possible as well that Austen may have been influenced by the tradition of the moral exemplum, particularly as it appears in Chaucer's works—for example, in the Parson's Tale. Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, with its attempt to portray "the image of a brave knight, perfected in the twelve private moral vertues, as Aristotle hath devised" (1-2), is another possible influence.<sup>46</sup>

It is interesting to consider the possibilities of what Austen read, though of course, as Doody remarks, "The record of what any individual has read is almost always incomplete" (347), and as DeForest suggests, "If Jane Austen did learn Latin and Greek, neither she nor her family would have publicized this fact" ("Closet Classicist" 98). Quite apart from speculation about what Austen may have read, however, we do know that she read Shakespeare, and I believe that her ethical standpoint is strongly influenced by his plays.<sup>47</sup> In fact, Shakespeare's work is one of the most likely sources through

---

<sup>45</sup> See also DeForest, "Eighteenth-Century Women and the Languages of Power" (1992).

<sup>46</sup> Because Austen wrote about reading Robert Henry's *History of Great Britain* (1788), Doody speculates that Austen "could have read some fragments of Anglo-Saxon and of medieval poets including Chaucer. . . . But we have no idea whether she did complete her task and read all the volumes" (352). Doody says, "We can doubt if she ever read Spenser" (356), but a lack of reference to his work doesn't automatically mean Austen wasn't familiar with it.

<sup>47</sup> Other critics, including Macaulay and Simpson in the nineteenth century, have noted the parallels between Austen and Shakespeare, but there has not yet been a study devoted specifically to the relation between these two writers. This kind of analysis would be well worth pursuing. As Janet Ayling points out (90), F.R. Leavis raised but did not

which Austen absorbed Aristotelian principles. As A. Walton Litz suggests, it is the “harmony between characters and the base of reality—which is but to say, between characters and action—that made Jane Austen’s nineteenth-century critics appeal so often to Shakespeare, and in Aristotelian terms: a critical comparison that may, in the long run, yield more profound insights than the twentieth century’s penchant for comparing her art to Henry James’s” (“A Development of Self’: Character and Personality in Jane Austen’s Fiction” [1976] 66). It is in Rudyard Kipling’s story “The Janeites” (1926) that a character suggests Jane Austen might have been “the mother of ’Enery James.”

C.S. Lewis suggests that Austen is more likely to be the daughter of Samuel Johnson than the mother of Henry James (“A Note on Jane Austen” [1954] 371). Lewis distances Austen from having Henry James as her heir, or son: “Her style, her system of values, her temper, seem to me the very opposite of his. I feel sure that Isabel Archer, if she had met Elizabeth Bennet, would have pronounced her ‘not very cultivated’; and Elizabeth, I fear, would have found Isabel deficient both in ‘seriousness’ and in mirth” (371). I take *mirth* here to refer to the kind of religious joy that comes from strong faith, what Lewis says is faith in something strong enough that seriousness and good humour can coexist. As he says earlier in the article, “The hard core of morality and even of religion seems to me to be just what makes good comedy possible” (370). “Good humour,” then, as it applies to Austen’s characters, is surely closely allied to mirth and

---

pursue the connection, and George Whalley does elucidate to some degree the relationship between Austen and Shakespeare in his essay “Jane Austen: Poet” (1976). Harold Bloom notes in *The Western Canon* (1994) that “Austen’s irony is very Shakespearean” (256), and draws a specific comparison between Anne Elliot and Rosalind of *As You Like It* as characters who almost reach “the mastery of perspective that can be available only to the novelist or playwright, lest all dramatic quality be lost from the novel or play” (255).

religious faith.<sup>48</sup> Lewis is right about the discontinuity with James. Similarly, MacIntyre, though he perpetuates the infelicitous familial metaphor—he says Kipling “might better have said the grandmother” of James—points to the differences between Austen and James when he says that the latter “writes of a world in which—the progress of his own novels attests to it—the substance of morality is increasingly elusive” (243).

It is quite possible that Johnson was a powerful influence on Austen’s attitude toward ethics.<sup>49</sup> For one thing, her novels bear out the truth of his maxim in *Rambler* No. 4, “The New Realistic Novel,” that fiction is able to “convey the knowledge of vice and virtue with more efficacy than axioms and definitions.” Famously, Johnson adds that “the best examples only should be exhibited,” in order

to teach the means of avoiding the snakes which are laid by Treachery for Innocence, without infusing any wish for that superiority with which the betrayer flatters his vanity; to give the power of counteracting fraud, without the temptation to practice it; to initiate youth by mock encounters in the act of necessary defence, and to increase prudence without impairing virtue. (177)

Yet Johnson does not want virtue to be portrayed in the extreme: he does want it to be inspirational, but not “angelical, nor above probability” (178). Fiction offers a medium in which to analyze the complexities of believable virtue as well as all-too believable vice.

For Austen, who read widely, the genre of the novel was a clear and appealing choice. It is more likely that she began with a genre, and through it developed—and even

---

<sup>48</sup> I discuss the relationship between humour and faith at greater length in Chapter Five, on *Mansfield Park*.

discovered—her ethical standpoint, than that she formulated an ethical system first and then set out to find the right medium in which to express and expound it. Hence I believe that it was the process of writing about the complexities of character that led her to an illumination of ethical principles, rather than that she chose to write novels instead of treatises to set forth her theories. Her novels are subtle, not didactic, but they still accomplish the goal Johnson sets for fiction:

It is therefore to be steadily inculcated, that virtue is the highest proof of understanding, and the only solid basis of greatness; and that vice is the natural consequence of narrow thoughts, that it begins in mistakes, and ends in ignominy. (178-79)

Johnson also provides an account of the neglect of the classical and Christian virtues in “The Vanity of Human Wishes” (1749), in which “With distant voice neglected Virtue calls / Less heard and less, the faint remonstrance falls” (331-34), and yet supplication to heaven “for a healthful mind, / Obedient passions, and a will resigned” (359-60), for love, for patience, and for faith (361-63) may be successful. The poem concludes,

These goods for man the laws of heaven ordain,  
 These goods he grants, who grants the power to gain;  
 With these celestial wisdom calms the mind,  
 And makes the happiness she does not find. (365-68)

Here the emphasis is on the search for happiness, but happiness can only be discovered through wisdom and grace, and through faith, hope, and charity. Johnson provided more than balanced structure and style as an example for Austen in her own work: he also

---

<sup>49</sup> For a more in-depth study of the relation between Austen’s and Johnson’s work

made the virtues, plural, vivid in contemporary writing in a way that most eighteenth-century novelists, writing about the sexual purity of women as virtue, did not.

Henry Fielding is another writer who made the vices as well as the virtues vivid in the literature of Austen's time, and his frequent references to Aristotle and Plato in *Tom Jones* (1749) suggest a source for Austen's familiarity with Aristotle. Like Fielding, Austen frequently describes ironically "domestic Government[s] founded upon Rules directly contrary to those of Aristotle" (Fielding 55), and she shares with him a desire "to laugh Mankind out of their favourite Follies and Vices" (Fielding 7). There is more than one character in Austen's novels who resembles the philosopher Mr. Square who, although he is "deeply read in the Antients, and a profest Master of all the Works of *Plato* and *Aristotle*," nevertheless regards "all Virtue as a Matter of Theory only" (82). Mr. Bennet is one example of the learned man who prefers to contemplate morality in theory, usually with irony and cynicism, than to act in a way that is consistent with ethical principles.

Although it is interesting to speculate about how Austen's reading may have influenced her writing, it is true that how, or even whether, Austen knew Aristotle and other ancient, medieval, and early modern writers (and even Johnson) is still not essential to an understanding of her representation of the virtues. As Aristotle says in Book Three of the *Physics*, sometimes concentrating on the mechanics of causing can distract us from what causing and agency mean; by extension, in literary criticism, though the historical exercise can be useful, trying to prove what an author read may distract from the significance of what the author does with ideas. The question that is always the

---

generally, see Peter L. DeRose, *Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson* (1980).

beginning of ethical thought is “How ought I to live?”; as Julia Annas suggests, this question “is not taken to be in origin a philosopher’s question; it is a question which an ordinary person will at some point put to herself” (27). In this line of thinking, it is not imperative to demonstrate Austen’s familiarity with philosophical works: while her answers to this question will often be sophisticated, it is not necessarily because she has absorbed the theories of philosophers, but perhaps it is because she has asked the question herself and brought to her consideration of it the authority of both her experience and her reading.

In discussing the virtues in Austen’s novels, therefore, I focus on virtues that she herself highlights, rather than simply reading her work in the framework of the various lists of virtues that have been drawn up. Plato provides the first recorded articulation of the idea that there are four cardinal virtues: Part Five of the *Republic* is usually taken to be the first passage in Greek literature to set forth the doctrine of the four cardinal virtues (although the word often used in translations is “qualities”): Socrates says to Glaucon that “If we have founded it properly, our state is presumably perfect,” and that it will therefore “obviously have the qualities of wisdom, courage, self-discipline, and justice” (427E). Aristotle’s systematic approach to virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics* divides them into the categories of moral, intellectual, and social virtues. Contrary to what Spenser indicates in the *Faerie Queen*, Aristotle does not list just twelve moral virtues: it was later commentators—including Spenser’s friend Lodowick Bryskett in his *Discourse of Civill Life*—who proposed that there be twelve virtues.<sup>50</sup> More commonly, Christian writers have accepted the doctrine of the seven virtues; this list is composed of the

---

<sup>50</sup> According to Spenser’s editor Hugh Maclean (2 n.7).



cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice and the biblical virtues of faith, hope, and charity. In my analysis of Austen's novels, especially in my discussions of *Sense and Sensibility* (Chapter Three) and of *Pride and Prejudice* (Chapter Four), I talk about some of the virtues of social intercourse that Aristotle outlines, and in each of the six chapters on the novels I stress the importance of one particular cardinal or theological virtue to the novel's developments. The Aristotelian virtue of amiability is especially important in all the novels. Throughout my study, however, I focus above all on analysing the ways Austen shows characters learning and practising a range of the virtues.

### Teleology (and Marriage)

Two of the major subjects in Austen's novels are moral education and marriage. Both of these topics have been discussed many times before by her critics, but what is the relation between the two? Is it really so clear that marriage is the reward the heroine deserves because she has learned to be virtuous? Six novels end in marriage for at least one virtuous heroine, sometimes two, and even *Lady Susan* ends with a marriage, although "whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice—I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question?" (*MW* 313). In the Aristotelian framework, the life of an agent is thought to have a *telos*, an end or goal, and for Aristotle that *telos* is *eudaimonia*, often translated as "happiness." *Eudaimonia* suggests a concept of something more than pleasure; it has to do with well-being in general: Hursthouse proposes that the word "flourishing" gets at the term's meaning better than the word "happiness" (10). Aristotle says that "we have

practically defined happiness as a sort of good life or good action” (1098b.21-22). This way of viewing the ethical life is “teleological,” and it is common to associate virtue ethics with teleology.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to exponents of the teleological view of moral life, Kant in the eighteenth century reformulates ethics as necessary actions having strikingly little to do with happiness; for him the moral life is often achieved only at the expense of happiness. In his view, we are to aim not at happiness, but at moral dignity.<sup>52</sup> His insistence that moral choices be made as if each one could and would be extended as a universal law—“I should never act in such a way that I could not also will that my maxim should be a universal law” (*Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* [1785] 69)—means that the life of the individual is subordinate to the institution of moral law.<sup>53</sup> Austen’s characters however, experience morality as a positive, if difficult, choice, not as a sacrifice, for even when they do choose to defer or renounce gratification (for example, Fanny Price in her ascetic mode) it is in the service of a greater good, a Christian good that sustains them, rather than in the sense of irrevocable secular loss.

It is MacIntyre’s argument that Jane Austen “restores a teleological perspective” in turning “away from the competing catalogues of the virtues of the eighteenth century.” For him, Austen’s heroines accomplish their *telos* in marriage: they “seek the good through seeking their own good in marriage” (240). But while there is merit in this

---

<sup>51</sup> Although virtue ethics is usually aligned with teleology, in her book *Character, Virtue Theory, and the Vices* (1999), Christine McKinnon attempts a defence of virtue ethics without recourse to teleological arguments. She argues instead that virtue is a tool for “character-construction,” thereby appropriating the virtues to a social-constructionist model.

<sup>52</sup> Neil Robertson, “Kant and the French Enlightenment” (2001).

<sup>53</sup> Ironically, Kant’s philosophy arises from the new individualism of the Enlightenment.

argument, to imply that Austen's women fulfil themselves solely or ultimately in marriage leaves MacIntyre open to charges such as that of Susan Moller Okin, who objects—in relation to MacIntyre's larger project—that the moral narratives MacIntyre regards as essential to an education in virtue are problematic in their reliance on gender stereotypes (“Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues” [1996]). MacIntyre does not, for example, suggest that Mr. Darcy and Mr. Knightley fulfil their ultimate good through marriage. I disagree with MacIntyre that the *telos* for Austen's heroines is marriage, and I also disagree with Okin's view that an education in virtue simply requires the heroine to submit to the hero's power.

Judith Lowder Newton argues that Elizabeth Bennet moralizes too much at the end of *Pride and Prejudice*, and that the reason for this is that “marriage requires her to dwindle by degrees into a wife” (84). This interpretation is far from the idea that Elizabeth's wise marriage accomplishes the teleological aim of her life. In contrast to Newton I think that Elizabeth, treating Darcy after they are married with a “lively sportive manner of talking” and making him “the object of open pleasantry” (*PP* 249), has hardly lost her wit or her independent spirit. She doesn't moralize more at the end of the novel than she did at the beginning, either. Her moral pronouncements early on—“Implacable resentment *is* a shade in a character” (*PP* 39); “And *your* defect is to hate everybody” (*PP* 40)—are far more absolute, and towards the end she begins to “wish that her former opinions had been more reasonable, her expressions more moderate!” (*PP* 242). Moderating excess is not “dwindling”: Elizabeth moralizes less at the end of the novel because she has learned about judgement and ethical fairness, not because she has subjugated her opinion to her husband's.

Newton's main evidence for suggesting that Elizabeth is obliged to "dwindle" in marriage is that according to Mr. Bennet, Elizabeth "could be neither happy nor respectable unless [she] truly esteemed [her] husband, unless [she] looked up to him as a superior." However, Newton neglects to quote Mr. Bennet's next line, which is that "Your lively talents would place you in the greatest danger in an unequal marriage" (*PP* 242). Though Mr. Bennet can't exactly be taken as the last authorial word on the situation, given his tendency to exalt the absurd over the sensible, we should at least give him the benefit of both parts of his speech. He does not stop at the idea that Elizabeth must see Darcy as her superior, and thus subordinate herself to him; instead, he suggests that any marriage that is not between equals is dangerous, doomed. Allan Bloom argues cogently that this idea means Elizabeth and Darcy must each learn to regard the other as superior, in a complex understanding of both hierarchy and equality (*Love and Friendship* [1993] 200).<sup>54</sup> I raise the issue of complex equality in *Pride and Prejudice* here because it is central to my argument about Austen's work as a whole: my line of analysis traces the reasons why the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy is one of equals, and the implications of that equality for an assessment of Austen's achievement.

For those of Austen's characters who begin their education in moral knowledge in the course of a novel, marriage may be the goal through which they fulfil their *telos*. This category would include Emma, Catherine, and Marianne. But the heroines who know how to be virtuous when their novels begin—Elinor, Fanny, and Anne—can be seen as happy in their virtue, if not in their romantic attachments, throughout their histories, and thus not exclusively dependent on their choice of prospective husbands for

---

<sup>54</sup> See also my article "Radical Marriage" (1999).

moral goodness or happiness.<sup>55</sup> The wise marriage may increase that happiness, even exponentially, but it is not the sole condition or end of the practice of virtue. Claudia L. Johnson is right to say that “Marriage is an unquestioned necessity in Austen’s novels, but it is never the first or only necessity, and the women, as well as the men, who pursue it as though it were never enjoy the full benefits of authorial approval, even if they are spared the burden of specific censure” (*Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* [1988] 92). The marriage of Elizabeth and Darcy is one of fulfilment and happiness, and yet both of them, like Elinor, Fanny, and Anne, are obliged to find fulfilment in the exercise of their own independent happiness first.

How do these characters work towards *eudaimonia* and discover the right *telos*? Plato’s *Symposium* offers compelling arguments for the role of *eros* in ethics. In the first speech, Phaedrus makes the case for the importance of shame: because we are loath to do something that is shameful in the eyes of the beloved, he says, the fear of shame motivates us to act ethically so as to please the beloved. This speech helps to illuminate Darcy’s reasons for writing his letter of explanation to Elizabeth: because he loves and desires her, he wants to make sure that she doesn’t see his actions as shameful. Frank Churchill, by contrast, has no shame, ridiculing other people and leading Emma to question the relation between Jane Fairfax and Mr. Dixon. Even though Jane is his own beloved and betrothed, he flirts with Emma publicly and treats Jane badly. Later in the

---

<sup>55</sup> Susan Morgan divides the novels into the categories of Novels of Crisis (*Emma*, *Northanger Abbey*, and *Pride and Prejudice*) and Novels of Passage (*Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*); Susan Kneidler divides them into Sisterhood Novels (*Northanger Abbey* and *Emma*), Family Heritage Novels (*Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park*), and Patriarchy Novels (*Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*). I find it more helpful to think in terms of kinds of heroines than types of

*Symposium*, Socrates reveals what Diotima has taught him about love: instead of simply desiring to avoid shame, she says, what *eros* wants is wholeness and completeness. Erotic love, therefore, can have as its *telos* the good. In the initial stages of love, desire may lead us simply to avoid shame, but as love matures, desire moves us to act positively in the service of the good. *Eros* then becomes the active pursuit of good rather than the avoidance of shame.

The Platonic notion of erotic desire as the moving force behind virtuous action can be useful in understanding Austen's work, but for her characters it is love more than desire that inspires virtue. The distinction between Plato's idea that what moves the world is desire, and Aristotle's notion that what moves the world is love is an important one for Austen, as it helps to explain, to borrow Susan Morgan's phrase, "Why there's no sex in Jane Austen's fiction." In the article and book chapter that bear this title, Morgan argues that "Austen's fiction simply leaves out the whole politics of domination and submission that we have been so carefully taught to confuse with a natural passion" (*Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* [1989] 39). Morgan argues persuasively that "Offering forms of passion other than what tradition has defined as natural and sexual is at the heart of what Austen brings to portrayals of women in British fiction" (*Sisters* 38). Morgan points out that "Many Austen readers, themselves committed both to sex and progress, seem relieved to assert that in her last novel, *Persuasion*, passion at least, though not, of course, actual sex, does appear" (*Sisters* 39).<sup>56</sup>

---

novel, and in any case I argue that neither Lady Susan nor Elizabeth Bennet performs according to type.

<sup>56</sup> Morgan attributes the initiation of the interpretation of *Persuasion* as the passionate novel to Virginia Woolf, who wrote that in *Persuasion* Austen "is beginning to discover that the world is larger, more mysterious, and more romantic than she had supposed"

While I agree with Morgan that our contemporary expectations of desire in novels may lead us to undervalue the kinds of passion that Austen does explore, I also think it important to stress the Aristotelian importance of love more than desire as a virtuous passion that motivates the actions of Austen's virtuous characters. The virtue of Mr. Darcy is exercised when he acts to preserve Lydia's reputation (and thereby Elizabeth's) from ruin: he is motivated partly by the fear that shame will injure his beloved; yet the higher motive that moves him is the desire to act justly. The dilemma of Lydia's elopement with Wickham has been possible partly because of Darcy's own concealment of Wickham's past actions, and he seeks to restore justice to the injured Bennet family. It is his love of honour that led him to conceal Wickham's past behaviour; it is his love of honour combined with his love for Elizabeth that leads him to effect Lydia's marriage. Love and virtue, more than desire or shame, inspire Darcy's actions. The distinction between acting virtuously to avoid pain and acting virtuously to promote the good is further illuminated by Plato's other dialogues.

### *Phronesis and Sophia*

In the *Meno* Plato distinguishes between the philosopher's virtue and ordinary virtue. In the *Phaedo* he has Socrates take up this distinction: "Ordinary virtue seems to be compared with a system of barter in which goods of a similar kind are exchanged for one another. The philosopher's virtue, however, introduces wisdom (*phronesis*)" (Tarrant 103). Although it is difficult to distinguish the views of the historical Socrates from the views of Plato's fictional Socrates, "Socrates is thought to have held that virtue

---

(*The Common Reader* [1925] 147). Morgan says that "Woolf, in her defense, could not

is a kind of wisdom or knowledge concerning what is truly good, possession of which is the only genuine human happiness,” and “since all the virtues are forms of this wisdom, they are all essentially expressions of one quality, a view which came to be known as the unity of the virtues” (Porter 97). Ordinary virtue has to do with avoiding pain in order to increase pleasure: Socrates calls this kind of adherence to principle illusory, and suggests that it is actually a kind of self-indulgence that forces one to be temperate for the sake of later pleasure. Those who possess ordinary virtue “are afraid of losing other pleasures which they desire, so they refrain from one kind because they cannot resist the other” (*Phaedo* 68E); “These people have neither mastered fear nor mastered desire . . . . They too think in terms of avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure” (Tarrant 102). Ordinary virtue is practical, and has to do with action. The philosopher’s virtue goes to the heart and mind, transcending and mastering fear and desire. As George Bernard Shaw puts it, “virtue consists, not in abstaining from vice, but in not desiring it” (qtd. in Willey 59).

Austen’s heroines, particularly Elinor, Fanny, and Anne, tend not to think of their behaviour in terms of desire resisted and pleasure postponed, but as a harmonious way of acting under the quotidian and the exigent pressures of their lives. Even for the heroines who are required to further their educations in virtue, making moral choices is all along more a matter of doing what is right than of avoiding what is wrong. That Austen’s heroines are more likely to behave in accordance with the philosopher’s virtue, and do what is right because it is right, suggests that they are capable of *phronesis*, but do they reach *sophia*? Both Gallop (99) and Fott (29) argue that Austen’s characters do not reach the level of *sophia*, wisdom or greatness of soul, because they act within the social world,

---

have known the use critics would make of that remark” (*Sisters* 237 n.38).



which has more to do with *phronesis*, practical wisdom, than with higher philosophical contemplation. Although this is true of Jane Bennet, Charlotte Lucas, Lady Russell, and Catherine Morland, who all function as virtuous figures as far as the practical realities of moral and social life are concerned, none of these characters ever thinks beyond practicalities to a greater good. However, Anne Elliot, Fanny Price, and Elinor Dashwood are already wise and exercise their wisdom, while Marianne Dashwood, Emma Woodhouse, and Elizabeth Bennet learn how to be wise and contemplate higher realities. Marianne does not have adequate time to develop her newfound wisdom, but the potential is there. These heroines possess *sophia* in varying degrees, but as Austen's mature heroines they are all closer to it than Catherine Morland, even though she was "in training for a heroine" (15).

The maturity of the heroine is determined by the extent of her moral education. Moral education, even for the ancient philosophers, was seen as in the service of God. Whether he says it explicitly or not, Aristotle implies throughout his ethical treatises that the contemplation of God and the contemplation of the good are one, and that this is the *telos* of the virtuous person. He describes this role in the *Eudemian Ethics*:

Whatever choice, then, or possession of the natural goods—whether bodily goods, wealth, friends, or other things—will most produce the contemplation of God, that choice or possession is best; this is the noblest standard, but any that through deficiency or excess hinders one from the contemplation and service of God, is bad. (1249b16, qtd. in Willey 23).

And in the *Nicomachean Ethics* he says that "the activity of God, which surpasses all others in blessedness, must be contemplative; and of human activities, therefore, that

which is most akin to this must be most of the nature of happiness” (1178b). The highest virtue is contemplative, and, as I shall argue in Chapter Five, Fanny Price is the character who best exemplifies the contemplative life, and who is the closest to *sophia*. Fanny is the heroine whose life of the mind is flourishing.

### Process

The *telos* for Austen’s virtuous characters, then, is not the achievement of a certain state—that is, as MacIntyre suggests, marriage—but a way of existing in a kind of harmony with life as a whole, whether that harmony has ultimately to do with *phronesis* or *sophia*. In the Cyrenaic school of philosophy, as for Thackeray’s or Oscar Wilde’s characters, the end of life is pleasure in experience; this attitude is very much a modern one too, and it defines happiness more as a sense of satisfaction achieved than as an ongoing process (Annas 38; 453). Annas argues that we need to study the ancients to learn to “interpret happiness in a more indeterminate and flexible way than we are used to” (453). I think we would do well to learn about this kind of happiness as a process through studying the ancients in conjunction with Austen. Austen’s Victorian critic Richard Simpson accurately describes her attitude toward the moral life: “She contemplates virtues, not as fixed quantities, or as definable qualities, but as continual struggles and conquests, as progressive states of mind, advancing by repulsing their contraries, or losing ground by being overcome” (249-250). As Juliet McMaster suggests in “The Continuity of Jane Austen’s Novels” (1970), Austen “is interested in virtues and vices, but she is more interested in defining the limits of each, in showing just at what point a virtue tips over into excess, or just to what extent a vice may be tolerable or even

necessary to redress a balance” (723). Virtue, for those Austen characters who practise it, is a process.

Aristotle says that happiness “is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action” (1097b. 21-22), and that human good is “activity of soul in accordance with virtue, and if there are more than one virtue, in accordance with the best and most complete,” and he adds, “in a complete life” (1098a.17-19). Philosophers after Aristotle, however, drop self-sufficiency as a necessary condition of one’s final end (Annas 41). Austen suggests that self-sufficiency is part of the equation, as her virtuous characters such as Elinor, Fanny, Anne, or Mr. Knightley, are initially self-sufficient, yet they maintain their virtue by constantly exercising good judgement. For Austen it is both process and goal. “Virtue ethics” has to do with a way of living, a way of behaving, as opposed to a deontological or Kantian method of making choices or following rules. Although Aristotle is the author of treatises on ethics, his approach to the ethical life is still instinctive rather than systematic. Like Plato, Austen sees virtue as something other than the avoidance of vice for the gratification of later pleasure; like Aristotle she sees its goal as a form of happiness, and yet she also sees virtue as more of a continuous process of attaining happiness, even in little, than as a final end.

In turning to ancient theories, Annas concludes that “The most important lesson which modern virtue ethics can learn from ancient ethical theories, in fact, is that virtue ethics, given a proper conception of virtue, has no tendency towards moral conservatism. Rather, it expresses a tendency to question and to reflect on conventional morality” (451). Although I disagree that this is the “most important lesson” to be learned from ancient ethical theories, I agree that an investigation into ancient theories reveals a flexible,

exciting, and challenging approach to the ethical life, and I believe that this questioning of conventional morality is certainly apparent in Jane Austen's conception of virtue. Annas's argument that "virtue ethics" has "no tendency towards moral conservatism" is too extreme. The ancients may often be radical, but they are also often conservative. In contrast to the argument that Austen is morally conservative in a straightforward and inflexible manner, and in contrast also to the notion that she is a revolutionary writer, my argument is that she comes close to hitting the mean. Though she celebrates wise marriage as one of the rewards of virtue, she is aware of the possibilities of virtue for its own sake; and yet her critique of marriage does not lead her to reject conventional life altogether. Questioning the excesses of both conservative convention and radical change, she explores the ways in which her heroines and heroes might reach the centre of the harmonious ethical life.

### The Habit of Activity

To explain how they reach that centre it will be necessary to look at Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his well-known doctrine of the mean in some detail. The mean is not a matter merely of moderation, but a question of degree. Aristotle separates things good in themselves from things that are merely useful (1096b.14-15); it is moral excellence that is good in itself, whereas other kinds of excellence may be useful goods. As well, Aristotle says that "By human virtue we mean not that of the body but of the soul; and happiness also we call an activity of the soul" (1102a.15-16). Virtue consists in action, and Aristotle argues that "no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities (these are thought to be more durable even than knowledge of the sciences), and

of these themselves the most valuable are more durable because those who are happy spend their life most readily and most continuously in these" (1100b.12-17). Anne Elliot, for example, is quiet, she is reserved, and yet she is not passive. She is happy in the activity of helping others, sharing her strengths in charitable actions and duties such as cataloguing her father's collections at Kellynch, looking after her nephews at Uppercross, or making decisions in the moments after Louisa's fall at Lyme. She demonstrates, in addition to her constancy in love for Wentworth, her constancy in her love for her neighbour through virtuous action.

Aristotle admits that virtuous actions seem to require some kind of "external goods" such as wealth, friends, beauty, because "it is impossible, or not easy, to do noble acts without the proper equipment" (1099b.1-2). Prosperity, at least to an extent, would seem to be a precondition of virtue—perhaps Thackeray's Becky Sharp is right after all that she could be a good woman if only she had five thousand a year, except that she would also have to undergo an education in virtue to displace her vanity. In the Christian tradition, poverty, loneliness, and ugliness do not preclude virtuous behaviour, and sometimes they even make it easier to reach purity of soul, but in the *Ethics* virtue is easier if supported by favourable material conditions. Anne's old school friend Mrs. Smith is an example of Christian perseverance and hope despite unfavourable conditions, but at the same time Fanny Price's poor family in Portsmouth exemplifies some of the difficulties of finding the time, energy, or inclination to be virtuous and well-behaved, and it is evident that Fanny's material condition at Mansfield Park, in concert with her education there, have made it easier for her to practise the good life, even the contemplative life. Austen is interested in both questions, exploring both the Christian

ideal of the poor widow giving away her last mite (Mark 12: 42-44), and the classical ideal of using one's material circumstances to benefit others.

In Book II Aristotle outlines the distinction between intellectual and moral virtue, and describes how we come to be virtuous: "Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit" (1103a.23-25). Virtue comes to be a habit of the soul, what Gerard Manley Hopkins would call the "habit of perfection," both something to be put on and worn, and something to be learned and practised. This practice, like the cultivation of any good habit, involves constant exercise in order to increase adaptability and flexibility:

the virtues we get by first exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well. For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them, e.g. men become builders by building and lyre-players by playing the lyre; so too we become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts. (1103a.32-1103b.2)

As with exercise, music, and other arts, the cultivation of such habits from the earliest stages of life is essential, because "states of character arise out of like activities" (1103b.21-22): "It makes no small difference, then, whether we form habits of one kind or another from our very youth; it makes a very great difference, or rather *all* the difference" (1103b.24-26).<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> See also Plato, *Laws* 653A ff. and *Republic* 401E-402A, on the importance of an education in virtue.

While Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis* (1905) rejects Aristotle's idea of cultivating virtuous habits, quoting Walter Pater's maxim "Failure is to form habits" (Pater 1353), I think that the more serious failure is to form bad habits. It is not habit itself that is good or bad, but the kind of habit that is chosen. Even Wilde and Pater advocated the forming of the habit of pleasure, the habit of seizing each moment as if it were the "hard, gemlike flame" of existence (Pater 1353), the habit of indulging desire. But intellectual virtue questions the authority of desire and seeks to understand it, not merely to conquer it. Education, whether to good or bad ends, is always the cultivation of certain kinds of habits of body and mind. Exercise and practice make it possible to learn skills and arts; the character, like the body, requires exercise to make it healthy.

The importance of education and learning even for those who are already wise is stressed in Proverbs 9, verse 9: "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser: teach a just man, and he will increase in learning." As Margaret Doody interprets Sir Edward Denham's reading habits in *Sanditon*, however, "It would seem that the good heart may indeed make good use of literature, but good books of any kind cannot give wisdom to a fool or create a right heart in a perverse reader" (Doody 349). Sir Edward

read all the Essays, Letters, Tours & Criticisms of the day—& with the same ill-luck which made him derive only false Principles from Lessons of Morality, & incentives to Vice from the History of it's [sic] Overthrow, he gathered only hard words and involved sentences from the style of our most approved Writers. (*MW* 404-405)

Nevertheless, for those who are ready to learn and eager to discern the truth, the habit of learning can lead to an increase in wisdom. Practising the flexibility of the intellect in

education makes the mind more readily adaptable to necessity and contingency. Perhaps Lady Catherine de Bourgh is not so far wrong in worrying about the neglect of the Bennet sisters' education—though her incivility in expressing that fear publicly can hardly arise from her own complete education in virtue.

### Choice

What are the circumstances that make possible the cultivation of virtue? Aristotle speaks of “potentiality for virtue” (1099b.19): he recognizes that the power of moral excellence is not all dependent on individual choice, but that it is affected to a large extent by nature and fortune. It is incumbent on the agent, therefore, to practise virtue in a given circumstance to the best of his ability: “For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances . . . . And if this is the case, the happy man can never become miserable—though he will not reach *blessedness*, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam” (1100b.35-1101a.8). Thus Anne Elliot, educated by disappointment, learns to make the best of the situations in which she is placed: when it seems that she must accompany her father and sister to Bath she thinks that though she would rather not go immediately, “It would be most right, and most wise, and therefore must involve least suffering to go with the others” (31). It is revealing that while she is in fact concerned with avoiding suffering, she gives pride of place to the reasons of what is “most right” and “most wise”—the “therefore” in her reasoning is telling. Upon her sister Mary's insistence that she requires Anne's presence at Uppercross Cottage, Anne readily revises her acceptance of her family's wishes in order to see Mary's claims now as a duty, for “To be claimed as



a good, though in an improper style, is at least better than being rejected as no good at all” (31). Making, as Chaucer has it in *The Knight's Tale*, “vertu of necessite,” Austen’s future wife of Wentworth avoids Bath and will be slightly happier at Uppercross—though her strength of mind would help her to avoid misery and despair in either place. It is divine grace, not effort or fortune alone that makes it possible for an individual to sustain a virtuous disposition.<sup>58</sup>

Distinguishing between virtues that are voluntary and the practice of virtue that involves choice, Aristotle suggests that the voluntary covers a wider range, as children and animals participate in voluntary actions, but choice involves deliberation, not just inclination or appetite (1111b.2 ff.). Although Anne is not able to choose where to go, she is free to choose how to respond to her family’s demands. Another distinction is between voluntary and involuntary: “Since that which is done under compulsion or by reason of ignorance is involuntary, the voluntary would seem to be that of which the moving principle is in the agent himself, he being aware of the particular circumstances of the action” (1111a.22-24); “Further, the doing of an act that is called involuntary in virtue of ignorance of this sort must be painful and involve repentance” (1111a.19-21).<sup>59</sup>

Ignorance is not an excuse for transgressions against virtue, as “we punish a man for his very ignorance, if he is thought responsible for the ignorance, as when penalties are doubled in the case of drunkenness; for the moving principle is in the man himself, since he had the power of not getting drunk and his getting drunk was the cause of his ignorance” (1113b.30-34). At the same time, wishing to do good is not enough either.

---

<sup>58</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II 55.4.

Aristotle says that wishing to be just and wishing to be healthy are inadequate, as to some extent each of these states depends on nature and on choice. Actions that are in our power are necessary for the education in virtue to be effected. While we do not blame those who are weak or infirm or ugly by nature, “we blame those who are so owing to want of exercise and care” (1114a.24-25). This passage may help to explain Austen’s description in *Persuasion* of Mrs. Musgrove’s “large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for” (66). Many readers have objected to Austen’s criticism of Mrs. Musgrove here, and have either condemned the author for uncharitableness, or comforted themselves by reassurances that she must have intended to revise this passage if she had had a chance. But in light of Aristotle’s view of the power of choice in health, wealthy Mrs. Musgrove is judged for excessive eating as well as for excessive, and hypocritical, grieving. As Isobel Grundy points out, for Wentworth “the comedy resides in the gulf between Dick [Musgrove] in fact and Dick in memory; like Anne, he overcomes the momentary ‘self-amusement’ of his own clearer memory, to offer serious and respectful sympathy to the grieving, misremembering mother (*Persuasion: or, the Triumph of Cheerfulness* [1996] 67). Despite criticism of Mrs. Musgrove, sympathy for grief wins out, over truthful assessment of character, as the virtuous action.

By analogy with the body, the action of the soul is judged in the same way: “Of vices of the body, then, those in our own power are blamed, those not in our power are not. And if this be so, in the other cases also the vices that are blamed must be in our

---

<sup>59</sup> The distinctions among the roles of choice and of voluntary and involuntary actions in the practice of virtue will resurface in my treatment of *Sense and Sensibility* in Chapter Two.

own power” (1114a.29-31). Early in *Pride and Prejudice*, during her stay at Netherfield, Elizabeth says to Mr. Darcy that she feels some faults are fair game for criticism and laughter, but that she recognizes there are limits to what can be mocked: she says, “I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good. Follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies *do* divert me, I own, and I laugh at them whenever I can” (PP 39). Plato writes in the *Republic* that it is idle to think anything ridiculous except what is wrong (171). What is wise and good is beyond reproach, just as what is weak or faulty by nature is beyond reproach. But what is faulty by design or neglect is blameable. The art is to learn how to distinguish the differences.

### Theological Virtues

Aristotle gives some direction in the *Ethics* about how to make ethical choices about moral action. Christian scriptures, however, do not offer explicit analysis of methods for making ethical decisions.<sup>60</sup> In the Old Testament, the Ten Commandments are obviously fundamental to the subsequent tradition of Judaeo-Christian virtue theory, but there is no Hebrew term that corresponds to *virtue*. And the emphasis here is on law and rules, not on modes of ethical choice. As John Barton explains, “What the Bible thinks about is not moral progress but *conversion*”:

Hebrew culture differs from Greek on precisely this issue: the Hebrew Bible does not operate with any idea that one can grow in virtue, but sees virtue as something one either has or lacks. It is true that if you give instruction to a wise man he will become wiser still (Prov. 9:9), but there

is no point in giving instruction to a fool, because he will persist in his folly just as much as before. (“Virtue in the Bible” [1999] 15)

Although the idea of “virtue” is not explicit in the Old Testament, Barton argues that something like a virtue ethic “may be implicit in places where morality is not directly under discussion”; he says he has in mind “principally the narrative texts of the Old Testament” (18), because “What we have in these stories is exactly that presentation of human beings in all their singularity which has been the subject of several virtue ethicists” (19). One example, Barton suggests, is the story of David judged by God for adultery, with Bathsheba: although adultery is judged as absolutely wrong, “David is not an *exemplum* but a person like ourselves, who illustrates the difficulties of the moral life not by what he teaches but by what he does and is” (20).

In the New Testament there are some explicit references to character traits that are particularly appropriate in the Christian life: the Apostle Paul lists traits such as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance (Galatians 5:22-23). The most influential biblical passage for Christian thought about virtue is simply this well-known passage: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity” (I Corinthians 13:13). In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul invokes these three when he writes that he remembers “without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father” (I Thessalonians 1:3). In his *Summa theologiae* (I-II 57.5) Thomas Aquinas points to 1 Corinthians 13:13 and Wisdom 8:7 for the lists of the virtues; the latter passage states that wisdom “teacheth temperance and

---

<sup>60</sup> My account of Christian virtue ethics in this section is indebted to Jean Porter’s

prudence and justice and fortitude.” The Christian tradition of the virtues, therefore, is the integration of these four cardinal virtues into a system in which the three theological virtues are paramount. Uniting the Apostle Paul’s formulation of faith, hope, and charity with the ethical thought of Aristotle, patristic and medieval scholastic writers from Augustine to Peter Abelard, Peter Lombard, William of Auxerre, and Thomas Aquinas analysed and developed the Christian view of the ethical life in accordance with both reason and divine love.

Because these thinkers relied on the Aristotelian tradition to illuminate the workings of natural reason, Aristotle’s theories are still central in Christian ethics. Jane Austen’s heroines discover the necessity of acting according to reason, but the main argument for suggesting that Austen also incorporates the theological virtues in her novels is that reason is always arrived at through faith and love. The novels are about judgement and discernment, and heroism in the face of folly, but there is yet something more—these heroines discover reason through a faith in love. The educative power of love in the novels is related in some degree to Augustine’s theory that all the virtues are expressions of love.<sup>61</sup>

### Faith

Aquinas calls love, hope, and faith “an immovable foundation” on which the cardinal virtues are established. He explains that “A virtue is called cardinal, meaning principal, because the other virtues are based on it much as a door swings on its hinges

---

comprehensive summary of the area in her 2001 essay entitled, simply, “Virtue Ethics.”

*(cardine)*” (109)<sup>62</sup>. Prudence, he says, “is general. To the extent that it has for its first object all the moral virtues.” Therefore, “every moral virtue ought to be prudent” (109). Timothy McDermott points out that “Aquinas’ ethical criticism is neither act-centred nor agent-centred, but end-centred” (“Beginnings and Ends: Some Thoughts on Thomas Aquinas, Virtue, and Emotions” [1999] 37). The beginning of virtue may be prudence, but as Aquinas outlines it, the foundation of virtue is faith (1 Corinthians 3:11), while hope is called an anchor (Hebrews 6:19), and charity is called the roof (Ephesians 3:17) (109). The end of virtue, then, is Christ: “Christian ethics is above all act-centred and end-centred. The act in which it is centred is an act of passion, Christ’s passion, his passover from life through death to a new life” (McDermott 46).

Like Aristotle, Aquinas sees the moral and intellectual virtues according to the doctrine of the mean, but he argues that the theological virtues are not in the mean (116). Cardinal virtues, then, must be balanced, while theological virtues must be all-pervasive. Again following Aristotle he accepts that virtues are best understood as habits. Aquinas focuses on two habits that depend on the will: they are prudence and faith. He concludes that “it is the habits of the second and last type which have the nature of virtue more perfectly and properly” (49). The contemplative life is an end in itself, he says, but “the active life, in which the moral virtues are practised, is a doorway to the contemplative life” (109). As I shall argue in subsequent chapters, Austen, like Aquinas, sees prudence

---

<sup>61</sup> See *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* I 15.25, cited in Porter 100. For further analysis of Augustine’s view of virtue, see John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (1994).

<sup>62</sup> Page references are to John Patrick Reid’s translation of *The Virtues (In General)*. (1975).

as primary, and faith as foundational and all-pervasive, for both the active and the contemplative life.

Summarizing Aquinas's view of how virtue works in the life of the individual, McDermott writes that

the principles are *not* present as articulate rules but present as the love of good in the will . . . and in the educated love of good in the virtues; and the conclusions are *not* articulate decisions framed in language, but the very actions that close down all further argument and leave articulate decisions behind. (45)

He concludes, eloquently, that "The human being must become the living argument moved by her virtues and her will to bring herself to action" (45). I want to adopt this statement to describe the way Austen's novels work to illuminate virtue: the very choice of the genre of the novel makes it possible for Austen's heroines to become living arguments for virtue, as they are not case studies, but dramatic examples of the process by which a life is moved by the virtues and a will is used to practise prudence and faith, thereby bringing each heroine to action, and some to contemplation. I believe, then, that despite the move on the part of Protestant reformers to downplay Catholic catalogues of specific vices and virtues, and to emphasize instead a more general sense of the workings of salvation, the influence of the older tradition of Christian virtues and vices persisted in literature and was absorbed and revived by Austen. Marilyn Butler, in contrasting Jane Austen with Anne Radcliffe in her introduction to *Northanger Abbey*, notes that although modern readers "often take Austen for the champion of modernity," in fact, "the Protestant Radcliffe approaches the Catholic past critically," whereas "Austen, though

wedded to an exact modern setting, has also inherited the Tory leaning, more Catholic than Reformed, lightly asserted in her juvenile *History of England*' (xxix). Austen's conservatism is complicated, and draws on a long tradition of political and ethical thought.

Medieval scholastic philosophers, such as William of Auxerre, for example, distinguish between the theological virtues as dependent on grace, and the cardinal virtues as political and based on natural law. William suggests that the cardinal virtues serve as preparation for the theological virtues (Porter 102). Thus the two traditions may be seen in a dialectical relation: the theological virtues act as a foundation for the cardinal virtues, while at the same time the cardinal virtues prepare us to receive the theological virtues. Aquinas makes a distinction between infused virtues and acquired virtues. The theological virtues are infused, and their aim is union with God through virtue; the cardinal virtues can be acquired, but it is also possible for them to be infused. It depends on the end to which each virtue is directed. Unlike Augustine, who thought that the pagan virtues could not be true virtues, Aquinas grants that the acquired virtues are real, though limited (Porter 100-103). For Austen, the virtue of love is explicitly necessary for fulfilment in the practise of virtue, but one of the reasons that religion is not often explicit in the novels is that for her, for her created world, the grounding of the virtues is faith.

Partly, Austen's reticence about religion in her writing can be attributed to the customary Church of England reserve that preceded the evangelical enthusiasm that spread in the early nineteenth-century. It is because Christian faith is fundamental that it does not need to be explicit in her novels. As I shall argue in my concluding chapter, later novelists of the nineteenth century were more explicit about religion and faith in



their novels because Christian faith had been called into question, and faith, when it was present at all, was likely to have been preceded by or followed by doubt. To the extent that Austen's heroines seek freedom from dogmatic authority, Austen does resemble Descartes, who sought intellectual freedom. Both would argue that to be grown up means to do one's own thinking. In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes doesn't mention faith, yet despite his scepticism, he presupposes faith. Austen too presupposes faith, though she is not nearly so sceptical and in her quest for intellectual liberty she does not reject custom and habit outright, which Descartes does.

After Descartes, it is hard to see thinking as something that can be clear, because thought in the Enlightenment consciousness is caught in the subjective. But while Austen does share some similarities with Descartes, her work is not confined by subjectivity. Despite her historical moment, she writes of heroines for whom thinking and judgement are undeniably hard, but definitely not impossible. The reason for this belief in possibilities is that her writing begins from the firm ground of faith. It is in this way that she resembles Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare—her critical, ironic, comic, and sympathetic picture of human nature is both more confident and more understanding because it grows out of a tradition of faith in love.

One of Austen's primary concerns in her novels therefore, is with how the cardinal and theological virtues proceed from the basis of faith. As I shall argue in Chapter Six, Emma Woodhouse needs to learn about love and charity, but she has an unshakeable faith in her country and its religion (as well as in her class). As I shall argue in Chapter Seven, Anne Elliot has had to learn the virtue of hope, even when love falters, and what enables her to do this is strong faith. Both Emma and Anne learn these virtues

of the will. Love, both *eros* and *caritas*, comes for them some time later. For Austen's mature and maturing heroines, from Elinor and Marianne through Fanny and Elizabeth to Anne and Emma, love is a crowning virtue, just as marriage is a crowning reward. Faith, in education, and in themselves, as an intellectual virtue, added to a fundamental faith in God and in the Christian desire for the good, comes before—even if sometimes just before—love. This is why marriage is not ultimately the *telos* for these heroines. Faith has to be there for the intellectual awakening to the range of virtues they can, and ought to, practise. From that basis, with the aid of prudence, and in different degrees in each novel, these heroines become able to learn and develop strength, fortitude, and hope, with the goal of practising temperance and working toward justice. Justice and peace are the rewards of virtue, but through grace even these qualities are crowned by love. The difference between most of Austen's heroines and the heroines of sentimental romances of her time and ours is that for the majority of the latter, love is paramount, while for the former, love is both preceded by and accompanied by faith and the development of the intellect.

### Eighteenth-Century Virtue

In order to give an idea of the value and the uniqueness of Austen's conception of the flexibility of the virtues, and to show how the tradition of the virtues was re-interpreted in the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, it will be useful to investigate some contemporary philosophical and novelistic theories and codes of virtue. As Harriet Guest argues, at the beginning of the eighteenth century "virtuous femininity is often identified in privacy, and in freedom from all but pious desires and ambitions, but by the end

of the century virtue is identified more closely with industriousness” (“Eighteenth-Century Femininity: ‘A supposed sexual character’” [2000] 47).<sup>63</sup> Private virtue was now expected to have a public use. By the turn of the nineteenth century, virtue was for the most part seen as something that could be achieved by following a list of rules. Even more specifically, for women, in life and literature, virtue meant sexual virtue, and it was an absolute standard. The other traditional virtues were easily elided, thus creating a monolithic idea of virtue (in the singular) that was meant to hold for all cases.

One of the most well-known writers of the eighteenth century who wrote of and practised a scheme for virtuous behaviour was Benjamin Franklin. Like Austen, he was interested in *Pride*, the first of the seven deadly sins: he writes in his *Autobiography* (1793) that “there is perhaps no one of our natural Passions so hard to subdue as *Pride*. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself.” Franklin concludes this passage, famously, by saying that “even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably by [be] glad of my Humility” (160). His approach to the virtues was systematic: he declares (rather proudly) that: “I conceiv’d the bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (24). He conceives of it, indeed, as something to attain, to arrive at, rather than something to work on or practise: this attitude sees human nature as perfectible, and has been accompanied by both *hubris* and despair. Franklin lists twelve virtues that he intends to achieve, adding a thirteenth—“Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates” (150)—when a Quaker friend suggests to him that he is “generally thought proud” (158), and he implements a scheme of focussing on one virtue

---

<sup>63</sup> Guest suggests that this idea of industriousness “can involve the demand that middle-

per week, examining his conduct at the end of every day and recording it in a notebook in order to gauge his success in attaining each of his ideal virtues. Franklin's plan is a worldly one that aims for virtue to be rewarded with success on earth and riches in heaven as well. It has little to do with faith and even less to do with divine grace. Yet it represents a prevalent attitude toward virtue—prevalent both then and now—that would have virtue as a list of authoritative rules to be followed (or not) and as a strict code by which conduct is judged. In the eighteenth century this attitude was representative of both religious and secular Calvinism; in the twenty-first century it persists almost exclusively as a secular Calvinism that is frequently derided as repressive and outmoded.

In *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), David Hume stresses the importance of chastity as a useful virtue—not just one of a list of virtues, either, but the main virtue by which women are judged. He writes of women that

The greatest regard, which can be acquired by that sex, is derived from their fidelity; and a woman becomes cheap and vulgar, loses her rank, and is exposed to every insult, who is deficient in this particular. The smallest failure is here sufficient to blast her character. A female has so many opportunities of secretly indulging these appetites, that nothing can give us security but her absolute modesty and reserve; and where a breach is once made, it can scarcely ever be fully repaired. (54)

In the medieval romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* Sir Gawain laments his lost honour—he says of his fault that “For ther hit ones is tachched twynne wil hit never” (“For where a fault is made fast, it is fixed evermore” [2512; Marie Boroff trans.])—but in

---

class women should participate in or at least mimic the forms of productive labour” (47).

contrast to the Arthurian hero, Hume thinks that male honour can be restored, and fairly easily at that: “If a man behave with cowardice on one occasion, a contrary conduct reinstates him in his character” (54). And men’s infidelities, too, are not as serious as women’s: Hume says that “An infidelity of this nature is much more *pernicious* in women than in *men*. Hence the laws of chastity are much stricter over the one sex than over the other” (36). Although Hume’s theory of moral behaviour includes other virtues as well, it is significant that he stresses a woman’s chastity as the first and most important virtue of her character, without which any other form of virtue is rendered worthless.

In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes the rule-oriented version of useful virtue as it is portrayed in literature:

For, in treating of morals, particularly when women are alluded to, writers have too often considered virtue in a very limited sense, and have made the foundation of it *solely* worldly utility; nay, a still more fragile base has been given to this stupendous fabric, and the wayward fluctuating feelings of men have been made the standard of virtue. Yes, virtue as well as religion has been subjected to the decisions of taste. (168-69)

Female virtue is most useful, and therefore, implicitly, most virtuous, when it guarantees that women in the marriage market are sexually pure. Wollstonecraft is here thinking particularly of Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-48), and she objects that “When Richardson makes Clarissa tell Lovelace that he had robbed her of her honour, he must have had strange notions of honour and virtue. For, miserable beyond all names of misery is the condition of a being, who could be degraded without its own consent!” (168). Instead of being thought of as an action or disposition of character, virtue was conceived of

as a state of being that could be acted on by others. Despite the tendency of writers and society to characterize virtue in this way, both Wollstonecraft and Austen resist the idea that virtue is or should be primarily sexual virtue, and they both offer alternatives to conventional taste.<sup>64</sup> Wollstonecraft rightly complains that even when the existence of other virtues in women is acknowledged or encouraged, they are the passive virtues of patience, docility, good humour, gentleness, and what she calls “spaniel-like affection” (150; 118).

These virtues are along the lines of what Hume values as the “softer affections,” which for him include variations on the highest virtue of benevolence, or the ability to be “sociable, good-natured, humane, merciful, grateful, friendly, generous, beneficent” (*Enquiry* 16). In contrast to Hume, Bishop Butler writes in his *Dissertation: Of the Nature of Virtue* that “benevolence, and the want of it, singly considered, are in no sort the whole of virtue and vice” (131). For Hume the foundation of all virtue is feeling, and the value of virtue is judged by its usefulness. He writes of utility that it

is the *sole* source of that high regard paid to justice, fidelity, honour, allegiance, and chastity; That it is inseparable from all the other social virtues, humanity, generosity, charity, affability, lenity, mercy, and moderation: And, in a word that it is a foundation of the chief part of morals, which has a reference to mankind and our fellow-creatures. (*Enquiry* 50)

Although Hume speaks of virtues in the plural, he advocates a different standard of virtue for women than for men, and while he allows women the “soft” virtue of mercy, he reserves justice apart. This reservation makes it possible then for men to judge the virtue of women

---

<sup>64</sup> A number of critics have commented on connections between Austen and Wollstonecraft, while stressing that it would have been politic for most women writers of

based on the criterion of utility. Female virtue is most valued not when it represents a number of excellent qualities, but when it is useful, grateful, and good-natured.

A typical example of the ideal of passive virtue in literature is the heroine of Anne Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest* (1791), Adeline. Constantly praised for her virtue, Adeline rarely acts, and her virtue is never tested. She is pure and perfect, and acutely sensible to beauty and suffering, but she is not actively virtuous. R.F. Brissenden notes that the problem of representing virtue is the “fundamental flaw” in Radcliffe's novels, because “the distresses to which the virtuous are subjected are not, in the main, brought upon them by the fact that they are virtuous: the virtue and excessive sensibility of her heroines are used merely for the sake of heightening the horror and ugliness of the situations in which she places them” (*Virtue in Distress* [1974] 132). Adeline's virtue is like her aesthetic taste: it is codified by the canons of sensibility. She is the static virtuous heroine of the sentimental novel, and Marianne Dashwood resembles her in many ways; however, Marianne proves capable of practicing the virtues, rather than simply following the rules.

Like Adeline, Richardson's Pamela Andrews is virtuous from beginning to end: as Mr. B.— says of her, “her Virtue is all her Pride” (211), and as Pamela herself says in defence of her insistence on chastity as the supreme female virtue, “to rob a Person of her Virtue, is worse than cutting her Throat” (104). Although *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740) concludes with a list of Pamela's other qualities, including Kindness, Prudence, Charity, Meekness, and other virtues, which the narrator suggests make “her Character worthy of the Imitation of her Sex,” the novel bears witness that the most important in the list is not Prudence or Charity, but “Her Maiden and Bridal Purity, which extended as well

---

the time to conceal Wollstonecraft's influence on them, especially after the publication of

to her Thoughts as to her Words and Actions” (412). To the narrator’s emphasis on the equal importance of Pamela’s other virtues one might reply, as Pamela does to Mr. B— about his interpretation of her letters, “Well, Sir, said I, that is your comment; but it does not appear so in the text” (200).

Pamela and Adeline preserve their sexual virtue and resist the advances of libertines, Mr. B— and the Marquis de Montalt, whereas Elizabeth Inchbald’s Miss Milner and Eliza Fenwick’s Sibella Valmont are tempted to abandon their chastity and therefore, as Hume predicts of any unchaste woman, their characters and even their lives. In Inchbald’s *A Simple Story* (1791), Miss Milner is unfaithful even to the husband she loves, Mr. Dorriforth (later Lord Elmwood), and her infidelities lead her, as they do Austen’s Eliza Brandon, into ruin and death. Fenwick’s *Secresy; or, The Ruin on the Rock* (1795) dramatizes the choice of Sibella to enter into a private marriage contract with her childhood friend Clement Montgomery; like many another libertine in fiction he denies the marriage and she deteriorates in health and reputation, dying shortly after her child is born. While it is true of course that Austen’s virtuous heroines also value their chastity and, like Adeline or Pamela, avoid the loss of sexual purity before marriage, and while the women who succumb to seduction—or, as in the case of Lydia Bennet or Maria Bertram, even do the seducing themselves—do either risk their lives or at least their reputations, the representation of virtue in Austen’s novels involves many virtues other than passivity and sexual purity.

One of the key points of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* has to do with the education of judgement:

---

William Godwin’s *Memoir* in 1798 scandalized readers.



whilst women are educated to rely on their husbands for judgement this [womanish follies and weakness] must ever be the consequence, for there is no improving an understanding by halves, nor can any being act wisely from imitation, because in every circumstance of life there is a kind of individuality, which requires an exertion of judgement to modify general rules. (305)

Following the rules means relying on the judgement of others rather than judging for one's self, and slavishly imitating models of virtue. Practising the virtues, on the other hand, means negotiating situations as individual cases, judging how best to act in those circumstances. This does not mean, however, that the virtues are changeable or relative. They are flexible: they are principles rather than rules; they are the basis for reasoning, rather than a preconceived plan of action. In order to practise these principles rightly, one must be educated, so Wollstonecraft's main point is that women must be educated in order to be virtuous. This is Inchbald's conclusion in *A Simple Story* as well—the value of “A PROPER EDUCATION”—but in her novel it is first of all education in the service of chastity as an ideal, rather than education that develops the understanding in the service of a broader notion of honour. Faith makes education possible, and moral education is rewarded with love. For Austen's heroines, one of the most important aspects of education is the development of moral judgement. To elaborate on this idea, it will be necessary to turn back to Aristotle; therefore, this chapter concludes with an analysis of how judgement works to determine what kind of behaviour is most virtuous.

### Moral Judgement

Austen's heroines learn not to choose hastily. Deliberation is necessary in order to choose the most virtuous thing. The process of deliberation is not infinite, however, because, as Aristotle says, "If we are to be always deliberating, we shall have to go on to infinity" (1113a.2-3). Since the ethical life has to do with practice and not just with theory, the agent has to make choices. This is the point at which ethics becomes morality, and it is a crucial point, as the free play cannot be infinite any more than human life is. What is an ongoing process for Austen's most virtuous characters is the necessity of careful, attentive judgement in a series of actions that constitute the unity of the ethical life. As an example of inconsistent judgement, Lady Russell's determination not to judge Captain Benwick before she sees him is quickly followed by her declaration regarding Mr. Elliot that "He is a man whom I have no wish to see" (130); thus she exemplifies her prejudices even while she denies them. Anne, on the other hand, carefully weighs the judgements of her father and sister as they praise Mr. Elliot, considers at some length whether or not he can be a sensible man (137), and although her initial judgement is too quick (ten minutes) (141), she spends a good deal of time thereafter weighing his merits (144-45; 159-60), and develops suspicions of his imperfections before his vicious character is revealed to her by Mrs. Smith as "hollow and black" (198). Despite the fact that Anne is obliged to her friend and not to her own judgement for the truth, the point still holds that she has tried to distinguish his character as best she can, though with limited knowledge, and perhaps too much charity.

Because the virtues are "modes of choice or involve choice," they are not passions, but "states of character" (1105b.29-1106a.11). Like Aristotle, and also the

**Stoics, Cicero emphasized that virtue is best understood as a disposition to act in accordance with reason; in the Hebrew Scriptures there is a similar focus on interior disposition and character rather than on exterior observances; and both Abelard and Aquinas follow this same line of thinking of virtue as a “stable disposition” toward moral action (Porter 99; 101; 103). As Hermione Lee writes of Jane Austen’s descriptions of disposition, the use of words such as “temper,” “understanding,” and “taste” make it possible to “convey with great care and precision the constant underlying themes of her work, which are that virtues and vices are the result of innate disposition as well as of acquired understanding, that the head and the heart must work together, and that external accomplishments should reflect inner integrity” (“Jane Austen: ‘Taste’ and ‘Tenderness’ as Moral Values” [1976] 86-87). Aristotle defines virtue as that which “will be the state of character which makes a man good and which makes him do his own work well” (1106a.23-24). That state, he says, is the intermediate state between the excessive form of behaviour and the defective form. The intermediate point is determined not by a mathematical formula for equidistance, but in each case it is determined “not in the object but relatively to us” (1106b.8). In moral virtue, the right choice is the one that is appropriate to the person and the circumstances; this does not mean that morality is subjectivity, but that it must be practised with reference to individual lives, not just abstractions. Aristotle offers the example that**

**both fear and confidence and appetite and anger and pity and in general pleasure and pain may be felt both too much and too little, and in both cases not well; but to feel them at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the**

right way, is what is both intermediate and best, and this is characteristic of virtue. (1106b.17-23)

The virtuous way is the middle way that avoids extremes. Juliet McMaster highlights how this balance works in *Pride and Prejudice*: she says, “It matters *what* you say, *how much* you say, and *how well* you say it; and also what you *leave unsaid*. ‘Frankness,’ like ‘firmness’ in *Persuasion*, is a trait which, ‘like all other qualities of the mind ... should have its proportions and limits’ (*P* 116)” (“Talking about Talk in *Pride and Prejudice*” [1996] 83).

That there is a plurality of extremes that deviate from the limits of the middle way is important, because, Aristotle says, “it is possible to fail in many ways (for evil belongs to the class of the unlimited, as the Pythagoreans conjectured, and good to that of the limited), while to succeed is possible only in one way” (1106b.28-31). It is easy to go wrong, and hard to hit the centre. We tend to think of virtues and vices as pairs of opposites, as for example, Hope and Despair, Justice and Injustice, Love and Hate. Benjamin Franklin’s projected book on the *Art of Virtue* (never published) would have included, he says, “a little Comment on each Virtue, in which I would have shown the Advantages of possessing it, and the Mischiefs attending its opposite Vice” (157). Aristotle says, however, that each virtue has more than one opposite. Each virtue has excessive forms and defective forms. The virtue is the intermediate, perfect state. The reason we fall into seeing opposites is that one of the opposites is more common to human nature than the other.

Aristotle is careful to say that some things are just simply wrong, thus distinguishing his ethical theory and practice from subjective morality. Likewise,

Aquinas outlines that some things are always in opposition to natural law.<sup>65</sup> Aristotle says that in the case of some actions and passions, “It is not possible ever to be right with regard to them; one must always be wrong. Nor does goodness or badness with regard to such things depend on committing adultery with the right woman, at the right time, and in the right way, but simply to do any of them is to go wrong” (1107a.13-17). It is the right kind of actions, at the right time, and in the right way, that constitute virtuous behaviour; it is extremely difficult to figure out what these actions and choices are, and yet it is essential to try. The virtuous life is arduous, but the possibility of making the right choices is open.

In her novels, Jane Austen begins with the Aristotelian idea of the mean, and her virtuous characters work to find the mean in a world of extremes and temptations and vices. As I shall demonstrate in Chapters Three and Four especially, she explores the implications of what happens when the virtues come into conflict with each other, and she exploits the dramatic potential of these moments of tension. Here she differs from Aristotle in that she sees virtues in tension with one another rather than as coexisting peacefully. Austen is Aristotelian in her idea of a balance in virtuous action, the varieties of failing, the difficulty of judgement, the problem of hitting the centre, the problem of constant vigilance, and the problems of ignorance and involuntary lapses; however, in her reliance on love and hope, and especially on faith, her novels are fundamentally Christian. MacIntyre thinks it is a weakness of Aristotle’s view of virtue that he doesn’t foresee conflicts among the virtues: he says that “Aristotle’s portrait is at best an idealization and his tendency is always, so it might be said, to exaggerate moral

---

<sup>65</sup> See Stephen J. Pope, “Natural Law and Christian Ethics” (2001) 80.

coherence and unity” (157). Austen goes further than Aristotle in exploring the dramatic moments when virtues compete with one another in creative tension: her record of this exploration is one of the ways in which she fills in the blank spaces in the ancient map of ethics. While she sees tensions among the virtues, she also suggests that the unity of the virtues resides in attempts to balance these tensions. In her novels, the virtues are inherited as a relatively complete and harmonious system, but the fact that she is writing fiction means she can do things that philosophers writing treatises can't: she can take an ethical concept and turn it into a “living argument.”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> While I agree with Jane Adamson's suggestion that “A literary text ... is not a moral thesis. It is a foray, a many-sided experiential ‘hypothesis’, an adventure, a ‘suppose,’” I disagree with her conclusion that all literature is therefore a “‘messier’ kind of moral inquiry” (“Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy” [1998] 103; 88).

**Chapter Two: *Lady Susan and Northanger Abbey*: Propriety's Claims on Prudence**

**“All I wished for, was to breed you up virtuously; I never wanted you to play upon the Harpsichord, or draw better than any one else; but I had hoped to see you respectable and good; to see you able and willing to give an example of Modesty and Virtue to the Young people hereabouts.”**

**—Jane Austen, “Catharine”**

What better place to begin a study of the virtues in Jane Austen's novels than with her only vicious heroine, the eponymous heroine of *Lady Susan*? Lady Susan Vernon is cold-hearted, cruel, scheming, and delightfully wicked.<sup>67</sup> As many have remarked, she is lively in the spirit of Austen's juvenilia, and yet this novella can't quite be classified with the juvenilia, as it is more accomplished, longer, and more serious even in its ironic humour. It has been argued that she abandoned the first person epistolary style of *Lady Susan* because it had brought her too close to identifying with her transgressive heroine.<sup>68</sup> While I think this is certainly part of the reason she changed her technique, it's also true that in the limited omniscient narrative voice she found a way to sympathize with her characters while still maintaining the critical distance from them that was necessary to judge them fairly: that ironic distance is what enables her to create the voices of characters such as Lady Susan, and judge them too, yet without the didactic voice of characters such as Mrs. Vernon, who explicitly condemns Lady Susan.

From the moment Lady Susan first confesses to her friend Mrs. Johnson that "The Females of the Family are united against me" (*MW* 244), to the author's prediction for her chances at future happiness that "She had nothing against her, but her Husband, & her Conscience" (*MW* 313), her character is clearly in opposition to any accepted model of female virtue and decorum, and her letters throughout reveal her lack of consideration for anyone but herself. Although she makes a pretense of conforming to

---

<sup>67</sup> As Juliet McMaster writes, Lady Susan is "Perhaps the most abandoned and unscrupulous character in Jane Austen's fiction" ("Love and Marriage" [1986] 294-95). Ruth apRoberts notes that *Lady Susan* is Austen's "only work to center on an immoral character" ("*Lady Susan*" [1986] 256).

<sup>68</sup> Gilbert and Gubar suggest, rightly, I think, that Lady Susan is "the first of a series of heroines, of varying degrees of attractiveness, whose lively wit and energetic imagination make them both fascinating and frightening to their creator" (155).



conduct-book rules of propriety, for her propriety has nothing to do with morality, except insofar as it can help to conceal immorality. Whereas Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* possesses innate virtue and must learn social propriety, Lady Susan appears to be innately selfish, directing all her powers of pleasing in the service of worldly prudence and the sheer love of power. In this chapter I contrast *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey*, arguing that while both works share a concern with the notion of prudence, Austen's focus in each is on the varieties of villainy in human nature, more than on the virtues of a heroine, and that her critique of power and of propriety points to her growing concerns about how virtues come into conflict with one another. While Catherine tries to make virtue conform to propriety, Lady Susan tries to make vice conform to propriety.

### Lady Susan and Vice

Lady Susan's power derives from the combination of her beauty and her language. Even her hostess at Churchill, Mrs. Vernon, who has reason to mistrust Lady Susan, initially admits that "I cannot help feeling that she possesses an uncommon union of Symmetry, Brilliance, and Grace," even while she is critical of her guest's conversation: "She is clever and agreeable, has all that knowledge of the world which makes conversation easy, & talks very well, with a happy command of Language, which is too often used I beleive [sic] to make Black appear White" (*MW* 251). Lady Susan praises her own conversational skills freely, as she writes to Mrs. Johnson that "If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence. Consideration & Esteem as surely follow command of Language, as Admiration waits on Beauty" (*MW* 268). She attributes her ability to attract the young and principled Reginald De Courcy to her language more than

to flirtatious behaviour: “I have subdued him entirely by sentiment and serious conversation, & made him I may venture to say at least *half* in Love with me, without the semblance of the most common-place flirtation” (MW 258). It doesn’t hurt that Lady Susan still looks about twenty-five, even “‘tho’ she must in fact be ten years older” (MW 251); nevertheless, it is fascinating to see Austen trying out a character whose words are so powerful that they can change even the strongest prejudices. The title of *Lady Susan* was chosen by its first editor in 1871; it could perhaps have been called *Prudence*, or if the title hadn’t already been in use, *Persuasion*.<sup>69</sup>

Prudence in this novella is persuasion. It is the strategy of convincing others that what appears to be improper is in fact perfectly explicable and acceptable. Lady Susan takes as her maxim the rule described in Book Three, Chapter Seven of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749): the Author says, “Let this, my young Readers, be your constant Maxim, That no Man can be good enough to enable him to neglect the Rules of Prudence; nor will Virtue herself look beautiful, unless she be bedecked with the outward Ornaments of Decency and Decorum” (93). Lady Susan bedecks virtue and vice alike with beautifying ornaments, and has little trouble passing off her own interpretations of propriety on her brother-in-law Mr. Vernon or on her conquest Reginald De Courcy, and none at all on Sir James Martin. Women, however, find it easier to see through her, although Mr. Johnson and Reginald’s father do so as well. Mrs. Vernon, her mother, and Lady Susan’s daughter Frederica all understand Lady Susan’s way of calculating things, but they have little power to make others resist her, or to persuade her to their own ends.

---

<sup>69</sup> In contrast to Gilbert Ryle, who says that *Northanger Abbey* has “no abstract ethical theme” (113), I think both *Lady Susan* and *Northanger Abbey* take up the theme of prudence.

When Frederica does try to run away from Miss Summers's school in London, she gets only two blocks away before she is captured and obliged to return to her mother.

Contemplating this escape, Lady Susan muses that "I had not a notion of her being such a little Devil before; she seemed to have all the Vernon Milkiness" (*MW* 268). It's clear that she is thinking of Frederica inheriting her own devilishness, despite her daughter's appearance of innocence, and thus she implicitly acknowledges her own devilishness.

But she convinces Reginald, for example, that allowances should be made, and that perhaps the general reports of her transgressions are the result of prejudice and slander. He parrots this in his letter to his father, explaining that "we must not rashly condemn those who living in the World & surrounded with temptation, should be accused of Errors which they are known to have the power of committing" (*MW* 264).<sup>70</sup> Lady Susan tries to make Mrs. Vernon believe she is sensible to Frederica's situation, using the rhetoric of acknowledging she knows what she should feel in order to absolve herself of not feeling it: she exclaims to Mrs. Vernon, "Do you think me destitute of every honest, every natural feeling?" (*MW* 289). Mrs. Vernon is not deceived, but Lady Susan's pretense of saying the right things does help smooth things over, as propriety obliges Mrs. Vernon at least to be civil to her guest. With disingenuous irony, Lady Susan says at the end of her explanation of her treatment of Frederica, "I trust I am in no danger of sinking in your opinion" (*MW* 290), while Mrs. Vernon writes that "I could have said 'Not much indeed;'—but I left her almost in silence. It was the greatest stretch of Forbearance I could practise. I could not have stopped myself, had I begun" (*MW* 291). Mrs. Vernon's own sense of propriety urges her not to cross that boundary—it would not

be polite, it would not be wise. But would it be prudent on her part? Should she speak openly to her careless, trouble-making guest? Like Edmund Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, she is trying to avoid “family squabbling” (*MP* 153), especially as there is a possibility that her brother Reginald might marry Lady Susan.

Lady Susan not only bows to propriety when necessary, but also makes use of propriety to screen her own actions when it is convenient to her to do so. Despite her open flirtation with Reginald, when she wishes to keep him at bay so as to continue her affair with Manwaring, she invokes the claims of propriety in her defence. She writes to him that ““We have been unguarded in forming this hasty Engagement, but we must not complete the imprudence by ratifying it, while there is so much reason to fear the connection would be opposed by those Friends on whom you depend”” (*MW* 300).

Retreating behind the modest veil of widowhood, she puts Reginald off with her concern that society would disapprove of their engagement. ““I cannot forget that the indelicacy of so early a second marriage, must subject me to the censure of the World, and incur what would still be more insupportable, the displeasure of Mr. Vernon”” (*MW* 300). In each of these sentences, Lady Susan advances propriety as her weapon and then alludes to the financial imprudence of proceeding hastily. Writing to her friend Alicia Johnson to ask her to convince Reginald to leave town, she calls on the social god of propriety once more, entreating her friend to ““say all that you can to convince him that I shall be quite wretched if he remains here; you know my reasons—Propriety & so forth”” (*MW* 302). Writing to Reginald she puts the opinion of the world first, and her financial interest second; writing to Alicia, she stresses, ““do not forget my real interest,”” first—before she

---

<sup>70</sup> The distinction between living in the world and being of the world comes up later in

refers to propriety (*MW* 302). As she proclaimed early on in Letter 16 to Alicia, “Those women are inexcusable who forget what is due to themselves and the opinion of the World” (*MW* 269).

Clearly putting herself first and others second, Lady Susan exemplifies a desire for power. To the extent that she thinks of others at all, it is merely to be interested in what they think about her. She sees Reginald not as a person but as something that amuses her; the only thing she loves about him is her power over him. She toys with the idea of how to punish him for his own proud spirit, saying she is “doubtful whether I ought not to punish him, by dismissing him at once after this our reconciliation, or by marrying and teizing him for ever” (*MW* 293). Although she contemplates punishing Reginald by tormenting him for life, she considers death as a punishment for Mrs. Manwaring, simply for being married to Mr. Manwaring. Engaging in contemplation of conspiracy to commit murder, Lady Susan descends even further. Because she doubts she could resist an offer of marriage from Manwaring, she hopes that his current wife will meet a speedy end. She encourages Alicia Johnson, therefore, to assist her: “This Event, if his wife live with you, it may be in your power to hasten. The violence of her feelings, which must wear her out, may be easily kept in irritation. I rely on your friendship for this” (*MW* 308). As the narrator concludes, Lady Susan has no shame.

After Reginald has terminated his connection with Lady Susan, once he has learned of her affair with Manwaring, Mrs. Vernon visits Lady Susan in town to see if she can get Frederica “removed from such a Mother & placed under her own care” (*MW* 311). She discovers that Lady Susan has apparently a short memory, or else no

consciousness of how much she has been responsible for. Mrs. Vernon “was met with such an easy and cheerful affection as made her almost turn from [Lady Susan] with horror. No remembrance of Reginald, no consciousness of Guilt, gave one look of embarrassment” (MW 311). Lady Susan is unmoved by guilt, unaffected by conscience, and deaf to the voices of other human beings.<sup>71</sup> She hears only the promptings of her own greed, her own envy, and her own pride.

In *Persuasion*, firmness is shown to be important, but flexibility also proves to be valuable. Lady Susan, however, appeals to her inflexibility as one of the most important aspects of her character. With apparent high-minded seriousness, she writes to Mrs. Johnson that “I believe I owe it to my character, to complete the match between my daughter & Sir James after having so long intended it.” She asks for her friend’s opinion, but stresses that “Flexibility of Mind, a Disposition easily biased by others, is an attribute which you know I am not very desirous of obtaining; nor has Frederica any claim to the indulgence of her whims, at the expense of her Mother’s inclination” (MW 294). Like Frederick Wentworth in *Persuasion*, Lady Susan values firmness of mind, but whereas Wentworth learns that firmness is not always a good or even a pragmatic ideal, Lady Susan persists in valuing the power of firmness in the prudent choices she makes, and learns nothing, because she does not believe that she could ever be wrong.

What are the claims of prudence? It is one of the classical virtues, also defined as wisdom, but both words, wisdom and prudence, are complicated in Austen’s time and ours, since in today’s terms prudence is often thought of as wisdom in financial matters.

---

<sup>71</sup> In the terms Dante uses in *Hell*, Lady Susan is guilty not only of selfish desires of the flesh, which harm only herself, but of the desire to injure others, and ultimately of

Lady Susan is courageous in some respects—she is independent, outspoken, and seemingly fearless—but her bravery is directed toward the wrong ends. She is worldly-wise rather than virtuously wise. She loves no one, protects no one, and fights for nothing but her own gain. Her prudence is a mode of survival, but it is questionable whether it leads her to happiness. In the narrator’s Conclusion to *Lady Susan*, Austen says,

Whether Lady Susan was, or was not happy in her second Choice—I do not see how it can ever be ascertained—for who would take her assurance of it, on either side of the question? The World must judge from Probability. She had nothing against her, but her Husband, & her Conscience. (*MW* 313)

Now, she may not feel the naggings of her conscience very deeply, but even the fact that she elsewhere recognizes what she should feel toward a daughter or a lover suggests that she does have a sense of what is right, even if she feels no shame when she does wrong. Her husband, Sir James Martin, is too ignorant to teach her anything, but she may yet be drawn to reconsider her way of manipulating the world for her own purpose. However, within the confines of the novella, this is one Austen heroine who does not learn anything, least of all about virtue.

### The Problem of Power

*Lady Susan* is a parody. As Anne Ruderman argues, the novella “can be seen as a satire of Rousseau’s thesis that ‘to be a woman means to be coquettish, but her coquetry  


---

 deception, hypocrisy, and fraud. She therefore would belong in one of the lowest circles

changes its form and its object according to her views” (163). Because Reginald is a relatively serious and virtuous character, Lady Susan alters her coquetry to seeming virtue, and seduces him with “sentiment and serious conversation” (MW 258).

Ruderman acknowledges that “Rousseau would require the woman to be truly, and not just seemingly, virtuous, nevertheless, Austen makes fun of the way in which a coquette obscures the difference”; she points out too that “There is an echo of Lady Susan in Mary Crawford’s attempt to win over Edmund” (163). Although Mary Poovey, for example, has argued that the parody is not so obvious in *Lady Susan* (Poovey 178), this argument requires so much blindness to the comedy of the novella that Ruderman is right to conclude that “Austen’s most thoroughgoing critique of feminine power is in the portrayal of the heroine of her early *Lady Susan*” (163). Pointing as well to Lloyd W. Brown’s argument about this critique in his article “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition” (1973), Ruderman argues that Austen “seems to consider such a coquettish woman only fit for a quite funny parody, and then she rejects female power as a central subject for her own mature novels” (163). While I agree that *Lady Susan* criticizes female power, I disagree that Austen abandons the idea of female power in later novels. Instead, I see the heroine’s pursuit of virtue in these later novels as a quest for a different kind of power. Recalling that *virtù* or *vertu* once meant power, I think it is important to emphasize that the virtues are moral excellences, and therefore are more powerful than aggression or manipulation.

In *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen’s Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts* (1993), Maaja A. Stewart argues that Elizabeth Bennet’s wit recalls

---

of hell.



*Lady Susan's* aggressive sexuality, and that Elizabeth's wit must be subdued because it is a sign of female power (71). But, as I have argued in Chapter One, and as I shall argue again in Chapter Four, on *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth does not give up her spirit, her wit, or her power. What she gives up is her folly in misjudging character, which was a misdirected aspect of her power, and certainly not the whole of it. Lady Susan never relinquishes her power, but her kind of power does not make her happy, and it harms others; she is not a model of female assertiveness worth following. Like Stewart, Audrey Bilger argues in her book *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen* (1998) that "transgressive" heroines such as Lady Susan pose a threat to stereotypes of women, and Bilger suggests that such characters are "trickster" figures who allow authors "to challenge directly the rules that restricted development" and to ridicule "the authority of the conduct-book dictates" (109). According to Bilger, such figures include Lydia Bennet, Mary Crawford, and Lady Susan. It is true, as she says, that directly satirical commentary and, I think, portraits of such characters, have "a major limitation" in that "the novelists run the risk of being identified with their fiction and censured for their feminist views" (109). But to say that submerging the trickster as one of the characters solves the problem by making it possible "to stage rebellions against the restrictions on womanhood without having to fear being identified with these characters" is problematic and confused. Bilger concludes that "We might even say that the female trickster stands in for the author; after all, a trickster can only be as witty as her creator" (109).

This argument presupposes an identification of authors with their characters that is every bit as simplistic as assuming that the transgressive heroine directly represents the

author's own opinions. Imagine expanding this thesis to "an evil character can only be as evil as her creator." The argument undermines the importance of imagination and purpose in fictional creation, and is especially damaging (and has been especially common) in interpretation of fiction by women writers. Fundamental to this argument about the author's voice emerging in the trickster is the assumption that women writers of the past concealed political messages in their work in the hope that enlightened postmodern readers would uncover them, and as I argued in the introduction to this study, this approach is misguided. There is no doubt that it is safer for Austen to represent Lydia Bennet or Mary Crawford as the trickster than it is for her to focus on Lady Susan's trickery: there is certainly less risk that contemporary readers will identify her voice with that of the character, but this is precisely because the narrative voice that is critical of them is much stronger than their voices are. What right do readers have to ignore the clues of the text in order to read in political messages that accord with postmodern feminist assumptions about what form the author's rebellion should have taken?

In the case of Lady Susan, then, I cannot believe that Austen condones her behaviour. It is admittedly hard to establish where narrative approval and disapproval lie in the epistolary novel, just as it is difficult to establish a poet's perspective on his or her character created in a dramatic monologue, because there is no outside frame of reference against which to judge the voices of characters. But Austen clearly determined that the epistolary novel was not the right genre for the kind of work she wanted to do, and not only did she break off the sequence of letters that comprise *Lady Susan*, she added a Conclusion, with a narrator who analyzes, judges, and mocks the letter-writers.

**Ironically, the only character for whom the narrator expresses sympathy is Miss Manwaring, who didn't write any letters at all: "For myself, I confess that I can pity only Miss Manwaring, who coming to Town & putting herself to an expense in Cloathes, which impoverished her for two years, on purpose to secure [Sir James], was defrauded of her due by a Woman ten years older than herself" (MW 313). Austen does not approve of Lady Susan's variety of prudence, and her disapproval is evident in her loss of interest in the letters, her desire to incorporate the narrative voice of authority, even of ironic authority, and in her eventual focus in her major works on combining the voices of characters with narrative commentary and analysis. Neither the genre nor the heroine of *Lady Susan* suited Austen's purpose, which was ultimately moral as well as artistic, and so she abandoned both the genre and the heroine.**

### The Place of Love

What is missing in *Lady Susan* is love. Lady Susan is prudent in a worldly sense, and she cannot love. Her daughter Frederica can, but her story gets short shrift. Frederica seems to be inherently principled, despite her mother's comment about a touch of devilishness. She rebels against her mother's decisions because of her own sense of what's right, not because she resembles her mother. Mrs. Vernon writes of her that "She is extremely young to be sure, has had a wretched Education and a dreadful example of Levity in her Mother; but yet I can pronounce her disposition to be excellent, & her natural abilities very good" (MW 273). She concludes that "There cannot be a more gentle, affectionate heart, or more obliging manners, when acting without restraint" (MW 273). Later on, Mrs. Vernon says that she does not fear for Frederica's principles, even if

she were in her mother's company or under the influence of her mother's friends (*MW* 297). Frederica, like Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey*, has natural virtue, not yet moulded by either propriety or impropriety, and most engaging when acted out "without restraint." Frederica and Catherine represent the almost blank slate of human nature—not yet educated in the ways of the world, either for good or bad. Lady Susan's view of her daughter's innocence is that it will be harmful to her, especially in love affairs. She writes, "Artlessness will never do in Love matters, & that girl is born a simpleton who has it either by nature or affectation" (*MW* 274). In contrast, artlessness in *Northanger Abbey* is seen as a potential blessing in love. One of the main reasons for Henry Tilney's love for Catherine Morland is that he is taken by her openness and honesty.

As D.D. Devlin argues in *Jane Austen and Education*, Frederica "is another of Jane Austen's young women who . . . must overcome the fault of their upbringing" (40). Both Frederica and Catherine, like Marianne, and even Elizabeth and Emma, are at a starting point in their moral education, and need to engage with the social world and even the world of ideas in order to develop their potential. In *Lady Susan*, Devlin suggests, Austen

has discovered for perhaps the first time how she wishes to trace the path by which her heroines come to maturity and insight, and overcome the deficiencies of a bad education. However, the tracing is uncertain, partly because it is obscured by the amoral energy and interest of Lady Susan herself, and partly because Frederica and Reginald are too stupid to make Frederica's improvement convincing" (40).

*Lady Susan* is an early example of Austen's investigation of moral education, in which Austen approaches morality through the lens of vice. She satirizes conduct book virtue and the tricks of the coquette, but she offers little in the way of moral positives.

Practising the aesthetic representation of morality in *Lady Susan*, Austen learns about ways to improve the dramatization of virtue and vice in fiction. Through *Lady Susan* she finds her real story, which is the relation of the as yet unfixed character of the daughter to the fixed but varying vices and virtues of people, including her parents, in the social world around her. Writing about love as moral education will be both more fun and more educational than simply parodying selfish vice, and so Austen incorporates satire of the folly and vice of secondary characters such as Fanny Dashwood, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Elton, and Sir Walter Elliott into comic stories of serious moral growth through faith, hope, and love. Just as pure virtue can be dull in art, so can uncomplicated vice, and that is why Austen abandons *Lady Susan*, both its heroine, and its technique. Devlin says that love is absent from *Lady Susan*:

In *Lady Susan* [Austen] had come upon that 'original design' which she explored and elaborated in all her later novels; but she had made Frederica and Reginald such cardboard figures of stupidity that it was not possible, in a story so massively dominated by the energy of *Lady Susan*, to make the small voice of love, and its ability to confer freedom on the heroine, convincing. (42)

Frederica's love for Reginald provides her with the courage to appeal to him to help prevent her mother from marrying her to Sir James, as Devlin suggests (41), and I would argue that the power of her love is an early example in Austen's work of how a

theological virtue can lead to the practice of a cardinal virtue. However, it is not only love that is missing from *Lady Susan*: the work itself does not represent or offer faith in anything positive. Prudence in *Lady Susan* is present, but it is a calculating kind; the theological virtues are almost entirely absent. Austen's more developed novels focus much more on the benefits and the rewards of virtue. In *Northanger Abbey*, for example, Austen follows the education of her young and innocent heroine and begins to analyze what it means to try to live a good life in the social world.

### Catherine and Good Sense

Catherine Morland, famously, is "in training for a heroine" (NA 15). Her mind is "about as ignorant and unformed as the female mind at seventeen usually is" (NA 18). In fact, she is so far from being proud of herself that even her vanity is humble (NA 24). She is not clever; neither is she particularly strong. In one passage comparing her ironically to the typical heroine of romance, Austen writes that Catherine is obliged to sit down without a dancing partner because John Thorpe hasn't yet arrived. For moment, it seems as if her fortitude will be tested:

To be disgraced in the eye of all the world, to wear the appearance of infamy while her heart is all purity, her actions all innocence, and the misconduct of another the true source of her debasement, is one of those circumstances which peculiarly belong to the heroine's life, and her fortitude under it what particularly dignifies her character. Catherine had fortitude too; she suffered, but no murmur passed her lips. (NA 53)

Of course, the trial lasts only ten minutes, as Henry Tilney (much better than John Thorpe) arrives shortly. This is a far cry from the sufferings of the distressed Adeline in Anne Radcliffe's *The Romance of the Forest*, and nothing compared to the trials of Marianne Dashwood's fortitude in *Sense and Sensibility*. Catherine doesn't think much, understand much, or suffer much, and yet she is virtuous.

Unlike Lady Susan, she is capable of genuinely caring for other people. In the course of the novel Catherine begins to learn the kind of prudence that propriety requires, but the natural courage it takes to be honest and open with others is hers already. Her education consists in learning to balance what society expects in the way of respectable virtue, with what she feels to be right, without sacrificing virtue to propriety. This process is complicated by the fact that although she often senses what is right, she does not necessarily use her judgement to determine if her intuition is correct. And that's where Henry Tilney comes in, to remind her that she needs to think about what is right as well as feel it. Juliet McMaster asks, "Does Catherine *need* Tilney's instructions?" and suggests that "He is certainly not the infallible authority she believes him to be, and there is plenty of irony at his expense. In some matters, such as the judgment of his father, she is more right than he is" ("Clothing the Thought in the Word: The Speakers of *Northanger Abbey*" [1998] 216). She concludes, however, that "Catherine *does* need Tilney, and precisely in [the] area of refining her own speech and extending her understanding of others" (216). While Henry does teach Catherine, her honesty and lack of artifice also teach him about the kind of courage that is superior to mere propriety.

As was the case with *Lady Susan*, in *Northanger Abbey* Austen satirizes conduct-book morality and the literature of romances based on this kind of morality. Audrey

Bilger is right in pointing out that “Her satire runs counter to John Gregory’s warning in *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* that young ladies should live up to the virtue of perfection men see in them, lest they lose their influential stature” (93). In Gregory’s view,

The power of a fine woman over the hearts of men, of men of the finest parts, is even beyond what she conceives. They are sensible of the pleasing illusion, but they cannot, nor do they wish to dissolve it. But if she is determined to dispel the charm, it certainly is in her power: she may soon reduce the angel to a very ordinary girl. (qtd. in Bilger 93)

As Bilger argues, the narrator of *Northanger Abbey* “takes great pains to let her readers know that Catherine Morland is, above all, an ordinary girl, unusual only in her refusal to adhere to gender stereotypes as a child” (93). I might add that this refusal serves to make her even more ordinary, in that she therefore doesn’t conform to the stereotype of either the angelic woman or the angelic girl.

Near the start of *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is not “in the habit of judging for herself” (*NA* 66), but she can see that John Thorpe is not entirely agreeable, and with regard to her conversation with him, she “could not tell a falsehood even to please Isabella” (*NA* 67). Her mind may be unformed and her opinions unfixd, but her principles are instinctively good. When she sees Henry Tilney at the theatre following the mix-up about the planned walk with him and his sister, she is drawn to explain and apologize, rather than to play elaborate romantic games by attempting to be mysterious, because “Feelings rather natural than heroic possessed her” (*NA* 93). For Catherine, honesty comes naturally—she is practising the virtue unconsciously. Henry later



comments on her way of reacting to difficult situations: when she acknowledges that she is not excessively distressed to have lost Isabella as a friend, he announces that ““You feel, as you always do, what is most to the credit of human nature”” (NA 207). Even allowing for the strength of his regard for Catherine at this point, he doesn’t praise her excessively, but urges her to think carefully about her reaction: ““—Such feelings ought to be investigated, that they may know themselves”” (NA 207). Just as Mrs. Vernon judges Frederica to be naturally good, Henry judges that Catherine’s ““mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity, and therefore not accessible to the cool reasonings of family partiality, or a desire of revenge”” (NA 219). Catherine may be naturally, instinctively virtuous, but Henry suggests that her virtues would be strengthened if she examined and understood her own actions.

Catherine’s first explanation to Henry, in the scene at the theatre, about how she came to be driving away with her brother and the Thorpes when Henry and Eleanor were on their way to call for her, tests his reserve and politeness. The directness of her address—““Oh! Mr. Tilney, I have been quite wild to speak to you, and make my apologies””—is a bit much for him at first, as he replies ““in a tone which retained only a little affected reserve,”” but eventually her openness breaks down his strict adherence to ““calm politeness”” (NA 93) and he engages happily in conversation with her once more. Schooled in the expectations of propriety, he prudently guards his reputation and affections from injury by affecting reserve. But fortunately he is not reserved for long, for ““One cannot love a reserved person”” (E 203).<sup>72</sup> Catherine’s courageous honesty is

---

<sup>72</sup> It is Frank Churchill who says this in *Emma*, but Mr. Knightley later echoes unconsciously the sentiment when he tells Emma and Mrs. Weston that Jane Fairfax is ““reserved, more reserved, I think, than she used to be—And I love an open temper. . . . I

what Marianne Dashwood aims for in *Sense and Sensibility*, but because Marianne does it consciously, it is less natural. Just as in *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy must learn to be lively while Elizabeth learns to be more careful, Henry learns from Catherine's openness even while he teaches her to be more prudent about social life.

As Henry says to Catherine later, firm adherence to principle is not always a good thing: "To be always firm must be to be often obstinate. When properly to relax is the trial of judgement" (NA 134). Lady Susan is an example of obstinacy; so is John Thorpe. So, for that matter, is Frederick Wentworth. Firmness is valuable to a point, but flexibility is necessary too. Although Catherine usually accepts Henry's instruction and trusts his judgement (NA 114; 153; 211), she is busy learning to make up her own mind and does not simply adopt his views. She acknowledges in conversation with John Thorpe that "as to *most matters*, to say the truth, there are not many that I know my own mind about"—but at least she knows that she should probably know her mind, whereas Thorpe replies ignorantly, "By Jove, no more do I. It is not my way to bother my brains with what doesn't concern me" (NA 124).

Once Catherine's country walk with the Tilneys is rescheduled, her resolve is tested by the persuasions of her brother James, Isabella, and John Thorpe. The fact that she can resist makes her brother object that she used to be more easily persuaded (NA 99-100), and despite his arguments against her, despite Isabella's tears, and despite John Thorpe's angry "if you do not go, d— me if I do" (NA 99), "Catherine felt herself to be in the right" (NA 98). She says firmly, trusting in her own judgement for once, that "If I am wrong, I am doing what I believe to be right" (NA 100). Even when John Thorpe

---

saw Jane Fairfax and conversed with her, with admiration and pleasure always—but with

resorts to trickery, conveying a spurious message to the Tilneys that Catherine is otherwise engaged, Catherine's honesty triumphs above her fears, and she quickly follows the Tilneys to their home, bursting in without waiting for the servant to announce her. Again, her directness is irresistibly engaging, as "Whatever might have been felt before her arrival, her eager declarations immediately made every look and sentence as friendly as she could desire" (*NA* 102). In *Northanger Abbey*, as in no other novel, Jane Austen gives honesty full credit, above the strictures of propriety, above considerations of protecting her heroine's reputation.<sup>73</sup>

After Catherine has explained herself to the Tilneys, she does have some doubts about "whether she had been perfectly right" (*NA* 103). One of the problems for her here is that she believes that "A sacrifice was always noble"; her doubts arise because she thinks that "if she had given way to their entreaties, she should have been spared the distressing idea of a friend displeased, a brother angry, and a scheme of great happiness to both destroyed, perhaps through her means" (*NA* 103). The morality of sacrifice is a subject George Eliot brings up in her novels, often suggesting that "All self-sacrifice is good" (qtd. in Parkin-Gounelas 31). But as Austen's later novels demonstrate, the morality of sacrifice depends on what the sacrifice is for. Peter Geach writes in *The Virtues* (1977) that "self-sacrifice for an evil cause may be mere vice," and he says that, for example, even "two people's mutual love may be a living death by mutually inflicted wounds of the spirit" (xviii). In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine believes that she was right not to sacrifice the good opinion of the Tilneys by following the lead of John and Isabella

---

no thought beyond" (*E* 289).

<sup>73</sup> In Chapters Three and Four in particular I take up the question of what happens in Austen's novels when honesty conflicts with the practice of other virtues.

Thorpe. The tensions between different, competing goods begin to become important in *Northanger Abbey*, as Austen tests sacrifice against loyalty, honesty against propriety, and authority against natural inclination. Testing honesty against prudence, Austen encounters the complexities of the virtues, and hereafter, with Marianne Dashwood especially, demonstrates that honesty is not always the best, the most virtuous, policy. Catherine is naïve, but her misadventures never seriously compromise her. Even when she suspects General Tilney of murder, Henry is the discoverer, debunker, and protector of her secret.

Henry's speech to Catherine urges her to remember "the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians" (NA 197). Problematic as this speech is in its absolute certainty that for these reasons murder cannot go undetected, it serves as a reminder to Catherine that she needs to judge more carefully and more prudently in future. She is comfortable for the present to conclude that "Among the Alps and the Pyrenees, perhaps, there were no mixed characters. There, such as were not as spotless as an angel, might have the disposition of a friend," as in Anne Radcliffe's novels (NA 200). But Henry has taught her to begin to distinguish shades of grey in characters: "among the English, she believed, in their hearts and habits, there was a general though unequal mixture of good and bad" (NA 200). Having begun an education in Aristotelian ethics, Catherine makes a resolution to act with prudence: "Her mind made up on these several points, and her resolution formed, of always judging and acting in future with the greatest good sense, she had nothing to do but to forgive herself and be happier than ever" (NA 201).

Catherine is convinced that real evil is less likely to be detectable in the characters around her, and therefore that she will have to be more careful about judging the degrees of evil. I agree with Marilyn Butler's argument in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* that the villains in *Northanger Abbey*, especially General Tilney and John Thorpe, are admirably subtle. Butler writes that "already in *Northanger Abbey*, the opportunists find allies where they should properly be most vigorously opposed—among those who uphold only the forms, and not the essence, of orthodoxy" (180). She concludes, "The pompous but mercenary General is as much implicated as John Thorpe in the pursuit of Catherine's mythical fortune" (180). Although Austen focuses much more on the development of her heroine in *Northanger Abbey* than she does on the virtuous Frederica in *Lady Susan*, the major achievement of *Northanger Abbey* is, as Butler suggests, the creation of complex villains: "Her villains are not only better art than her rivals'; they are also better propaganda. The tendency among the routine anti-jacobins was to create Satanic demon-villains who were dangerously close in the temper of the times to being heroes. Jane Austen's intelligence, like Burke's, is more subtle" (181). Both the General and John Thorpe are believable as more or less ordinary members of society. They are not so clearly vicious that they are shunned by all rational people. The fortune-hunting greed of both of them, the intemperance of the General, and the foolish and inconsiderate behaviour of Thorpe are complicated by the fact that they are generally accepted in society and approved by Catherine's chaperones, the Allens.

That villains can be ordinary people is radical, just as the idea that heroines can be ordinary girls is radical. Both the vicious and the virtuous are shown in all their glorious ordinariness. They are, quite simply, human. Catherine must learn to distinguish

between ordinary people who are actively good or at least mostly harmless, and ordinary people whose vices impinge on her own virtue. In her 1994 introduction to *Northanger Abbey*, Butler calls for a new acknowledgement of this novel as “an ambitious, innovative piece of work, quizzically intellectual about fiction itself” (xv). *Northanger Abbey* shows that villains can be complicated and that novels can be morally serious and bitingly comic at the same time.

Although Austen’s portraits of virtue in *Northanger Abbey* are more developed than those in *Lady Susan*, and her portraits of vice are more subtle, she hasn’t yet found quite the balance that she will later discover, of the virtuous character surrounded by varieties of vice, but holding fast to the mean. The story of *Northanger Abbey* is wonderfully satiric, and playfully critiques the conventions of romance and the gothic. However, despite Austen’s insistence on her heroine’s natural, real, and non-heroic qualities, when it comes to virtue, especially the virtue of honesty, Catherine is more like Adeline or other virtuous heroines whose goodness is never in question. She agonizes (sometimes), but she is never shown to be seriously in error, only a little silly and easily led by her imagination. Later Austen heroines will have to think more, struggle more, and suffer for more than ten minutes or one dark night in a scary room.

Catherine is innately good, possessor of elements of courage if not quite yet the prudence necessary to cope with the vicious people she encounters in social life; Lady Susan is innately wicked, coldly prudent and the creator of her own version of propriety. In *Northanger Abbey* and even more so in *Lady Susan*, Jane Austen focuses on varieties of vice. In her later novels the portrayals of virtuous and vicious characters are both strong. Beginning with Marianne Dashwood, Austen’s other heroines are neither all

good nor all bad, as she incorporates aspects of both Lady Susan and Catherine into her later work. The figure of Catherine predominates as the pattern of natural virtue, but there is still a mixture, as Marianne, Elinor, Elizabeth, Fanny, Emma, and Anne exist in a world where original sin is also part of human nature. Unlike the world of *Lady Susan*, however, the worlds of *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* are places in which virtue can triumph over sin.

**Chapter Three: *Sense and Sensibility*: “Know your own happiness”**

**“ . . . summon up all the fortitude you possess, for Alas! in the perusal of the following Pages your sensibility will be most severely tried.”**

**—Jane Austen, “Love and Freindship”**



Early in *Sense and Sensibility* Marianne Dashwood believes that her sister Elinor's theory of behaviour requires the necessary subjection of one's self to one's neighbours' ideas of respectability. Critics have often ascribed such a theory to Austen as well as to Elinor; Jane Nardin, for example, writes that "The code of propriety which *Sense and Sensibility* as a whole suggests is morally valid is a rule-oriented code, a code which places conventional ideas concerning duty to society and to self before the dictates of personal judgement and desire" (*Those Elegant Decorums* [1973] 45). A number of critics have argued that there is a complex relationship in *Sense and Sensibility* between the natural affection and spontaneity of sensibility and a strict rule-following version of sense,<sup>74</sup> and some have gone so far as to suggest that not only does Austen not authorize a conventional code of rules, she can even be seen to subvert conservative ideology.<sup>75</sup> Those who do read the novel as conservative tend to accept Marianne's view of Elinor's rules as the dominant and triumphant code, and frequently to see the ending as a sacrifice of the passions of Marianne to the expectations of conservative society.<sup>76</sup>

---

<sup>74</sup> Jan Fergus suggests that the real conflict is between "sensibility and its genuine opposite, sensitivity" (*Jane Austen* [1991] 93). John Wiltshire argues that instead of a binary opposition between the sisters, there is a triangular relationship at the centre of the novel that includes Mrs. Dashwood (*Jane Austen and the Body* [1992] 25). Marilyn Butler sees the first half of the novel as conforming to the rigid formula of the title, while the second half becomes more natural and flexible in its presentation of the sisters (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* 188-89). See also Ian Watt, "On *Sense and Sensibility*" (1961) 46-47; Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and Her Art* (1939) 120; Andrew Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (1953) 30-31; 92. Ruth apRoberts, in contrast, argues that the portrayal of the sisters is dichotomous ("*Sense and Sensibility*, or Growing up Dichotomous" [1975]).

<sup>75</sup> Among those who read the novel as a radical critique of conservative ideology are Claudia Johnson (*Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* [1988] 69) and Moreland Perkins (*Reshaping the Sexes in Sense and Sensibility* [1998] 5).

<sup>76</sup> Two of the most prominent examples of this interpretation are Marilyn Butler's and Alistair Duckworth's. I shall take up Butler's argument later in this chapter. Duckworth argues in *The Improvement of the Estate* that Austen is a conservative Christian writer,

But perhaps readers who make this judgement resemble Marianne in her prejudice about Elinor's theory of behaviour. Marianne reveals that she has thought Elinor believed it right "to be guided wholly by the opinion of other people. I thought our judgments were given us merely to be subservient to those of our neighbours," she says to her sister, "This has always been your doctrine, I am sure" (SS 94). Although Elinor is generally careful, calm, and conservative in her behaviour, she does not obey social decorum rigidly or unthinkingly, and she defends what Edward presently calls her "plan of general civility" by insisting that "My doctrine has never aimed at the subjection of the understanding. All I have ever attempted to influence has been the behaviour. You must not confound my meaning" (SS 94). She desires that Marianne should behave with civility, politeness, and decorum to their acquaintance, but not at the expense of her independence of mind or her abilities to judge the character, understanding, and behaviour of others, and even with respect to civility it becomes clear in the novel that Elinor's way of acting is hardly inflexible. In contrast to critics who see either Elinor or her creator as an inflexible conservative, I argue that while Elinor's "plan of general civility" does in general have the author's approval, it is not a rigid code; I agree with those who argue that the relationship between sense and sensibility is complex, and I think this complexity is most evident in tensions between the virtues of amiability and honesty. This chapter examines the

---

but while he is adamant that "there remains behind the perversions of moral conduct everywhere described a steady vision of ideal social modes" (83), he objects to the ending, in which, he says, "Marianne's marriage to the rheumatic Colonel Brandon is a gross over-compensation for her misguided sensibility" (104). Along with many others, he sees Marianne's marriage not as the natural consequence of her conversion to author-affirmed conservatism, but as a betrayal. It seems contradictory to interpret Austen's conservative morality as approvingly as Duckworth does elsewhere, only to fault the author for bringing one of her characters in line with that morality, that "vision of ideal social modes."

consequences of different ways of dealing with those tensions, and argues that Austen's focus in this novel is the virtue of fortitude. Balancing amiability and honesty in the right way requires strength. *Sense and Sensibility* is a novel of classical balance and harmony, yet there are persistent reminders of the necessity of atonement for deviations from that balance, in order to maintain harmony. In fact, the practice of fortitude in the novel is shown to be incomplete without God's grace. Although the very title has led many readers to interpret the novel as something of a treatise on temperance, in which excess of sensibility is reformed by rigorous self-denial into sense,<sup>77</sup> it is fortitude, not temperance, that is the focus of *Sense and Sensibility*—fortitude that requires discipline to be sure, but that also makes it possible for genuine good nature, amiability, and honesty to be fully exercised in the pursuit of happiness.

In *Sense and Sensibility* the virtues that come under Austen's most intense scrutiny are the social virtues of amiability, honesty, and tact; the heroic virtue of fortitude; and the Christian virtues of love and faith. This is not to say that other virtues do not come into play, but only that these are among the most prominent. Whereas in *Lady Susan* Austen's focus is on a handful of vices and on the perversion of the virtue of prudence, and in *Northanger Abbey* her emphasis is on beginning to practice prudence, in *Sense and Sensibility* she explores a wider variety of virtues. She also shows how a classical virtue, fortitude, can be learned, and how it can be understood in Christian terms. In this novel, virtue is not just chastity, regardless of Colonel Brandon's highly

---

<sup>77</sup> See for example John Graham Rowell, "Virtue and Moral Authority in Jane Austen's Fiction" (1988). One of the reasons readers often dislike what they see as Marianne's transformation into an even more repressed version of Elinor is that they mistake sense for self-denial; but self-denial is not in itself a virtue. The right reason advocated by the novel's conclusion is a positive force, not a barren sacrifice of self.

conventional opinion of female virtue. Chastity as a virtue is implicit in all the novels, but as I shall discuss at greater length in Chapter Seven in my analysis of *Persuasion*, Austen values its concomitant virtue constancy, the enduring loyalty of the mind and heart, above the mere regulation of sexual conduct. In *Sense and Sensibility*, as in *Northanger Abbey*, the process of learning appropriate social behaviour as an integral part of the education of the understanding is central, and thus I begin with a discussion of the social virtues.

### The Social World

As Elinor reminds Marianne, living in the social world requires that we behave well to our neighbours—in Christian terms, that we love our neighbours as ourselves. *Sense and Sensibility* dramatizes the struggle to love neighbours who are rude, vulgar, senseless, or unprincipled, as well as those who are kind, thoughtful, and sensible, even while remaining true to one's own standards, intelligence, and honour. In loving one's neighbour, there is an inherent tension between respect and affirmation; that is, it is difficult to draw the line between being polite and sympathetic to someone, and being complicit with that person's behaviour. The danger is that one can enable the other person to continue with destructive actions if one affirms detrimental behaviour and appropriate behaviour indiscriminately.<sup>78</sup> This line demarcates the limits of sympathy: while sympathy can be a great virtue, allowing one to share in and ideally to alleviate the sufferings of another, it must be tempered by

---

<sup>78</sup> Among literary examples of this danger are Mr. Jarndyce's support of Harold Skimpole in Dickens's *Bleak House*, Charles Ryder's behaviour to Sebastian Flyte in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, or perhaps even Mr. Irwine's indulgent treatment of Arthur Donnithorne in George Eliot's *Adam Bede*. In contrast to these characters, Elinor

judgement so that one does not affirm good and evil equally, or allow one's self to be taken advantage of. Social behaviour in Austen's novels, then, requires the constant exercise of judgement in order to achieve the right relation of civility to integrity. The Aristotelian terms for the virtues of social intercourse are friendship, truthfulness, and ready wit or tact, all of which appear frequently in Austen's novels as she examines what it might mean to be virtuous in the social world.

Being virtuous and being in the world are often set up as contradictory states. In the Christian tradition, Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* articulates the ideal "That it is sweet to despise the world and to serve God," but he recognizes that "it is not granted to all to forsake all things, to renounce the world, and to assume the monastic life" (92). In Book 14 of *The City of God*, St. Augustine defines the distinction as one between two cities, the city of those who live for the flesh and the city of those who live for the spirit; while "the one seeks glory from men," "the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience" (477). To be virtuous is to obey God and conscience; to be worldly is to seek gratification in earthly things as ends in themselves. However, the virtue of those who live for the spirit is not necessarily limited to those in holy orders, but is a choice available to all. Virtue does not necessarily demand isolation from the world: Augustine after all writes of "the city of God as it sojourns in this world" (461). Like Augustine, Aquinas makes a similar distinction between man "as a terrestrial citizen" and as a "participant in the heavenly city, Jerusalem"; he stresses that while the virtues of the latter are available only by divine grace, the virtues that are in man "as a citizen of an earthly commonwealth, do not exclude the faculty of human nature." Thus, he says, "man can acquire them by actions

---

sympathizes with Marianne's distresses, but offers constructive criticism rather than

proper to him through his natural powers” (*The Virtues (In General)* 96-97). There are earthly, human virtues, which are practised in the world, and also divine virtues, which lift the soul into the city of the spirit. In *Areopagitica* (1644) Milton writes that “the knowledge and survey of vice is in this world so necessary to the constituting of human virtue, and the scanning of error to the confirmation of truth” (729). Austen would concur that it is necessary to survey vice, if not to know it. In order to discriminate between vice and virtue one must be educated to recognize each of them; otherwise it is difficult to maintain virtue that is in and yet not of the world. In Austen’s novels the process of moral education is essential precisely because it can be so difficult to distinguish the subtleties of vices and virtues.

Colonel Brandon places a high value on the ““amiable”” aspects of the ““prejudices of a young mind;”” that is, Marianne’s mind. Elinor, however, talks to him about what she feels to be the dangers and ““inconveniences”” of ““systems [that] have all the unfortunate tendency of setting propriety at nought,”” and she stresses that ““a better acquaintance with the world is what I look forward to as her greatest possible advantage”” (SS 56). Elinor’s choice of the word “acquaintance” here is significant, as “knowledge” of the world may suggest something more like immersion in its ways. As Edward Ferrars later assesses his own predicament, his early engagement to Lucy Steele—““a foolish, idle inclination””—is ““the consequence of ignorance of the world—and want of employment.”” Edward chooses his words judiciously when he describes how his error might have been avoided: he says that ““mixing more with the world,”” as he would have done had he had a profession, would have been good for him (SS 362).

---

helpless support.

“Mixing” implies more contact than “acquaintance,” but it still suggests a way of living in the world while not being wholly of the world. The consequence of a too-early friendship with or even worship of the world is exemplified by Willoughby’s independence at a young age and the “consequent habits of idleness, dissipation, and luxury”: “The world had made him extravagant and vain—Extravagance and vanity had made him cold-hearted and selfish” (SS 331). The world is at fault for wooing Willoughby early and late, and as Elinor later observes of the rake’s progress, “all Willoughby’s difficulties have arisen from the first offence against virtue, in his behaviour to Eliza Williams. That crime has been the origin of every lesser one, and of all his present discontents” (SS 352). The seemingly irreversible progress of Willoughby’s descent into vice following his first offence against virtue suggests that his immersion in the world makes it next to impossible for his honour to be restored—this is in contrast to Hume’s theory that a man’s virtue can be more easily redeemed. Thus Austen’s fiction might be seen as opposing Hume’s double standard of virtue. Willoughby’s vice is selfishness, or worldliness: like Mr. Elliot in *Persuasion*, for whom “‘To do the best for himself,’ passed as a duty” (P 202), “His own enjoyment, or his own ease, was in every particular, his ruling principle,” says Elinor (SS 351).

The way to avoid worldly sins, Austen suggests in *Sense and Sensibility*, is not by shunning the world entirely and thus risking ignorance, but by “acquainting” one’s self with the world in order to recognize folly and danger.<sup>79</sup> Austen, like Milton, “cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed” (*Areopagitica* 728).

---

<sup>79</sup> Even though Elinor and Edward agree that contact with the larger world is necessary, their choice of words suggests that while women should perhaps cultivate an

Learning to distinguish what is good in the world is a part of education. As Lady Howard puts it in Frances Burney's *Evelina* (1778), "When young people are too rigidly sequestered from [the world], their lively imaginations paint it to them as a paradise of which they have been beguiled; but when they are shown it properly, and in due time, they see it such as it really is, equally shared by pain and pleasure, hope and disappointment" (106). While Fanny Price's solution to the preservation of virtue—at least initially—may have more to do with isolation from worldly influence and contamination, Elinor Dashwood's view is that with the right kind of education it is possible to be virtuous in the social world, even in a society where the behaviour of those around her often seems antithetical to virtue. Social virtue provides the basis for choosing how to behave well: as Ben Jonson says of the study of poetry, it offers "a certain rule, and pattern, of living well, and happily; disposing us to all civil offices of society" ("Explorata: or Discoveries" 445). Seeing the social virtues as a pattern may be a more useful analogy than seeing them as a rule: rules may be made to be broken, but patterns are more likely to be altered to fit. Social virtues are like patterns for sewing: properly tailored for the individual and the occasion, they will allow for the garment to fit comfortably, but mass-manufactured according to identical standards they are unlikely to be universally appropriate.

Austen is interested in how rules and categories and patterns of virtue are fitted to the person and the moment, and like Aristotle, she includes amiability, honesty, and tact among the social virtues. In analyzing the social virtues in Austen's fiction, John Rowell relies on a much narrower definition of each of these three terms than I do, as his

---

acquaintance only, men should be encouraged to mix with the world. Hence in *Evelina*



discussion of wit has more to do with humour or wittiness than with what Aristotle calls “ready wit or tact”; his discussion of truthfulness considers only the estimation of one’s own abilities and not the demands of honesty; and his view of amiability is related primarily to mere decorum, and a calculating version of decorum at that (“Virtue and Moral Authority in Jane Austen’s Fiction” [1988]). But Jane Austen values amiability highly, more highly even than Aristotle does,<sup>80</sup> and in her representation of all three of these virtues she goes beyond narrow definitions of the terms: this is one of the ways in which she extends tradition. It is not the virtues that she makes broader—she is not suggesting that the target be widened or the standards be lowered—but the exploration of the ways they work or don’t work. Manners for her are more important than they are for Aristotle because they provide an indication and a guide for the morality they represent or conceal.

### Amiability

Amiability is an especially interesting virtue: Aristotle says he has no name for it—there was no precise Greek word for what he was trying to describe, and he uses the word *philia* as the closest approximation. Some translations of the *Ethics* now offer “amiability,” while others translate *philia* as “friendliness” or “friendship.”<sup>81</sup> “Amiability” is Austen’s term. The excess of amiability is obsequiousness, sometimes accompanied by self-serving motives, and the defect is cantankerousness or unmannerly behaviour (1126b.12-1127a.13).

---

Mr. Villars’s anxiety about his female ward’s “entrance” into the world.

<sup>80</sup> I agree with Alasdair MacIntyre (183) that Austen gives more weight to amiability than Aristotle does.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele is obsequious—as she herself might describe someone, “excessively amiable” or perhaps “prodigiously polite”—while Mr. Palmer is cantankerous.

Both the Miss Steeles are excessive in their amiability toward Lady Middleton:

With her children they were in continual raptures, extolling their beauty, courting their notice, and humouring all their whims; and such of their time as could be spared from the importunate demands which their politeness made on it, was spent in admiration of whatever her ladyship was doing, if she happened to be doing any thing, or in taking patterns of some elegant new dress, in which her appearance the day before had thrown them into unceasing delight. (SS 120)

Mrs. Jennings, Sir John Middleton, and especially Charlotte Palmer, are also excessively good-natured. Mrs. Jennings praises people indiscriminately, inconsistently, and excessively—she fits Madame Duval’s description of the French in *Evelina*: “‘They don’t make no distinguishments at all,’ said she; ‘they’re vastly too polite’” (156). Sir John’s interest in merry parties leads him to pressure others to join him; however, his superabundance of good spirits is often made more acceptable because of his kindness: when he cordially but ironically insists that the Dashwoods dine at Barton Park every day until they feel at home in Barton Cottage, “though his entreaties were carried to a point of perseverance beyond civility, they could not give offence” because he is so friendly and generous (SS 30). In the more serious question of whether or not Marianne is engaged to Willoughby, Mrs. Dashwood also is too kind to be prudent and ask her daughter the truth,

---

<sup>81</sup> W.D. Ross chooses “friendship”; J.A.K. Thomson uses both “friendliness” and “amiability.” Aristotle’s discussion of the nature of friendship in Books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is distinct from his discussion of *philia* as a social virtue.

and thus her desire to be generous and amiable to Marianne exceeds her wish to protect her: “Elinor thought this generosity overstrained, considering her sister’s youth, and urged the matter farther, but in vain; common sense, common care, common prudence, were all sunk in Mrs. Dashwood’s romantic delicacy” (SS 85).

Edward Ferrars, though often criticized as a dull or flat character, is more complex than the caricatures that comprise the characterization of Mrs. Jennings, Sir John, or even Mrs. Dashwood, because his amiability is in tension with his honesty. To Marianne it is certain that his character is ““very amiable”” (SS 17), and for Mrs. Dashwood it is enough that “he appeared to be amiable” (SS 15). The narrator tells us that “his behaviour gave every indication of an open affectionate heart” (SS 15), but in the course of events it becomes clear that his natural tendencies toward affection and amiability are hindered by the secrecy with which he is obliged to conduct the engagement of which he is already so weary. Edward is amiable, but he is not completely honest and open.

Lady Middleton’s inattention and even insensibility to all but her own children and her own pleasure mean that she lacks amiable qualities. That virtue can be a matter of degree, however, is demonstrated by Elinor’s relief at Lady Middleton’s “calm and polite unconcern” (SS 215) after Marianne is rejected by Willoughby—her policy of civil non-interference here outshines the “clamorous kindness of the others,” (SS 215), and the narrator tells us that “Every qualification is raised at times, by the circumstances of the moment, to more than its real value; and [Elinor] was sometimes worried down by officious condolence to rate good-breeding as more indispensable to comfort than good-nature” (SS 215). This remark suggests two things about Austen’s views on virtue: while virtue may be perceived in degrees, it does have a “real value,” and while even though both Elinor and her

creator value good breeding highly, and may find that it is more indispensable to *comfort* than good nature is, apart from good nature the value of good breeding is questionable.

Although it has been argued that Elinor's good nature is deficient or even repressed,<sup>82</sup> her engagement with the joys and sorrows of others, especially Marianne, and her deep love for her family and for Edward indicate otherwise. Elinor regulates her behaviour, but this does not mean that her temper is dull or her understanding is limited. That is true of Lady Middleton, who is all politeness and no spirit, but it is not true of Elinor.<sup>83</sup> For the Middletons, social life means entertainment: "Continual engagements at home and abroad . . . supplied all the deficiencies of nature and education; supported the good spirits of Sir John, and gave exercise to the good-breeding of his wife" (SS 32). Elinor is not unamiable; in fact, she is the character in the novel who best exemplifies the union of good nature and good breeding. It is not the case that Elinor needs to learn Marianne's sensibility as much as Marianne requires an education in common sense. From the start Elinor possesses a keen sensibility, if not to the beauties of dead leaves (SS 88), then to the feelings, pain, beauty, and also the selfishness of the characters around her. Her sensibility may have more to do with truth than with the beauty of nature, but her temper is amiable and her breeding is refined. True amiability involves civility to family, friends, and

---

<sup>82</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's description of the novel as "especially painful" (*The Madwoman in the Attic* 157) is representative of the difficulty many twentieth-century readers have had in accepting the way the narrator of *Sense and Sensibility* sides with Elinor on moral questions of duty, responsibility, and the repression of the self; both Wiltshire (27) and Butler (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* 191) comment on the resistance of readers of this novel to the very notion of objective morality.

<sup>83</sup> Butler says that "Elinor was never intended to be infallible, but to typify an active, struggling Christian in a difficult world. Indeed, Jane Austen clearly argues that we do not find the right path through the cold, static correctness of a Lady Middleton, but through a struggle waged daily with our natural predisposition to err" (192). For the most

strangers, according to their due. This is not to say that self-interest is involved in assessing what is due to others—if it were, Elinor would be obliged to be more polite to Mrs. Ferrars—but that the amount of attention paid must be appropriate to the circumstances. Discerning what is appropriate requires education and understanding. Some people, for example, fawn unnecessarily and insincerely over strangers—this is excess, and amiability means judging how much attention is warranted to satisfy civility. Before taking up the question of what it is that makes Elinor amiable, and the question of what constitutes fortitude, I want to explore what happens in *Sense and Sensibility* when amiability comes into conflict with the virtue of honesty.

### Truth, Honesty, Sincerity

Marianne's love of truth and sincerity is well known. Presumably it should lead her to the practice of the virtue of truthfulness, but it also leads her into transgressions against amiability. One of the reasons for this is that while she believes she is acting spontaneously and naturally in each situation, she is in fact following her own system of rules: Susan Morgan is right that "The conventions of sensibility, far from representing a mode of spontaneous and open response to the events and people of Marianne's life, are a means of predetermining truth, of dictating judgment and behavior" (*In the Meantime* [1980] 123). Alistair Duckworth argues that Marianne's sensibility is "not merely fashionable" because she values sincerity and detests the jargon of the picturesque (*Improvement* 105), but even her revelation that "sometimes I have kept my feelings to myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and hackneyed out of all sense and

---

part I agree with this statement, though I question the degree to which Elinor's struggles

meaning” (SS 97) shows a reliance on conventions of sensibility that require originality in all things. Marianne's devotion to her ideal of honesty—she proclaims to Elinor at one point (SS 170) that she conceals nothing (nothing, that is, except the fact that there is no secret about Willoughby)—and her unwillingness to qualify her language with the forms of politeness mean that she cannot be amiable to her hostesses, Lady Middleton and Mrs. Jennings. When Lady Middleton proposes cards during one of the Dashwood sisters' visits at Barton Park,

No one made any objection but Marianne, who with her usual inattention to the forms of general civility, exclaimed, “Your ladyship will have the goodness to excuse *me*—you know I detest cards. I shall go to the piano-forté; I have not touched it since it was tuned.” And without farther ceremony, she turned away and walked to the instrument. (SS 144)

Lady Middleton is offended, and of course it falls to Elinor to smooth things over.<sup>84</sup>

Elinor's civility here both placates her hostess and produces an opportunity to speak to Lucy alone, and she “thus by a little of that address, which Marianne could never condescend to practise, gained her own end, and pleased Lady Middleton at the same time” (SS 145).

Marianne sees civility as inferior to openness and sincerity, but her rejection of propriety means that she retains her sincerity at the expense of tact, and therefore offends or injures other people.

---

are specifically Christian.

<sup>84</sup> Nardin outlines the rules she believes Elinor must follow in order “to be as attentive to others as they deserve,” saying that Elinor “proportions her attentions to the merits of the recipients” (27). She is right that Elinor assesses appropriate behaviour relative to context, but this idea in fact refutes her statement that morality in the novel is a “rule-oriented code” (45), because it demonstrates that Elinor exercises individual judgment in order to practice virtues.

Elinor notices in Willoughby a similar lack of tact, “a propensity, in which he strongly resembled and peculiarly delighted her sister, of saying too much what he thought on every occasion, without attention to persons or circumstances” (SS 48-49). The crucial difference between Marianne and Willoughby, however, despite the similarity in the openness and professed sincerity of their opinions about landscapes and taste, but especially about people they dislike, is that “Marianne abhorred all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve” (SS 53); that is, she is conscious of the real dangers of unreserve but believes she avoids them. Although we are told that “Willoughby thought the same” (SS 53), the later actions of both illustrate that Marianne learns to value the benefits of reserve when concealment is appropriate, whereas Willoughby simply regrets that his own secrets did not remain concealed for longer or forever. The qualification on Marianne’s dislike of concealment provides an interesting contrast with Mr. Darcy’s vehement avowal that “disguise of every sort is my abhorrence” (PP 192) in the aftermath of his first proposal to Elizabeth: both Marianne and Darcy later discover that there are times when concealment may be polite or politic, but in the first revelations of their opinions on the subject it is Marianne who is said to be more aware of the possible consequences of concealment, while Darcy is much more extreme in his rejection of all disguise. This contrast is instructive because it revises the commonplaces of Austen criticism that Darcy is reserved and proud, not open, and that Marianne is romantic, open, intemperate, and oblivious of all consequences.

Marianne doesn’t foresee all the potential disgraces of incivility, however, and refuses to be polite to Mrs. Jennings even though she owes her hostess her gratitude. When the sisters are travelling to London with Mrs. Jennings, although “Mrs. Jennings on her side

treated them both with all possible kindness,” Marianne, who finds her hostess vulgar, “sat in silence almost all the way, wrapt in her own meditations.” As usual, “To atone for this conduct, therefore, Elinor took immediate possession of the post of civility which she had assigned herself, behaved with the greatest attention to Mrs. Jennings, talked with her, laughed with her, and listened to her whenever she could” (SS 160). As with attitudes on their journey to London, so too with the desire to leave the city: Marianne, once rejected by Willoughby, wishes to leave immediately for Barton to be with her mother, yet Elinor recognizes that “We owe Mrs. Jennings much more than civility, and civility of the commonest kind must prevent such a hasty removal as that” (SS 191). Although her behaviour in the second situation is much more understandable, and Marianne in both instances may be true to herself and to her own feelings; her honesty impinges on her responsibilities toward others. Following her own rules, she offends not merely against politeness and decorum, but against the virtue of amiability. For her the virtues and the passions are conflated, as she believes it is virtuous to be passionate.

Marianne may be said to follow Hume in that she sees sentiment as the cause of all that is noble. Hume writes that “What is honourable, what is fair, what is becoming, what is noble, what is generous, takes possession of the heart, and animates us to embrace and maintain it” (*Enquiry* 15). In contrast to the uplifting powers of sentiment, he argues, reason is cold and reserved, not capable of inspiration: he continues, “What is intelligible, what is evident, what is probable, what is true, procures only the cool assent of the understanding; and gratifying a speculative curiosity, puts an end to our researches” (15). In his use of biblical language that echoes Philippians 4:8—“Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure,



whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things”— Hume revises tradition to demote truth. Whereas the Apostle Paul emphasizes that Christians should contemplate “whatsoever things are true,” Hume privileges honour and nobility of sentiment above truth and reason. He acknowledges the argument that virtue is conformity to reason, but argues that it is passionate feeling, not reason, that compels people to pursue virtue.<sup>85</sup>

Marianne’s strong sentiment, however, does not always lead her to virtue. In fact, it is possible that she is guilty of an excess of truthfulness; that too much honesty is not virtuous. Aristotle outlines the main deviations from truthfulness as boasting and false modesty, but because the ways of failing to satisfy the mean are unlimited, surely two more ways of deviating from this virtue are rudeness, an excess of honesty at the wrong time, toward the wrong person (and so on), and falsehood, simply not being truthful. At the risk of sounding too much like Mary Bennet, let me suggest that boasting and false modesty have to do with our estimation of ourselves; rudeness and falsehood have to do with how we treat others. Civility, after all, has to do with our relation to other people. The question of false modesty or boasting does arise in *Sense and Sensibility*, but it does not appear to be as much of a problem for Austen’s heroines as the variations of rudeness and falsehood are: Edward points out that Marianne ““knows her own worth too well for false shame”” (SS 94), and neither Marianne nor Elinor is inclined to self-promotion. Austen, like Aristotle, values truthfulness, not modesty, as the virtuous mean in this case. In contrast to the extremes of

---

<sup>85</sup> See Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment, II* (2000), for a discussion of Hume’s theory of the relationship between sentiment and virtue (290-93). See also Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (1996), on the ways in which passionate feelings were thought to travel from person to person, influencing their sympathetic engagement with others (1-16).

boasting and false modesty, truthfulness provides a correct estimation of one's own worth. Modesty, with its conduct-book connotations of sexual purity, bashfulness, and shame, is not a virtue (*NE* 1128b.10ff.).

Marianne's excessive honesty hurts her fellow creatures; Elinor, on the other hand, whose sensibility toward the feelings of others is in fact much stronger than Marianne's, finds it necessary to lie in certain circumstances, in order to avoid incivility, and in order to remain amiable. Here is where virtue in Jane Austen's writing becomes truly fascinating: it is not only not passive, as it is for Radcliffe's heroines, but it is tested—tested not simply against temptations and vices, as it is for Richardson's heroines, but against other virtues. Honesty comes into conflict with amiability. When the decidedly unamiable Mrs. Ferrars praises Miss Morton's ““stile of painting”” instead of Elinor's screens and Marianne protests rudely but sincerely, ““what is Miss Morton to us?—who knows, or who cares, for her?—it is Elinor of whom we think and speak”” (*SS* 235), Elinor is hurt by the warmth of this outburst, ““but Colonel Brandon's eyes, as they were fixed on Marianne, declared that he noticed only what was amiable in it, the affectionate heart which could not bear to see a sister slighted in the smallest point”” (*SS* 236). Brandon is a partial observer, but it is true that there is something amiable in Marianne's intentions; however, the effect on others around her, including, most importantly, her sister, is that she has been impolite in being too honest.

Elinor, as many readers have noticed, is the virtuous heroine who has to tell lies. R.F. Brissenden argues that Elinor's ““commitment to decorum,”” though understandable, is not commendable, as it ““leads her astray.”” Brissenden thinks Elinor ““is rather too ready to follow the apparently easier and wiser paths of prevarication”” (“The Task of Telling Lies”

[1984] 454), but this conclusion does not do justice to the struggles Elinor endures in deciding how to behave to others. It is not easy to be civil to everyone. It is a good question, however—how can we reconcile virtue with the necessity of lying in polite society? How, indeed, does Elinor do so, for surely she is aware of what she is doing? There are a number of places in the novel where Austen draws attention to Elinor's attitude toward politeness. She is obliged to respond somehow to Lucy Steele's inordinate praise of Sir John and Lady Middleton, because "Marianne was silent; it was impossible for her to say what she did not feel, however trivial the occasion; and upon Elinor therefore the whole task of telling lies when politeness required it, always fell" (SS 122). She does her best to say the right thing, "speaking of Lady Middleton with more warmth than she felt," and then offering a "simple and just" commendation of Sir John when Lucy calls him charming (SS 122). But while she is not being entirely honest here, neither is she being obsequious, as Lucy is in her excessive and self-interested praise of her new-found patrons. And she does not simply smile and agree with everything Lucy says: when Lucy turns to praise the children, saying that she dotes upon them, Elinor sees her chance to respond to the second part of the statement rather than the first, and says, "I should guess so . . . from what I have witnessed this morning" (SS 122). Thus although she must deviate a little from truthfulness, she does not lie any more than she has to.

Elinor's politeness is a sign of her concern for others, and yet her sympathy does not get the better of her judgement. When she is left to explain to Colonel Brandon why Marianne flees the room upon his arrival, he asks if her sister is ill, and she "answered in some distress that she was, and then talked of head-aches, low spirits, and over fatigues; and of every thing to which she could decently attribute her sister's behaviour" (SS 162). This

happens before Marianne receives Willoughby's last letter, well before she becomes really ill, but Elinor is able to use Marianne's heightened anxiety and low spirits to meet Brandon's expectations, and to conceal, civilly, that Marianne doesn't want to see him because he is not Willoughby. When Charlotte Palmer asks Elinor "whether she did not like Mr. Palmer excessively," Austen gives this response: "'Certainly,' said Elinor, 'he seems very agreeable'" (SS 114). Now, while saying of a man whose "studied indifference, insolence, and discontent" she has already observed (SS 112) that he seems "very agreeable" is a polite lie to his wife, the punctuation of the remark means that Elinor is able to give her own judgement in a concealed way: "certainly," followed by a semi-colon, is the answer to "whether she did not like Mr. Palmer excessively," not the first confirming part of "he seems very agreeable"; that is, certainly she does not like him excessively.<sup>86</sup> And how could she? Elinor tries not to do anything excessively—why would she find a cantankerous man to be certainly agreeable?

Many times in the novel she eschews speech altogether and, unless she is obliged to give an answer, simply avoids either politely agreeing with or rudely opposing someone. This tension between silence and speech happens frequently in conversations with Lucy—"Elinor wished to talk of something else, but Lucy still pressed her to own that she had reason for her happiness; and Elinor was obliged to go on.—"; "To this, Elinor had no answer to make, and did not attempt any" (SS 239)—or with her mother—"Elinor could *not* remember it;—but her mother, without waiting for her assent, continued"; "She paused.— Her daughter could not quite agree with her, but her dissent was not heard, and therefore gave no offence" (SS 338). She tells polite lies when she

---

<sup>86</sup> Although punctuation was altered in a number of places for the second edition of the

judges that something civil must be said, but refrains from doing so whenever she can. Yet if the situation really requires it she does speak out, even if it means offending; for example, she silences Lucy's professions of selfless concern for Edward staying in favour with his mother by pointing out that it is "for your own sake too, or you are carrying your disinterestedness beyond reason" (SS 148). With some people, however, she does not feel it is worth replying or objecting, if the subject matter is not serious: to the effusions of Robert Ferrars about the sublime value of a cottage she "agreed to it all, for she did not think he deserved the compliment of rational opposition" (SS 252). The important thing is that Elinor judges each situation as it arises; it is not simply that she always tells polite lies while Marianne always tells the truth: Elinor tells polite lies when it is an unavoidable necessity, but she never does so with unthinking politeness. Thus Elinor's approach to balancing amiability and honesty, despite falling short of perfect virtue, involves a complex understanding of social life.

### Honesty and Civility

Both Elinor and Marianne are guilty of deviating from the mean of truthfulness, albeit in different directions. Marianne is rude; Elinor lies. The question then is which sister chooses the right approach? Marianne may be truthful, but she is not always amiable. Elinor sometimes tells polite lies, but she upholds civility and the virtue of amiability, and is attentive to the feelings of others. Elinor genuinely feels for others in distress: like George Eliot's Dorothea Brooke, who forces herself to ask the important question "Was it her event only?" after she comes across Will Ladislaw at Rosamond Lydgate's house (*Middlemarch*

---

novel, this was not one of them.

543), Elinor is capable of working her way through to real sympathy for others even when her own heart has been seriously hurt. After she learns of Lucy's secret engagement to Edward, "Her resentment . . . for a short time made her feel only for herself; but other ideas, other considerations soon arose" (SS 139) and soon she feels that if Edward "had injured her, how much more had he injured himself; if her case were pitiable, his was hopeless" (SS 140).

In general, for Marianne, the practice of honesty regardless of situation is a selfish adherence to a code of taste: it is abhorrent to her to tell less than the whole truth (the truth as it appears to her, that is). This does not mean, however, that Marianne is always entirely oblivious to the feelings of others; on the contrary, when she is speaking to someone she loves, such as Elinor, she holds back from expressing her whole opinion if she believes that it will offend. Early in the novel she tries not to continue the subject of whether or not Edward has taste (even though she has raised it with Elinor)—"Marianne was afraid of offending, and said no more on the subject" (SS 19)—but when Elinor continues it, she phrases her response carefully, saying, "I have not had so many opportunities of estimating the minuter propensities of his mind, his inclinations and tastes as you have; but I have the highest opinion in the world of his goodness and sense," and "rejoic[ing] to find her sister so easily pleased" by this answer (SS 19-20). Her assessment of Edward's character sounds like a politely-phrased reference letter for a mediocre but pleasant employee or student. Marianne does know how to be tactful. The education in civility she goes through later in the novel is not a whole new way of looking at social life so much as a revision and extension of the best parts of her previous outlook.

Nevertheless, Marianne for much of the novel thinks mostly of her own feelings. On the subject of her various offences against civility to her neighbours, Morgan argues convincingly that “Marianne’s integrity is a luxury, an indulgence of self at the expense of those around her. Moreover, it is simply the choice of another kind of fiction, one which is not a reflection of truth at all. Instead, it substitutes fixed maxims and immediate impressions for the more difficult and more homely task of being just to others as well as to oneself” (*In the Meantime* 127). A serious problem with this approach, then, is that Marianne doesn’t allow for the possibility that she will be wrong, that people will turn out to be better than she expects. The decorum that Elinor holds to, on the other hand, offers, as Morgan says, “a way of seeing and acting toward others which allows for them the possibility of becoming more than our understanding of them” (*In the Meantime* 129).<sup>87</sup> Mrs. Jennings’ real kindness and concern during Marianne’s illness bear out the value of Elinor’s politeness: whereas at first both sisters found her rather vulgar, Elinor persisted in behaving toward her with civility, and in fact Mrs. Jennings does prove to be more amiable than either sister thought. Even more seriously, Elinor’s civility toward Colonel Brandon means her mind is open to being convinced of his virtues, while Marianne’s early dismissal of him as old and therefore disagreeable means that her eventual reconsideration of this opinion is much more painful, as it means admitting she was wrong and unfair to him. By behaving civilly to other people, Elinor is closer to practicing virtues than Marianne,

---

<sup>87</sup> David Monaghan’s argument in *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision* (1980) is that “Elinor’s social life is conducted almost entirely in the company of good-natured fools like Sir John Middleton or cold materialists like John Dashwood and, therefore, her good manners can rarely be more than the means of concealing her true reaction to the stupidity or cynicism of her companions” (44); however, it is precisely because Elinor is obliged to practise good manners in bad company that she is able to demonstrate how deep her moral understanding of other people is.

because surely a virtue is no longer a virtue when the practice of it is unjustly harmful to others. Elinor, in pursuit of amiability, tact, and truthfulness, and finding that there are tensions among these virtues, aims at the next best thing to the perfect practice of each virtue, which Aristotle says is appropriate when there is such a conflict (*NE* 1109a.33-36). Elinor is an excellent example therefore of that idea that Austen's characters function as "living arguments" for the virtues. Although Aristotle mentions conflicts between virtues, he does not analyze in detail what happens when the virtues collide. Austen does, and her lively portraits of virtuous and almost virtuous characters make the virtues more compelling than any treatise could.

### Vice or Moral Weakness

The next question is, what happens when people fall short of the full practice of a virtue, or of the virtues? Are they guilty of vice? Again, for Aristotle at least, it is not that simple. He says that there is an important distinction between vice and moral weakness (1145a.15ff.), the difference being that while vice is an imbalance of emotion that makes us unable to see that what we do is wrong, moral weakness is the state of knowing what is right, behaving wrongly, and being conscious of regret at falling short of practising the virtues. What does this distinction mean for Elinor and Marianne? Elinor is much more self-aware than Marianne. When she is obliged to lie in polite company, she recognizes and regrets what she's doing; thus, according to Aristotle she would be guilty only of moral weakness, which is much easier to correct than vice.

For Marianne, on the other hand, the problem is more serious. Her perspective is imbalanced, and needs to be set straight. She believes, for example, that if there had been



“any real impropriety” in her trip to Mrs. Smith’s house with Willoughby, she “should have been sensible of it at the time” (SS 68). Like Shaftesbury, she believes in an innate sense of right and wrong. As William E. Alderman writes, Shaftesbury believes that “no creature can do ill without being conscious of his offense and without having a feeling of deserved punishment” (“Shaftesbury and the Doctrine of Moral Sense in the Eighteenth Century” [1931] 1088). According to Shaftesbury in the *Inquiry Concerning Virtue*, therefore, “To have the reflection in his mind of any unjust action or behavior which he knows to be naturally odious and ill-deserving—this is alone properly called Conscience” (Bk. 2, Pt. 2, sect. 1; qtd. in Alderman 1088). But Austen does not follow Shaftesbury in this feeling; although the practice of the virtues relies upon individual judgement, it must be educated judgement, as Wollstonecraft advocates, and the principle is not simply, “if it feels moral, it must be right.” Marianne proves to have misjudged the appropriateness of her actions. Because she is unaware that it is wrong, her incivility is probably a vice, and therefore harder to correct. The very difficulty of readjusting her behaviour later on can be seen in her reaction to Elinor’s request that she be discreet about Lucy’s engagement to Edward. Marianne apologizes for having been insensitive to Elinor’s heartaches, and she “engaged never to speak of the affair to any one with the least appearance of bitterness;—to meet Lucy without betraying the smallest increase of dislike to her;—and even to see Edward himself . . . without any diminution of her usual cordiality” (SS 264–65). In short, she promises to be amiable even under unpleasant circumstances. “These were great concessions;—but where Marianne felt that she had injured, no reparation could be too much for her to make” (SS 265). Here Austen again shows Marianne’s disposition towards excess, even in good things, and although Marianne does keep her promise to Elinor, she

shows tendencies towards obsequiousness, excessive amiability, because, for example, “She attended to all that Mrs. Jennings had to say upon the subject, with an unchanging complexion, dissented from her in nothing, and was heard three times to say, ‘Yes, ma’am’” (SS 265). Achieving the virtuous balance is indeed a difficult task.

### Confession and Change

Marianne does prove capable of correcting her behaviour and achieving a balance. After her illness, she tells Elinor that she has considered her feelings and actions throughout the affair with Willoughby, and she sees ““nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others”” (SS 345). In her enthusiastic plans for future improvement, Marianne is once more extreme, asserting that ““from my home, I shall never again have the smallest incitement to move,”” but she clearly knows the virtuous path she should strive to achieve: ““if I do mix in other society it will be only to shew that my spirit is humbled, my heart amended, and that I can practise the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness, and forbearance”” (SS 347). These aspirations are reminiscent of the negative virtues Wollstonecraft criticizes, because Marianne is thinking in extremes still, yet the fact that she aspires to “practise the civilities” shows that she is on the right track. Through her own experience of suffering and through the education Elinor urges on her, she has come a long way from her first assessment of Elinor’s doctrine of civility as subservience to our neighbours’ judgements. The next lesson she must learn is that this practice of civility does not involve merely “the lesser duties of life” for gentle women, but it is related to the highest aspiration for both men and women: it is part of the full practice of the virtuous life.

In Marianne's grand plan for improvement, she says, "I mean never to be later in rising than six, and from that time till dinner I shall divide every moment between music and reading. I have formed my plan, and am determined to enter on a course of serious study" (SS 343). Marianne's plan resembles a passage from one of her favourite poets, James Thomson, whose works Edward earlier speculated she would buy if, as Margaret said, someone were to give them "all a large fortune apiece" (SS 92). In *The Seasons* Thomson writes of

An elegant sufficiency, content,  
Retirement, rural quiet, friendship, books,  
Ease and alternate labour, useful life,  
Progressive virtue, and approving heaven!  
These are the matchless joys of virtuous love . . . . (49-53)

In the earlier conversation with Edward, Margaret, and Mrs. Dashwood, Marianne and Elinor differ about what constitutes economic competence or wealth, with Marianne giving two thousand a year as "a very moderate income," for "a proper establishment of servants, a carriage, perhaps two, and hunters," and Elinor laughing that one thousand would be wealth to her (SS 91). Marianne's later proposal of retirement and study involves a more modest idea of a life of "elegant sufficiency," although in Colonel Brandon she does marry a man with two thousand a year after all.

Responding to Marianne's proposal for a retired life, Elinor "honoured her for a plan which originated so nobly as this," yet she smiles "to see the same eager fancy which had been leading her to the extreme of languid indolence and selfish repining, now at work in introducing excess into such a scheme of rational employment and virtuous self-controul"

(SS 343). After Elinor has told her of Willoughby's confession, however, Marianne reiterates her desire to regulate her remembrance of him, saying that "it shall be checked by religion, by reason, by constant employment", and vowing that "The future must be my proof. I have laid down my plan, and if I am capable of adhering to it—my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved" (SS 347). For Austen, decorum and civility, the "lesser duties of life," may be trivial and meaningless if they are mere forms, but when united with the ideals of religion, reason, and employment, they are among the outward signs of inward spiritual change and growth.

### Fortitude and Happiness

Happiness for Marianne, then, involves religion and reason as well as exertion and fortitude. What is it that constitutes Elinor's happiness? Early in the novel, Mrs. Dashwood, who ordinarily delights in indulging melancholy thoughts, exhorts Edward to conquer his want of spirits and not dwell on the question of his inheritance or independence, by telling him to "Know your own happiness. You want nothing but patience—or give it a more fascinating name, call it hope" (SS 103). Does Elinor know her own happiness? That Mrs. Dashwood preaches patience and hope is unusual, considering the narrator's later comment that "Bad indeed must the nature of Marianne's affliction be, when her mother could talk of fortitude! mortifying and humiliating must be the origin of those regrets, which *she* could wish her not to indulge!" (SS 213). Fortitude is perhaps an even less fascinating name for a virtue, but that is effectively what Mrs. Dashwood is advocating when she tells Edward to be patient. Significantly, she takes a classical virtue, patience, endurance, or fortitude, and revises it slightly, renaming it with a more romantic, more Christian word,

hope. While Mrs. Dashwood's more immediate concern is to coax Edward out of his "want of spirits," her theory that knowing one's own happiness is grounded in patience, or hope, is wise instruction.

Elinor possesses patience, and she has been praised by critics for exemplifying the related virtue of self-discipline or exertion.<sup>88</sup> Returning to my earlier question about the source of Elinor's amiability, I would argue that it is this exertion that makes it possible for Elinor to be amiable. Just as offences against virtue set in motion other offences against virtue, as in Willoughby's case, the positive practice of virtue involves a chain of interrelated virtues that cause and affect each other. Self-knowledge may bring us to understand our faults, knowledge of how we have injured others may bring us to exert ourselves to do better in future, and the constant discipline of seeking to know well in order to act rightly requires courage: Elinor has the courage to be strong, and because she is strong in her knowledge of herself and of others she is able to be amiable. Moral education ideally promotes truthfulness, tact, and amiability. Elinor's strength and fortitude make it possible for her to act in an amiable manner, and to have hope in her heart even when it seems Edward is lost to her forever. When Marianne learns Edward is bound to Lucy she asks her sister, "how have you been supported?" and Elinor replies that she felt she was doing her duty; Marianne exclaims, "—and yet you loved him!" but Elinor reveals the source of her hope and endurance by saying, "Yes. But I did not love only him" (SS 263). Again like Eliot's Dorothea, Elinor is able to sympathize with and love others when she herself is suffering: even in this very conversation, with Marianne "listen[ing] with horror, and cr[y]ng] excessively," she is required "to be the comforter of others in her own distresses, no

less than in theirs” (SS 261). This takes a good deal of strength, and Elinor is equal to the challenge. She knows her own happiness well enough to recognize, as she says to her sister, that “after all that is bewitching in the idea of a single and constant attachment, and all that can be said of one’s happiness depending entirely on any particular person, it is not meant—it is not fit—it is not possible that it should be so” (SS 263). Because Elinor is acquainted with the world, and knows something of what may and may not constitute happiness, she is able to be strong, and because of her fortitude she is able to know her own happiness.

This fortitude—call it strength, discipline, patience, or exertion—does not come easily to Elinor, however. She tells Marianne that ““The composure of mind with which I have brought myself at present to consider the matter, the consolation that I have been willing to admit, have been the effect of constant and painful exertion;—they did not spring up of themselves”” (SS 264). For example, in the most severe test of her civility she is required to conduct a social visit with Lucy and Edward at the same time. Neither of the others is able, or willing, to rescue the situation, but Elinor is determined to say and do what she ought: “so anxious was she, for his sake and her own, to do it well, that she forced herself, after a moment’s recollection, to welcome him, with a look and manner that were almost easy, and almost open; and another struggle, another effort still improved them” (SS 241). This is virtue tested and proven. Doing and saying the right thing at the right time does not always come easily to her, but the important thing is that she tries. Austen does poke fun at Elinor’s patience, however, when she writes that when Elinor goes to fetch Marianne, she leaves Lucy and Edward together and takes her time getting to her sister, spending several minutes on the landing, “with the most high-

---

<sup>88</sup> See Stuart M. Tave’s chapter on “The Sensibility of Marianne and the Exertion of Elinor

minded fortitude” first (SS 242). It is funny and ironic that Austen describes this plan as heroic, and we are meant to be amused, but surely we sympathize with the exasperated Elinor as well. She receives no help from Edward or Lucy, who alone are responsible for the awkwardness of the situation. To accuse her of glorying in her self-denial and high-mindedness, however, as some critics have, is unjust. If she had stayed in the room enduring the impossible situation, determined not to leave, that might be interpreted as self-torture and excessive fortitude. The fact that she escapes the room is evidence that she is much affected by what is happening, and that even her endurance has limits. Her “high-minded fortitude” in leaving Edward and Lucy alone for a few minutes longer is thus amusing because ironic, but, more than that, it does take real account of how to handle social difficulties.

Elinor is possessed of “strength of understanding” and “coolness of judgement,” and she is good-natured: “She had an excellent heart;—her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong, but she knew how to govern them” (SS 6). Her strong feelings are apparent in scenes where she becomes speechless—for example, when Edward appears at Barton Cottage and reveals that he is free. As Inger Sigrun Brodey points out in her article “Adventures of a Female Werther: Austen’s Revision of Sensibility” (1999), “Like a true ‘woman of feeling,’ Elinor loses her ability to speak when she feels most deeply” (120-21). She knows her own mind, and therefore can be strong, can love her neighbour, and can be happy, even in difficult circumstances; the balance she achieves between a just understanding of the social world and a charitable attitude toward the people in it contributes as well to the eventual happiness she finds in

---

Dashwood” in *Some Words of Jane Austen* (1973).

marriage with Edward. In contrast to Elinor, Willoughby's inconsistent opinions and inconstant actions lead him into a marriage in which he declares himself miserable, to the point where he even begins to speculate to Elinor in their interview at Cleveland, "Were I even by any blessed chance at liberty again"—but she stops him from continuing (SS 332). In conversation with Edward while he is still engaged to Lucy, Elinor offers him "a very earnest assurance . . . of her unceasing good wishes for his happiness in every change of situation that might befall him" (SS 290). While this assurance may have a slight hint of her hope that his situation might change so he would be free to marry her, it is not nearly so blatant as Willoughby's remark. Even if it were blatant, the fact remains that Edward and Lucy are not married yet, and Willoughby is—and Edward's and Lucy's engagement would need only to be broken in some way, whereas Willoughby's wish depends on his wife's death. In any case, much more prominent in Elinor's wish for Edward's happiness is her real desire for his welfare, and her dependence on the necessity of seeking honourable happiness even under the reverses of fortune. With Elinor as the exemplar of fortitude tested and still constant, her brother's praise of "Poor Fanny[']s'" reaction to the news of Edward's engagement to Lucy appears even more ridiculous. John Dashwood assures his sisters and Mrs. Jennings that his wife's "constitution is a good one, and her resolution equal to any thing. She has borne it all, with the fortitude of an angel!" (SS 265)

If Elinor is the representative of the virtue of fortitude in the novel, is it Marianne's fate to learn to be as virtuous as her sister? After he relates the story of the two Elizas to Elinor, Colonel Brandon expresses his belief that as Marianne's misfortunes "proceed from no misconduct," they "can bring no disgrace. On the contrary, every friend must be made



still more her friend by them” (SS 210). He is sure that knowledge of her own sexual innocence will support her in her disappointment; Elinor, on the other hand, thinks that Marianne might have acted better, and the narrator’s judgement is with Elinor. Brandon reflects conventional opinion in his certainty that because there has been no sexual misconduct, there has been no transgression against virtue. He is also certain that “Concern for her unhappiness, and respect for her fortitude under it, must strengthen every attachment” (SS 210). As he has just concluded his tale of the first Eliza’s inconstancy, confessing that “I had depended on her fortitude too far” (SS 206), it is clear that for him female fortitude consists chiefly in resisting sexual temptation.

Chastity is an aspect of the virtues, but it properly belongs in a sub-category. It may well follow that someone who values faith and love should want to guard against sexual impurity, but fortitude in this novel is not just about avoiding temptation, as the narrator, Elinor, and ultimately Marianne demonstrate in words, and as Marianne especially demonstrates in dramatic action. Marianne does not at first have real fortitude—she does have the kind Brandon is talking about, and she has not lost sexual virtue, but she does not have the strength of mind that would enable her to stay strong and healthy when she is rejected in love. The evening of Willoughby’s departure from Barton we are told that she “could neither eat nor speak, and after some time, on her mother’s silently pressing her hand with tender compassion, her small degree of fortitude was quite overcome, she burst into tears and left the room” (SS 82). The narrator says, “She was without any power, because she was without any desire of command over herself” (SS 82); in other words, she lacks fortitude because she lacks the courage to exert herself. Because she feels joy and suffering in extremes—when it is decided that the sisters will go to London, “Marianne’s joy was

almost a degree beyond happiness” (SS 158), and when Mrs. Jennings brings her a letter that she expects is from Willoughby but is really from her mother she feels “the acuteness of the disappointment which followed such an ecstasy of more than hope” (SS 202)—Marianne finds it difficult to maintain her composure, her spirits, and her health.

Elinor is sensible to exhort her to “Exert yourself, dear Marianne,” when Marianne gives way to misery after receiving Willoughby’s final letter, and she points out the possible consequences of not doing so, using extreme language to try to shock Marianne into a recognition: “if you would not kill yourself and all who love you,” she cries (SS 185). Readers often interpret Marianne’s subsequent melancholy and illness as a refusal to obey Elinor’s advice, but in fact there are numerous signs that she does try to exert herself. On the first evening after Willoughby’s letter has effectively destroyed all her hopes, she determines to dine with Elinor and Mrs. Jennings, even with company (the Parrys and Sandersons) present as well, and “though looking most wretchedly, she ate more and was calmer than her sister had expected” (SS 193). Although she does leave the room when she later feels oppressed by Mrs. Jennings’s attention to her sorrow, the scene contrasts sharply with the evening after Willoughby’s departure from Barton Cottage, as she is much stronger the second time, even though suffering a far greater disappointment. In London, after the letter, “From a night of more sleep than she expected, Marianne awoke the next morning to the same consciousness of misery in which she had closed her eyes” (SS 201); again in contrast, in Barton, “Marianne would have thought herself very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. . . . She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it” (SS 83).

When the sisters attend a party at the home of Fanny Dashwood’s acquaintance, the

narrator relates that “Marianne had now been brought by degrees, so much into the habit of going out every day, that it was become a matter of indifference to her, whether she went or not” (SS 249): although she has not yet begun to take an interest in things outside herself, she is beginning the habit of exertion and self-discipline. After she learns of Edward’s engagement, she starts to see what fortitude has meant for Elinor, but this knowledge does not help her to emulate her sister; rather, “Her mind was so much weakened that she still fancied present exertion impossible, and therefore it only dispirited her more” (SS 270). She has been exerting herself, but she now reacts to Elinor’s conduct “with all the pain of self-reproach, [and] regretted most bitterly that she had never exerted herself before; but it brought only the torture of penitence, without the hope of amendment” (SS 270). At this point, she is penitent, but she feels neither absolved of her fault nor inspired to improve her conduct.

It is when she confesses to Elinor what she has felt, and acknowledges responsibility for her weaknesses, that she reveals she is prepared for forgiveness and change. She says, ““I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the grave”” (SS 345). She describes the change in her opinions to Elinor, and expresses the newly-dawned desire ““to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all”” (SS 346), and she appears to think atonement involves doing penance by studying and by demonstrating her affection for her family. Yet instead of “finding her only pleasures in retirement and study” (SS 378), at the end of the novel she has learned to love again, and although absolution is not explicitly offered to her, it is surely through the grace that comes with atonement that she is able to find renewed happiness. Colonel Brandon is naturally happy in his marriage to her, but the rhetoric of the narrator’s

conclusion raises the question of whether or not Marianne is genuinely happy—“that Marianne found her happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend”—only to resolve it in the very next sentence with authorial certainty: “Marianne could never love by halves; and her whole heart became, in time, as much devoted to her husband, as it had once been to Willoughby” (SS 379).

Along with a number of other critics,<sup>89</sup> Marilyn Butler argues that Marianne’s marriage is a betrayal and a failure: she writes that “The measure of Jane Austen’s failure to get us to read her story with the necessary ethical detachment comes when she imposes her solution” (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* 196). But if we read Marianne’s earlier story closely and notice the ways in which she exerts herself to do her duty to others and to God,

---

<sup>89</sup> Jan Fergus’s argument that Austen is more interested in dramatizing relationships in communities of women than relationships between men and women offers a rare (though misdirected) defence of Marianne’s marriage (90). Marvin Mudrick argues that the marriage means Marianne is the victim of social conformity; A. Walton Litz suggests instead that Austen is the victim of artistic convention in feeling it necessary to marry off Marianne and reward Brandon (both qtd. in Duckworth 104). Tony Tanner says it isn’t the “real” Marianne who submits to this marriage (*Jane Austen* [1986]). Duckworth agrees that Marianne is betrayed by her author (104). Patricia Meyer Spacks says only that “One feels a faint sadness at her sensible marriage” (“Sisters” [1986] 149), yet her assessment of Brandon and Edward as “slightly tarnished figures” (150) fails to consider how much more than tarnished the once sparkling Willoughby would have been as an alternative.

In *Reshaping the Sexes in Sense and Sensibility* (1998), Moreland Perkins makes the most extreme, and also the weakest, case for a reading of Marianne’s marriage as a betrayal, arguing that because the reformed Marianne is not represented dramatically she doesn’t count: he rejects the moral education and marriage because they do not “cohere” with his ideas of “the gender-dissonant Marianne” that he finds earlier in the novel. Here the desire to use Austen as a critic of the social construction of gender outweighs the textual evidence. Although Marianne’s marriage is not dramatized, her confession and conversion are, and to persist in rejecting the implications of the ending is to misread the novel. Marianne does change, and we are told that she does love Colonel Brandon. Elsewhere in *Sense and Sensibility* Perkins is able to find some evidence for his theory of “reshaping the sexes” in that Elinor exhibits a kind of masculine strength while Edward may represent the weaker sex, but for the most part his book is a transparent attempt to

the marriage at the end will not be as shocking, because it is not an abrupt about-face. It is problematic that Mrs. Dashwood is made the apparent agent of the marriage: while the marriage is consistent with Marianne's repentant and educated self, the fact that Mrs. Dashwood announces her plans to reward Colonel Brandon with the gift of her daughter makes it seem as if Marianne is the victim of social pressures. Yet although the marriage is her mother's "darling object," it is Marianne who comes "voluntarily to give her hand to another" (SS 378). Some readers object to the narrator's statement that she marries "with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship" (SS 378), but this is Austen's irony: most marriages in her novels are far from this ideal of esteem and friendship, let alone the additional ideal of romantic love, and these initial sentiments of Marianne's do mature into love. Marianne's education, then, what the narrator calls her "extraordinary fate" (SS 378) of revising her opinions and counteracting her early actions, involves both the classical regulation of governing her feelings and improving her temper, and the Christian imperative of contrition. The classical balance may be a matter of degrees and of negotiating the tensions among the virtues, practicing how to be good, civil, and happy, but atonement to God requires contrition and confession, humility and love, and acceptance of grace and forgiveness.

Elinor finds happiness and fulfillment through marriage with Edward, it is true, but she is capable of "knowing her own happiness" from the beginning of the novel because she knows her own faults and exercises her judgement in social life to maintain the virtues of her understanding and to focus on the virtues of prudence, amiability, honesty, civility, and fortitude in her actions. John Graham Rowell too suggests that

---

impose postmodern theories of gender on Austen, as Perkins systematically discards all

“Austen’s heroines choose the right actions, but they do not choose the happiness that is their reward at the end of each novel” (83); all anyone can do is choose virtuous action with the hope that it may contribute to happiness. It is not only good fortune that leads to her happiness in marriage, but also fortitude that helps her to be amiable and thus to be happy in her knowledge of herself as well. Susan Morgan argues that Elinor is “the major innovation of *Sense and Sensibility* and a new kind of character in English fiction” because she is a flawed heroine in the “sense of using an awareness of her own failings as a factor in maintaining a continuing and flexible process of judgement” (*In the Meantime* 125; 126). I agree with this judgement of Elinor, but I think Morgan is unfair to Marianne, whom she calls a flawed heroine only “in the simpler sense” of “making mistakes and learning to see them” (*In the Meantime* 126). Elinor possesses this awareness of her faults from the beginning, but when Marianne ultimately does achieve a similar awareness, she also recognizes that there is a complicated process involved in “practising the civilities.” Although Marianne changes, she is Marianne still; she is not a new Elinor: as Wiltshire points out, her enthusiasm for reform, “the very eagerness of her desire to live,” is what “makes her reform a new enactment of her embodied self, not the assumption of an Elinor-like sobriety” (50). Like Morgan, Butler sees Elinor’s character as representative of something new, in Austen’s work, if not in English fiction generally: she says, “Elinor is the first character in an Austen novel consistently to reveal her inner life,” and concludes that it is a “real technical achievement of *Sense and Sensibility*” that “this crucial process of Christian self-examination is realized in literary terms” (189). Elinor is highly aware of her conduct and very much concerned to correct it when it is

---

her other novels in favour of the one novel where he thinks his theory might work.

wrong, but she operates according to a system that, though flexible, is more dependant on amelioration than on forgiveness—is her self-examination really Christian?

Marianne thinks she knows what constitutes her own happiness, yet she ultimately finds it not in sentiment, passion, and taste alone, but in classical heroism and fortitude, and in Christian confession and repentance. Fortitude alone would have supported her in her plan of work and study, if she had indeed lived out her life in seclusion, but atonement, not just her atonement to God but Christ's atonement for her, means that her ruined and disappointed love can be revived in a new sphere of affection and family life. Unlike Charlotte Palmer, who is always "happy without a cause" (SS 118), Marianne and Elinor have good reason for their happiness. But whereas Elinor's primary support is her own strength, and she offers an example that her sister eventually learns to emulate, Marianne turns to God for her support, and finds love. She may have been educated partly by Elinor's example of the classical virtues, but if Elinor is a classical heroine (even though she marries a clergyman), and Marianne represents both classical and Christian virtues, perhaps it is Elinor's turn, at the end of the novel, to learn from Marianne, not about sensibility, but about grace. As Augustine writes in Book 22 of *The City of God*, "however valorously we resist our vices, and however successful we are in overcoming them, yet as long as we are in this body we have always reason to say to God, 'Forgive us our debts'" (850). Forgiveness fills the gap between the mean we aspire to, and the virtue we can achieve on our own. Unlike Elinor, Marianne is prepared to ask for divine grace to make up the difference.

Seeing Elinor and Marianne in the context of classical and Christian ideas of the virtues can help to clarify the way Jane Austen works within a larger tradition of the

philosophy of virtue, exploring the weaknesses, tensions, and balances involved in the practice of an ideal. Understanding the sisters as participants in a process of learning to practise the virtues may also be more helpful than trying to sort out to what degree each possesses sense or sensibility. *Sense and Sensibility* is not dichotomous; it does not involve rigid prescriptions of character defined by duty and desire, reason and emotion, sense and sensibility; it is not primarily concerned with how to temper sensibility with sense. It is complex not because Elinor must learn sensibility while Marianne must learn sense,<sup>90</sup> but because Austen shows them both aspiring to the ideal of virtuous behaviour through a difficult working out of judgement, practical wisdom, and application. *Sense and Sensibility* is about flaws, weaknesses, even vices, and confession and change. Unlike *Northanger Abbey*, *Sense and Sensibility* is concerned with discovering the right way to practise the range of the virtues. This makes *Sense and Sensibility* one of Austen's mature novels, I think, even though it is often classed with *Northanger Abbey* as an early, relatively flat novel. The virtues in *Sense and Sensibility* are quite different from virtue in Richardson's, Radcliffe's, Inchbald's, or Fenwick's novels, and Austen does not rely on Hume's or Shaftesbury's theories of morality.

The practise of the virtues in this novel is something like what Wollstonecraft calls for, in that it involves educated women who don't depend on men for judgement and moral guidance, but practise the "exertion of [their own] judgment to modify general rules" (305).

---

<sup>90</sup> A number of critics argue that both Elinor and Marianne have to learn and develop through the course of the novel. See, for example, Andrew Wright, *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure* (1953) 89; Darrel Mansell, *The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation* (1973) 66; Kenneth L. Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (1968); and Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (1986). Susan Morgan argues instead (rightly, I think), for this distinction: she says that "Elinor does not mature in this novel, but she is in a constant process of developing her



And it is even more like what Aristotle envisions, in that it does not involve prescriptive sets of opposing behaviours, but a range of right principles that must be practised to be achieved, and that even at times compete with each other. In addition, however, virtue in this novel ultimately requires Christian confession and penance. The virtues are not static, but tested; they are social, intellectual, moral, and spiritual, not simply sexual, virtues. *Sense and Sensibility* is a radical reworking of contemporary notions of virtue that Wollstonecraft, Aquinas, and Aristotle would have approved, as Austen demonstrates the importance, necessity, and flexibility of practising the virtues; and it provides, in Marianne, an example of how classical and Christian virtues can show how to know one's own happiness.

---

vision" (*In the Meantime* 130). Duckworth similarly suggests that Elinor "does not so much evince a moral growth as a constant internal moral struggle" (*Improvement* 114).

**Chapter Four: *Pride and Prejudice* and the Beauty of Justice**

**“...perfect happiness the just reward of their virtues.”**

**—Jane Austen, “Evelyn”**

Like *Sense and Sensibility*, *Pride and Prejudice* is concerned with the social virtue of amiability and the problem of how to be truthful and civil simultaneously. Like Elinor, Elizabeth Bennet must negotiate ways to keep her judgement independent while she behaves politely to her family, her neighbours, and her enemies. But she has much more spirit than Elinor, and thus has a great deal more trouble behaving civilly when she is insulted or exasperated by others. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the tensions in Jane Austen's exploration of competing virtues are heightened, yet it is not simply because Elizabeth has a harder time than Elinor at balancing amiability and civility. There is more at stake, the questions are more complicated, and the action is more dramatic in this novel because Austen takes on the problems of anger and prejudice, investigating how they work in relation or opposition to the principles of virtue.

A relatively recent and predominant critical trend has been to read *Pride and Prejudice* as the humiliation of Elizabeth Bennet, with the subjection of Elizabeth's assertiveness to Darcy's better judgement the focus of the dislike of critics including Judith Lowder Newton, Mary Poovey, and Susan Fraiman.<sup>91</sup> The underlying assumption of such critics is, as Claudia L. Johnson says explicitly in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*, that original sin is "thread-bare morality" (PP 60).<sup>92</sup> If one rejects the

---

<sup>91</sup> See *Women, Power, Subversion* (1981); *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984); and *Unbecoming Women* (1993) respectively. The argument that Austen's heroines are forced into humiliating submission stems from Sandra M. Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's influential book *The Madwoman in the Attic*, which argues that Austen's imaginative heroines are "mortified, humiliated, even bullied into sense" (159), and that "the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor, whose house can provide her with shelter and sustenance and at least derived status, reflected glory" (154).

<sup>92</sup> Johnson sums up the attitude of many recent critics of Austen when she argues that "*Pride and Prejudice* invites us not to chide Elizabeth with threadbare morality about

central Christian doctrine of original sin, both for one's self and on behalf of Jane Austen, then it is not surprising that *Pride and Prejudice* will read like a repressive story in which a strong-minded independent woman is forced to admit that she has made a mistake, and thus is humiliated by and before the man she loves. In addition to the tendency to see *Pride and Prejudice* as a story of humiliation, another trend of much longer standing has been to accept too readily as critical fact Austen's playful comment in a letter to Cassandra that *Pride and Prejudice* really is too "light, and bright, and sparkling" (*Letters*, 4 February 1813),<sup>93</sup> and therefore to try earnestly to demonstrate Austen's seriousness by showing how the novel is "marked, even scarred, by history" (Armstrong 161), or by arguing that Austen was a political subversive hiding behind conservative forms (Johnson 75), because "the family of readers that Austen posited did not necessarily exist" in her own time (Poovey 115).

Julia Prewitt Brown has argued convincingly that "Jane Austen's stature has declined with the rise of feminist literary criticism," suggesting that while Poovey, Johnson, Nina Auerbach, Carolyn Heilbrun, and Gilbert and Gubar read Austen as complicit in bourgeois ideology and see marriage in her novels as an inadequate substitute for independence, the criticism of men including F.R. Leavis, Ian Watt, Lionel Trilling, George Steiner, and Alasdair MacIntyre reads Austen as serious and "internationally important" ("The Feminist Depreciation of Jane Austen: A Polemical Reading" [1990] 303). I agree with Brown that the decline in Austen's reputation is a

---

original sin, but on the contrary, if not actually to flatter people's pride as Wickham and Collins do, then at least to honor it" (83).

<sup>93</sup> In their biographies of Austen David Nokes and Carol Shields miss the irony of Jane Austen's comments about adding "shade" and stretching out the novel with "a long chapter of sense."

serious one, but whereas she would like to see Austen taken seriously primarily in the context of a feminism based on the works of Mary Wollstonecraft and George Eliot (313), I think Austen should also be taken seriously as a philosophical and religious writer in the context of the tradition of both men and women who wrote before her time.

In contrast to critics who focus on either humiliation or the scars of history in *Pride and Prejudice*, then, I shall argue first of all in this chapter that the change in Elizabeth is not due to repression and humiliation, but to a liberating process of education that leads to Christian humility. Humility in *Pride and Prejudice* is not abject self-abasement, but a right sense of one's own fallibility, and it is not just something Elizabeth learns in order to submit herself to Darcy, but something that they both learn so that they together submit to God in marriage. The second part of my argument is partly a defence of language: I want to defend the specific words—including *anger*, *prejudice*, and *judgement*—that Austen uses to describe the education of Darcy and Elizabeth, in order to demonstrate that *Pride and Prejudice* is intensely serious, even the most serious of Austen's novels, despite and often in places because of its comedy. It is serious not primarily because it is political in a historical sense—by which most critics mean that it participates implicitly in the debates surrounding the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars<sup>94</sup>—but because it deals with crucial issues of courage and justice. It is thus in fact highly political, insofar as Aristotle says that the question of “how shall our life together be ordered?” is the central issue of politics. Both the seriousness and the beauty of *Pride and Prejudice* arise out of Austen's concern with how to get from sin to

---

<sup>94</sup> Unlike most critics who argue that Austen is political, Roger Gard sees Austen as politically representative precisely because her work is not overtly political: “Unpolitical,

justice. Part of the answer to the question of this process has to do with humility, part of it also has to do with anger, and most of it has to do with love.

### Sparkling or Serious?

There has always been a suspicion among readers—and especially among nonreaders—of Jane Austen’s novels, that love is not quite a serious enough topic, even for a novel. Janeites are forever caricatured as escapist readers indulging in a guilty pleasure, reading Jane Austen in a dreamworld of fantasy, wish-fulfillment, Regency ballgowns, lace, and perfectly happy marriages. The real world, even the real world of other kinds of fiction, it is suggested, is much more serious than that. Even the best of the recent film adaptations do little to counteract the prevailing prejudice that Austen novels are preoccupied with the perfect wedding as the culmination of every woman’s dream.<sup>95</sup>

---

she is *therefore* the realistic novelist of an evolving national democracy” (*Jane Austen and the Art of Clarity* [1994] 17).

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Davies’s 1995 miniseries based on *Pride and Prejudice*, though well-done and for the most part faithful to the spirit of the novel, is particularly guilty of reinforcing the image of the wedding as the climax of the story, with its double wedding, elaborate costumes, Cinderella carriages, and kissing forming a sharp contrast to Austen’s single-sentence reference to the weddings of Jane and Bingley, Elizabeth and Darcy: “Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters” (*PP* 385). One-line weddings don’t translate well to the screen. The wedding scene in Emma Thompson’s version of *Sense and Sensibility* (1995) is just as bad. Ironically, it is the scripts that invent wholly new concluding scenes that are more successful at conveying the spirit of Austen’s conclusions. Davies does better in his 1996 *Emma* than in his version of *Pride and Prejudice*. This film version of *Emma* concludes with an invented country dance that celebrates the engagement of Emma and Mr. Knightley, but more prominently symbolizes the harmonious future of the community. Despite the fact that it too departs from the novel, Nick Dear’s 1995 film version of *Persuasion* also offers a satisfactory solution by briefly showing Anne and Wentworth together on board ship. This conclusion suggests that their life lived together, in its resemblance to the marriage of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, is far more important to Austen

*Pride and Prejudice*, perhaps because it is one of the best-known and best-liked of the novels, is particularly prone to the criticism that it is mere fantasy. Johnson calls the novel “almost shamelessly wish-fulfilling” (73), Newton describes it as “Austen’s fantasy of female autonomy” (74), and Armstrong says that its explorations of class privilege are limited, which is why “the assuaging and energizing dreamwork of its comedy have no parallel in Jane Austen’s other novels.” Armstrong defends Austen by saying that she was “no dreamer” because in *Mansfield Park* she next “constructed a text which would challenge” the dream of *Pride and Prejudice* (176). Attempting to defend the political seriousness of this novel, Marilyn Butler first of all writes that “It would not be in keeping with the serious-mindedness of modern scholarship to rest content with the popular view of *Pride and Prejudice* as having no meaning at all” (329), and goes on to suggest that “If in nothing else, a clue to the conservatism of the novel lies in the original title, ‘First Impressions’” (335), which might indicate that “the early version was more dogmatic” (336) than the later version with its revolutionary heroine.

It does seem difficult to fit *Pride and Prejudice* into a political reading: both Butler and Johnson find the novel to be anomalous, as the former, who wants it to reiterate the anti-Jacobin sentiments she finds in the other novels, admits that “Of all the Austen novels, *Pride and Prejudice* seems at first glance the least likely to yield a conservative theme” (328), and the latter, who wants it on the contrary to be politically subversive, has trouble with what she sees as the way in which “on the surface at least, *Pride and Prejudice* corroborates conservative myths” (74). Here as elsewhere in her

---

than the mere wedding ceremony. For an overview of the relation between the novels and the recent films, including the various approaches to the endings, see *Jane Austen in Hollywood*, edited by Linda Troost and Sayre Greenfield (1998).

book, Johnson is left to find evidence for her argument in what Austen doesn't say, and she posits that Austen's silence on political matters "is an enabling rather than inhibiting strategy" in that she is somehow able "to dismantle myths propounded by anti-Jacobin novelists without seeming necessarily to imply a Jacobin wish to see society radically reconstituted" (xxv): she concludes, therefore, that "Austen's attempt to reform gentry myths in *Pride and Prejudice* entailed consenting to most of their basic outlines" (89).

Even critics such as Butler and Johnson, who are unwilling to accept the view that *Pride and Prejudice* has "no meaning at all," have had trouble reading it as politically engaged and therefore as serious writing. Thus it remains read by many as irredeemably romantic or insufficiently political. Ironically, the barrier to taking *Pride and Prejudice* seriously has been that it is easy to accept Austen's own comments on her work as a serious statement of artistic fact.<sup>96</sup> My objection is to a too-ready acceptance of the first part of that famous "light and bright and sparkling" sentence; I think if we are to take Austen seriously we need to read the whole sentence closely. She writes of *Pride and Prejudice* that

The whole work is rather too light, and bright, and sparkling; it wants shade; it wants to be stretched out here and there with a long chapter of sense, if it could be had; if not, of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story; an essay on writing, a critique on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparté, or anything that would form a

---

<sup>96</sup> The difficulty of taking Austen both seriously and lightly simultaneously is nicely summarized by Park Honan, who says that "As the twentieth century ends, Jane Austen's artistic power is credited, though her lightness disguises her profundity" (420).



contrast, and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style. (*Letters*, 4 February 1813)

These lines are clearly ironic: she may be modest here but it is widely agreed by now that she was not an unconscious artist, and if she really thought her novels needed extra long chapters of sense (Chapter 17 of *Adam Bede* comes to mind) she might have added them. As she well knew, sense is pervasive throughout her novels—it is never an aside. In this sentence she anticipates the objections of some of her readers; she is not speaking as a serious critic of her novel because the novel could speak for itself. Regrettably, the uncritical tendency to believe what writers say of their work, whether their intention is serious or ironic, has meant that many of Austen's readers think that she too thought *Pride and Prejudice* was "light."

To the extent that it is light, it is the lightness of clarity and truth, not lightness of frivolity. Tragedy is never far away in *Pride and Prejudice*,<sup>97</sup> and the brilliance of Austen's heroine is that Elizabeth can see the materially disastrous consequences of acting according to conscience and the good, yet she does the right thing anyway, refusing both Mr. Collins's modest competence and Mr. Darcy's powerful consequence because both men are, among other things, self-interested and self-important. Mr. Collins is clearly ineducable; Darcy, however, is capable of improving the education of his judgement. The questions of judgement and education are not frivolous, nor is the problem of how to bring about the right kind of learning. Austen's question throughout *Pride and Prejudice* is Plato's question in the *Meno*: "Can virtue be taught?"

---

<sup>97</sup> Dorothy Van Ghent remarks that Jane Austen, like Cervantes and Molière, knew how closely comedy and tragedy are related. Van Ghent cites the ending of Plato's

This is a sensible question and a serious one. As to the question of whether *Pride and Prejudice* is too light, bright, sparkling because it wants a chapter of solemn specious nonsense, about something unconnected with the story, it is clear simply from Austen's use of the word *specious* that the novel does not want it at all. And the novel's intensely serious comedy is very much connected with its story. D.W. Harding is right that "The people who feel that her work would have been in some way more significant if she had dealt with contemporary great events are coming perilously close to the Prince Regent's Librarian with his suggestion that she should write an 'historical romance, illustrative of the history of the august House of Coburg' (*Letters*, 27 March 1816)" ("Social Habitat" 52). Harding makes a useful distinction between being preoccupied with abstract social questions and being intelligently aware of them ("Social Habitat" 65). Those who are preoccupied with them will have little room for art; those who are oblivious to them will have little idea of the larger significance of their work; those who write with an awareness of history, society, and human nature will be able to achieve much more than either of the former kinds of writers. That Austen is aware of but not consumed by history is one of the reasons that her high reputation has thus far outlasted that of Sir Walter Scott.

### Regulated Hatred

While Harding is right that Austen's novels are not less significant for their lack of chapters of historical solemnity, his well-known interpretation of the novels as the author's way of achieving ironic distance from society because of her "regulated hatred"

---

*Symposium*, in which Socrates tells Aristophanes and Agathon that the genius of tragedy

of society's vulgarities is too extreme. His understanding of Austen is that as a novelist "part of her aim was to find the means for unobtrusive spiritual survival, without open conflict with the friendly people around her whose standards in simpler things she could accept and whose affection she greatly needed" ("Regulated Hatred" [1940] 351-52). The "subversive school" of Austen criticism takes its cue from Harding's pioneering reading between the lines of her novels, and ranges from such critics as Marvin Mudrick and John Halperin, who see Austen as bitterly ironic towards other human beings; to Johnson and Poovey, who see Austen's subversiveness as selective hatred directed against social structures and strictures rather than against vulgar people.

But the problem with the first version, by Harding and Mudrick, of the sharply satiric and subversive view of Austen, is that it may lead readers to cultivate Mr. Bennet's kind of ironic detachment, reserve, and sense of his own superiority, rather than engaging even with difficult people and characters. Proponents of Austen as a pre-feminist political subversive are, ironically, in the same position as these critics: arguing, as Poovey does, that Austen only appeared to uphold conservative values in common with readers because she could not speak subversively in her own time,<sup>98</sup> means that the critic places herself just as firmly in an elitist group of enlightened readers today. As Wayne Booth says in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) of many conservative Austen readers through the years, they have the "illusion of traveling intimately with a hardy little band of readers whose heads are screwed on tight and whose hearts are in the right

---

is the same as the genius of comedy (*The English Novel* 195).

<sup>98</sup> Poovey writes that "It is precisely the latitude of interpretations permitted by this compromise of ethical and moral absolutes that finally imperils the didactic design of *Pride and Prejudice*. For the family of readers that Austen posited did not necessarily

place” (266). Thus even writers who celebrate Austen as a subversive feminist cultivate a small band of superior readers who can now understand Austen, even if her contemporary readers could not.<sup>99</sup>

The idea that what Austen sought through her novels was “unobtrusive spiritual survival” is also problematic. In suggesting that Austen wanted to remain unobtrusive, Harding anticipates the feminist argument articulated by Johnson that she found silence empowering; that given her social situation as a single woman without wealth or status, the most effective thing she could do was to go along with the forms of “conservative myths” while silently objecting and plotting subtle ways to communicate her message of political change. In life it may be true that Austen wanted to some extent to remain unobtrusive—that she required seclusion for her writing, did not seek out literary circles, and desired not to offend her neighbours with overt criticisms of their vulgarities. But in her novels spiritual survival is not unobtrusive. It may be temporarily hidden or reserved, as in the case of Fanny Price seeking refuge in her room or Anne Elliot playing the piano in order to deflect attention from herself, but it eventually is shown to assert itself in various ways, as Fanny insists on not marrying Henry Crawford and Anne demonstrates her instincts for survival when she directs the response to Louisa’s fall. And in *Pride and Prejudice* especially, precisely because of its bright and sparkling heroine, spiritual survival is shown to be central, as survival requires being actively engaged even with the most impossible people in order to address the pressing political problem of how our

---

exist; even in her own day, the consensus of values she needed to assume was as wishful a fiction as Elizabeth Bennet’s marriage to Darcy” (207).

<sup>99</sup> For a useful discussion of some of the dangers of assuming that Austen’s readership is limited to a select few in either her time or ours, see Gard, *Jane Austen and the Art of Clarity* 3-7.

collective life should work. The unobtrusive survivor is Mr. Bennet, hiding in his library. Spiritual survival in Austen's novels, as it is exemplified by her most virtuous characters, requires not the rejection of the vulgar world (as in the ascetic Christian extreme or the eighteenth-century model of the discontented man of the world withdrawing from social life), but courageous engagement with the world in the service of justice. Therefore, Harding's theory that hatred is the driving force behind the novels does not account for the positive energy they possess and inspire.

### Righteous Anger

Hatred, even well-regulated, is still hatred, still negative. The idea that Austen's novels are powered by bitter hatred whether of people or institutions does not adequately explain the positive exuberance or the joy of her vision of human happiness. Austen writes with ironic humour and criticism and with sharp satire, but she also writes with pleasure and hope. To emphasize the joy in the novels is not in any way to lessen their seriousness or downplay their satire: it is in her comprehensive judgement of both good and bad that the powerful and the positive aspects of her work reside. Judgement, while it cannot coexist even with well-regulated hatred, does require the naming of evil. But it is the naming of evil in the service of love, not of hatred, and that is the important distinction for a right understanding of Austen's novels. Distinguishing between good and evil is a central concern for her characters, and in order to do it they must learn to exercise judgement; they need to examine their prejudices and their principles, and doing so will unavoidably involve anger, whether it is anger at something that is evil in someone or something else, or anger at something in themselves. This is righteous anger,

but it is temporary, because in the novels, as in the Christian tradition, love triumphs. It cannot do so, however, if no one recognizes what is wrong, becomes angry, and makes the effort to set things right; that is, makes an effort to establish justice.

What is central to *Pride and Prejudice* is not wish-fulfilment or fantasy, but justice, and how to get there. Readings of the novel that rely on the politics of the state or the politics of gender in Austen's time or our own in order to explain this novel are bound to demonstrate that women were required to be unobtrusive. But some of the very concepts that trouble Austen's readers because the words seem so negative, so humiliating, such as anger, prejudice, and judgement, are actually integral to the cause of virtue and justice. Integral, I must stress, only when rightly used and rightly understood. They are powerful concepts, and it is the difficult business of Austen's characters, in the novels generally and in *Pride and Prejudice* in particular, to learn exactly how to use them with courage and with love. Not all her characters are capable of learning this; not all her virtuous characters do it consistently well. But her analysis of how they think about social and political life together is what makes the novels so fascinating. I want to correct Harding's assessment of "regulated hatred" as the source of Austen's ironic and artistic power, and to suggest instead that it is righteous anger that helps her characters determine how to act and how to live.

### Anger and Amiability

Anger is, strangely enough, closely tied to the right practice of amiability. Those who never get upset at anything, who tolerate or even praise everyone and everything, are bound to be excessively amiable. More extreme than Mrs. Jennings in this excess is Mr.

Collins. The excess of amiability, as I noted in the previous chapter, is obsequiousness, sometimes accompanied by self-serving motives (*NE* 1126b). Mr. Collins is insufferably obsequious, and his attempts at civility are invariably excessive, as his confession to Mr. Bennet about his habit of “arranging such little elegant compliments as may be adapted to ordinary occasions” suggests (*PP* 68). Far from offering compliments that occur to him naturally in social situations, he contrives stock phrases to offer up, much like greeting-card verses kept in readiness for any emotional occasion.<sup>100</sup> This preparation saves him the trouble of actually assessing the abilities or charms of the individual ladies he meets, and ensures that he will never be astonished at the beauty of any one woman. And, as we know, it isn't the individual woman he thinks of in his schemes of marriage, it is his own happiness.

When Elizabeth realizes that his “affections,” such as they are, have been transferred to her, she “observed his increasing civilities toward herself, and heard his frequent attempt at a compliment on her wit and vivacity” (*PP* 88). His civilities are increasing to excess, and, significantly, it's a repeated attempt at one compliment. The unfortunate Mr. Collins aspires to the virtues of civility and humility, and it would be impossible to say that he falls short of them, for he far exceeds the mean in both cases. So much so, in fact, that Austen describes his walk into Meryton with the Bennet girls as passing “[i]n pompous nothings on his side, and civil assents on that of his cousins” (*PP* 72). Excessive civility turns into pompous behaviour, while the sisters somehow manage to be appropriately civil in response. Civility is to amiability what manners are to morals:

---

<sup>100</sup> I should perhaps grant him the fact that at least he composes them himself. The reason he looks so foolish here is not so much that he studies in preparation for delivering compliments, as that he reveals this, proudly, to another.

ideally the outward manifestation of real goodness, politeness based on respect, tolerance, and understanding.

The defective form of amiability is cantankerousness, churlishness, or contentiousness (*NE* 1126b); it involves a lack of manners and understanding, and is exemplified by Lady Catherine's cantankerous behaviour and interference in the business of those around her. At Rosings in conversation with Elizabeth—really more of an interview than a real conversation—she is always exclaiming, one imagines, quite loudly, at the answers Elizabeth makes to her intrusive questions: “Five daughters brought up at home without a governess!—I never heard of such a thing” (*PP* 164); “All!—What, all five out at once? Very odd!—And you only the second.—The younger ones out before the elder are married!” (*PP* 165). At cards, “Lady Catherine was generally speaking—stating the mistakes of the three others, or relating some anecdote of herself” (*PP* 166). She does not aspire even to the most basic civilities of conversation, instead criticizing other people without the least attempt to understand or respect them. She and Mr. Collins are indeed opposites, but neither is anywhere near virtue. Criticism and anger come too easily to Lady Catherine; Mr. Collins is not nearly critical enough.

Mr. and Mrs. Gardiner are often singled out as a rare example of the happily married couple, at ease with each other, their family, and their relations in society—whatever Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst may think of their position—and they can serve as a good illustration of the mean, the centre at which the virtue of amiability may be found. They fulfill Aristotle's criterion for true amiability, which is that they behave “alike towards those [they know] and those [they do] not know, towards intimates and those who are not so.” Aristotle specifies that “in each of these cases” the virtuous person “will



behave as is befitting; for it is not proper to have the same care for intimates and for strangers” (1126b). They are neither too defensive nor too generous. The civil behaviour of the Gardiners to their relatives and to strangers is founded on a complex understanding of human nature; by offering respect and politeness to all, they leave open the possibility that even those who appear undeserving may turn out to be better than they seem, as Darcy in fact does. Yet when Lydia and Wickham elope the Gardiners are sufficiently angry to take action: once an individual has demonstrated that he or she is undeserving, even the amiable person is entitled to become angry—to a point. The contemplation of anger in the cause of justice is extremely difficult, and the action that follows such contemplation is even more difficult, because justice without mercy, without charity, is scarcely justice at all. Figuring out how anger is related to amiability, then, is something that can be learned only through practice.

The virtue of amiability is complicated for Mr. Darcy, and he is aware that it is: his problem, as he himself describes it, is that he doesn't have “the talent which some people possess . . . of conversing easily with those I have never seen before. I cannot catch their tone of conversation, or appear interested in their concerns, as I often see done” (*PP* 175). Elizabeth, describing her own performance at the piano, implies that like her, he doesn't “take the trouble of practising” (*PP* 175). Soon after this conversation, Elizabeth herself is called on to do what Marianne Dashwood calls “practis[ing] the civilities,” (*SS* 347) as Lady Catherine makes comments on Elizabeth's piano-playing, “mixing with them many instructions on execution and taste”; Austen says “Elizabeth received them with all the forbearance of civility” (*PP* 176). Civility has a lot to do with decorum, with maintaining social niceties even when one does not feel like

being polite, but its practice is also closely related to morality. By not responding rudely or angrily to Lady Catherine, Elizabeth is not merely doing what Mr. Collins asks her to when he tells her to dress simply because Lady Catherine “likes to have the distinction of rank preserved” (PP 161). That would be following the rules. Instead, by putting up with the incivility of others, she learns to practise and preserve her own amiability.

### The Excuse for Incivility

The crucial moment in *Pride and Prejudice* in which the anger of both Darcy and Elizabeth is demonstrated is the first proposal scene. When Darcy finds his proposal rejected, he accuses Elizabeth of incivility: “I might, perhaps, wish to be informed why, with so little *endeavour* at civility, I am thus rejected” (PP 190). Struggling for composure despite his anger, he feels that she has been rude in saying that if she “could *feel* gratitude,” she would thank him. But of course she cannot feel it, and so she chooses not to pretend that she is grateful for his affections. Despite the fact that he will soon explain his own behaviour and his struggles over his regard for her by avowing that “disguise of every sort is my abhorrence” (PP 192), he does seem to wish that she had disguised her frank statement that she cannot feel obligation or gratitude. Here again, the virtues are shown to be dramatically interesting, as it just isn’t possible to practise all the virtues at the same time, because they compete with one another. That is exactly what happens to both Elizabeth and Darcy in this scene. Both attempt to be civil: despite losing “all compassion in anger” when Darcy first speaks of the inferiority of her position, Elizabeth “tried, however, to compose herself to answer him with patience,

when he should have done" (*PP* 189). Darcy likewise becomes "pale with anger," yet he speaks "in a voice of forced calmness" and "with assumed tranquillity" (*PP* 190-91).

But in spite of their efforts at first to be, or at least to seem, civil, the virtue of amiability comes into direct conflict with the virtue of truthfulness. Neither likes to lie; thus under pressure they tell each other the truth, Darcy that he loves her even though her relations are inferior, and Elizabeth that she cannot feel gratitude and therefore cannot even thank him for his proposal. And Elizabeth, when he accuses her of incivility, counters with her own implied accusation: by asking "Why with so evident a design of offending and insulting me, you chose to tell me that you liked me against your will, against your reason, and even against your character?" she argues that he transgressed against civility first, and so she feels justified in asking "Was not this some excuse for incivility, if I *was* uncivil?" (*PP* 190). When she seeks an excuse for her own reaction, she is not simply searching for something that will explain her transgression against a rule of virtue, a code of conduct, but she is reaching for a tradition in which, as I suggested in Chapter Three, the virtue of civility exists in tension with the virtue of honesty.

In this scene, neither character can exist for long within that tension, and both are overcome by anger, but, as I have been suggesting, anger is not necessarily always a bad thing. It is important that Elizabeth and Darcy struggle not with politeness as it is tested against the temptation to become rude or angry, but instead they wrestle first with two competing virtues, amiability and truthfulness, before they become truly angry. It is hard to be virtuous, but it is even harder when the virtues won't exist equally and simultaneously. The outbursts of honesty and anger that follow are brief but powerful.

With respect to anger, Aristotle calls the excessive form irascibility or revengefulness, and says that the deficiency has no real name, but the right disposition is something like patience, or good temper. He says, “The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is praised” (1125b). Neither Elizabeth nor Darcy gives in to anger completely, as they reveal, honestly, why they are angry, and yet they are both trying to be patient and civil. Elizabeth again tries “to the utmost to speak with composure” (*PP* 192) and Darcy leaves her, with “incredulity and mortification,” true, but with civil parting words: ““Forgive me for having taken up so much of your time, and accept my best wishes for your health and happiness”” (*PP* 193). The apology may be narrow—he doesn’t apologize for anything he has said or for injuring her feelings, but his wish for her welfare shows that he can pay attention to what is apart from himself.

### Civility

It is when Elizabeth and the Gardiners meet him at Pemberley that Darcy begins to demonstrate that he is learning to practise the virtue of amiability. Elizabeth is surprised that he wishes to be introduced to her uncle and aunt—“[t]his was a stroke of civility for which she was quite unprepared” (*PP* 254)—and yet she then hears him invite her uncle, “with the greatest civility, to fish there as often as he chose” (*PP* 255). Darcy is practising civility even towards those he does not know—this is in sharp contrast to his remarks on his first meeting with Elizabeth. While Mr. Gardiner suspects that ““perhaps he may be a little whimsical in his civilities,”” Elizabeth explains to them that Darcy’s

“character was by no means so faulty, nor Wickham’s so amiable, as they had been considered in Hertfordshire” (*PP* 258).

Wickham’s manners, his civil behaviour and pleasing address, convinced many that he was amiable; Darcy’s manners, on the other hand, convinced many that he was guilty of pride, conceit, and even perhaps cantankerousness. So far I have treated civility and amiability as if they were more or less interchangeable, but at this point I want to make a distinction between them. Wickham’s character demonstrates that it is possible to be civil without being truly amiable. The civilities, then, are lesser virtues; though it is still possible to behave in excess or defect of the virtue of civility, this virtue is more a matter of form. Even Miss Bingley can be civil, though hers is often described as “cold civility” (*PP* 42). Politeness and etiquette may reflect an amiable character and a complex moral life, but they clearly cannot substitute for them. Here the civilities are more like a set of rules to follow, rules that may give the appearance of goodness, and may contribute to the preservation of decorum, but which in isolation from other virtues can be dangerous. Civility often disguises anger, and often should. Yet there are no rules for exactly when and how anger should be concealed or repressed, and when it should be spoken. Once again, the pressure is on the individual to learn, to feel, to know, to judge, and to accept responsibility for mistakes. As Henry Tilney puts it in *Northanger Abbey*, “When properly to relax is the trial of judgement” (*NA* 134). Prudence and wisdom are essential to the pursuit of justice and the practice of amiability.<sup>101</sup>

---

<sup>101</sup> Inger Sigrun (Thomsen) Brodey is right that in *Pride and Prejudice* and in *Sense and Sensibility* “The reader must work alongside the characters to find a mean, a form of virtue that is appropriate to the context” (“Words ‘Half-Dethroned’: Jane Austen’s Art of the Unspoken” [1996] 103). However, she also says that “Austen constructs her novels to train her readers to rethink names, words, and categories,” and that “Words, like virtue

Righteous anger is a tremendously difficult concept, and is next to impossible to practise in a virtuous way, and yet in the first proposal scene both Elizabeth and Darcy are justified to some extent in their anger with each other. There is no easy way to be reconciled in a polite compromise. They are trying to find the truth, and they are right to be angry with each other when they suspect deviations from truth. This scene on its own, however, cannot demonstrate the full purpose of righteous anger. To understand how anger works toward justice it will be necessary to consider the difficult questions of prejudice and judgement.

### Prejudice and Judgement

How can prejudice possibly be defensible? To the extent that it is an unthinking bias against someone or something, it isn't; but the idea of having preconceived opinions warrants further consideration. When one is predisposed in favour of something that is good, like fairness, or beauty, or kindness, one's prejudices prevent one from giving equal weight to things that are opposed to them. If prejudice is understood as prepossession, or adherence to principle, it is quite different, and much more acceptable, than the idea of judging adversely in advance of the situation or the facts. While Jane Austen does not by any means advocate all prejudice as good, it is worth thinking about prejudice as a complex word and a complex issue in her novels, especially, for obvious reasons, in *Pride and Prejudice*.

---

itself, need to be defined anew in every context" (103). Although Austen does want readers to think hard about the definitions of words and the meaning of the virtues, thinking about these things is quite different from having to rethink them every time. While it is necessary to be always aware of the context, the words do have meanings and

For example, Elizabeth is prejudiced in favour of good sense; judging Mr. Collins by that principle, not only in advance of his arrival at Longbourn, but also during his visit there, she finds him deficient. Although she has prejudged him during the conversation with her father and sisters at breakfast when they analyze his letter, her prejudice is borne out by her later observation of his behaviour. Her prejudice in favour of good sense leads to a prejudice against, and then a judgement of Mr. Collins's foolishness, and when his lack of sense threatens to impinge on her own freedom she rejects his offer of marriage in the name of principle. Jane, who has fewer prejudices and is more greatly disposed to approve of everyone—Elizabeth says she is ““a great deal too apt you know, to like people in general”” (*PP* 14)—might have accepted him.

Good judgement always relies to some extent on prejudices in favour of the good—the difficult thing is determining when a judgement is too hastily made. Judgement involves discrimination, another unfashionable word, in order to make sure that it is good judgement. Tolerance, compassion, and sympathy invoked without limits are just as dangerous as prejudice, discrimination, and judgement made without reason. Just as a virtue is better understood as a quality with limits and degrees rather than as the diametric opposite of a vice, judgement is better understood as incorporating aspects of anger, prejudice, and discrimination, as well as incorporating understanding, mercy, and love, than as a rigid system of negative pronouncements.

The problem, then, for Elizabeth and Darcy, is that although both have understandable and defensible prejudices in favour of civility and good breeding, they both judge each other too quickly as offending against those ideals. That they are apt to

---

the virtues can be defined. The importance for Elizabeth of memory, reading, and re-

judge others is not in itself a bad thing—their judgement is independent, in contrast to Mr. Bingley’s preference of relying on his friends to judge for him, and it is intelligent, in contrast to Jane’s too-generous candour and subsequent susceptibility to Miss Bingley’s guile—but their tendency to judge others before they judge themselves is a serious problem for both Elizabeth and Darcy. Their potential, then, to exercise good judgement is superior, but as yet uneducated, and both make mistakes. As Darcy says of Bingley in his letter to Elizabeth, “Bingley has great natural modesty, with a stronger dependence on my judgement than on his own.—To convince him, therefore, that he had deceived himself [with regard to Jane’s affection], was no very difficult point” (*PP* 199). Darcy is confident in his own powers of perception, and does not stop to question his own judgement. Likewise, Elizabeth is certain that Charlotte would never act so foolishly as to show more affection than she feels in order to secure a husband, and of course is soon obliged to reexamine this conviction. With respect to each other, their judgements are premature, as Darcy pronounces Elizabeth tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt him, before he has thought very much about her looks or had a chance to see what effect her liveliness has on her looks, and Elizabeth establishes her inflexible view that Darcy is proud and disagreeable before she has even spoken to him. Their prejudices are founded on first appearances, not even on first impressions of conversation; neither has an adequate basis for good judgement.

While early on they make wrong decisions, Darcy soon revises his under the influence of love, and the education he receives from the moment he begins to love Elizabeth is a difficult one. Love is beautiful, but education can be painful, as it is hard

---

reading in *Pride and Prejudice* demonstrates that definitions are possible.



to come to terms with one's own mistakes. The fear of shame, however, as Plato has Phaedrus suggest in the *Symposium*, can inspire the individual to learn more and to be more virtuous. The pursuit of love and the pursuit of the beautiful involve openness to error. Elaine Scarry writes in *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) that beauty "ignites the desire for truth by giving us, with an electric brightness shared by almost no other uninvited, freely arriving perceptual event, the experience of conviction and the experience, as well, of error" (52). Scarry suggests that the love of the beautiful, far from distracting us from what is just, can instead drive us to seek justice.

In Darcy's case, by the time he writes his letter to Elizabeth, in the aftermath of the anger over injustices in the proposal scene, he has realized that judgement and justice are more difficult than he had previously thought. In describing why he convinced Bingley of Jane's indifference, he shows a new openness to reconsidering his own judgements on the basis of better information: he writes, "If *you* have not been mistaken here, *I* must have been in an error. Your superior knowledge of your sister must make the latter probable.—If it be so, if I have been misled by such error, to inflict pain on her, your resentment has not been unreasonable" (*PP* 197). He also recognizes that she has not had enough information to judge Wickham correctly: "Ignorant as you previously were of everything concerning either, detection could not be in your power, and suspicion certainly not in your inclination" (*PP* 202). Just as the truths of the proposal scene were painful to both, sorting out the truth in the letter is painful; the difference is that when he was proposing and then being rejected, Darcy thought only of himself—"And this . . . is your opinion of me! This is the estimation in which you hold me!" (*PP* 192)—when he is writing the letter to Elizabeth he is thinking of the pain that the truths he tells will give

her: “Pardon me.—It pains me to offend you” (PP 198). In the letter, in addition to explaining his own actions, he is trying to establish what is right: he asks if he has been mistaken regarding Jane, he reveals the reasons for his adverse judgement of Wickham, and he is at pains to judge correctly.

In their book *The New Idea of a University* (2001), Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson argue that in Jane Austen’s fiction “There is no saying in advance how we ought or ought not to speak, no prescribing the best style. There are judgements to be made but no rules to follow, no skills to be exercised” (60). While it is true that there are no prescriptions for speech or behaviour, judgements are not made without reference to principle. In his letter Darcy appeals to his observation of Jane, which he acknowledges to be incomplete, and his experience of Wickham, which he maintains is a solid basis for judgement. Prejudice formed on superficial observation is shown to be faulty: Darcy needs to learn to look more closely before judging others, to let Bingley judge for himself, and most importantly, to judge himself more strictly than he judges others, and to do that first, while leaving open the possibility that others will behave better than he expects them to. Yet with Wickham, he has greater reason to judge his character because he has seen him deceive again and again. While the Bible tells Darcy to forgive his brother seventy times seven, or to welcome the prodigal son home again, Wickham is neither Darcy’s brother nor his son, and he is not repentant. And forgiveness does not necessarily mean Darcy has to continue to let Wickham take advantage of him. Judgement is not a skill that can be taught by inculcating rules; it is an art. And art is harder to achieve than the correct execution of technical skill.

By writing the letter, Darcy demonstrates some of the ways in which he is learning this art. Reading it, and rereading it, Elizabeth exemplifies Austen's model for the art of education. Maskell and Robinson suggest that *Pride and Prejudice* provides a framework by which we can understand what education should be. But they point to Mr. Bennet's breakfast seminar on the textual analysis of Mr. Collins's letter as the ideal model, with a learned man offering to young students a piece of writing for discussion. Mrs. Bennet's response focuses more on her projections for the future than on the matter at hand, while two of his other listeners, preoccupied with other things, decline to comment. Each of the other three offers her opinion of the text, with one determined to like it, one commenting pedantically on style, and one arriving at something resembling the seminar leader's own opinion, thereby at once demonstrating her critical capacities and pleasing her teacher. The idea of the seminar discussion represented here is a useful comment on education, but it is not the best model for it.

For one thing, Maskell and Robinson give Mr. Bennet too much credit for wisdom. They write that "As Mr. Bennet, without aiming to, just in the ordinary course of domestic life, educates his daughter Elizabeth, so Elizabeth re-educates the formally educated Darcy, and is educated by him" (45). In the ordinary course of domestic life, Mr. Bennet is usually in his library, ignoring the education of all his daughters, including Elizabeth. And in the breakfast seminar scene, he gives no guidance, no instruction, to his students: he simply offers them a text to think about and then prepares to enjoy laughing at their responses to it. That Elizabeth responds intelligently owes nothing to the powers of the seminar leader (except in this case, perhaps genetic inheritance), and everything to her own judgement: "He must be an oddity, I think," said she. "I cannot

make him out.—There is something very pompous in his stile.—And what can he mean by apologizing for being next in the entail?—We cannot suppose he would help it, if he could.—Can he be a sensible man, sir?” (PP 64). In asking this question she is not seeking confirmation of her suspicion, but drawing out the reluctant participant at the table and forcing him to give his own opinion to the group, which he has hitherto concealed from his students just as he has concealed for a month the very fact of the letter and of Mr. Collins’s visit. In both cases he enjoys the concealment and the resulting attention he gets when he does reveal something. At Elizabeth’s prompting, he offers his opinion, which reveals more about his anticipation of entertainment than about his judgement of Mr. Collins’s lack of sense; thus he doesn’t address Elizabeth’s question adequately. He replies, “No, my dear; I think not. I have great hopes of finding him quite the opposite. There is a mixture of servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him” (PP 64).<sup>102</sup>

Like Maskell and Robinson, Susan Fraiman sees Mr. Bennet as the source of Elizabeth’s initial intellectual power; however, whereas they argue that Elizabeth goes on to educate Darcy, Fraiman argues that Elizabeth loses that power: she writes that “Enabled by her father, this unique Bennet daughter sets out with a surplus of intellectual confidence and authority which, in the course of the novel, she must largely relinquish” (63). Mr. Bennet does recognize Elizabeth’s intellectual superiority, but he is not responsible for her education. When Lady Catherine speculates that if the Bennet girls had no governess—“I always say that nothing is to be done in education without steady

---

<sup>102</sup> This desire for entertainment means that Mr. Bennet resembles his wife: she too is anxious for entertainment and some kind of excitement. For him, however, the

and regular instruction, and nobody but a governess can give it” (*PP* 165)—their “mother must have been quite a slave to your education” (*PP* 164), Elizabeth answers that “that had not been the case” (*PP* 164): “but such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might” (*PP* 165). In the past Mr. Bennet may have encouraged reading, and provided other instructors or tutors from time to time, but, not surprisingly, he did not undertake his daughters’ formal education. No more does he contribute to the education of Elizabeth’s judgement in the course of the novel. The crucial part of Elizabeth’s education comes from her own self-examination, and the beginnings of that process arise from her contemplation of Darcy’s letter. This is not to say, as Fraiman does, that Darcy becomes the agent of her education—Fraiman describes “a darker, downward vector” in what she sees as “the narrative that passes Elizabeth from one father to another and, in doing so, takes her from shaping judgements to being shaped by them” (63)—with his letter offering its judgement of her, but that the letter provides the occasion for her to educate herself.

If Elizabeth were to attempt to maintain her self-esteem by persisting in her initial impression of the letter, that would indeed indicate a dark and downward vector. At first she reads “[w]ith a strong prejudice against every thing he might say” (*PP* 204)—clearly the wrong kind of prejudice, as it makes learning impossible. But although “for a few moments, she flattered herself that her wishes did not err” (*PP* 205)—that is, that her judgement of Wickham is intact and infallible—and although if she were to do what she intends to do with the letter and “never look in it again” (*PP* 205) she would indeed

---

entertainment has little point. For her at least it is constructive, because the goal of her

confirm her previous judgements and blindly proceed with the vain assurance of her own confidence, she does not put the letter away, and she does not leave her opinions unquestioned. When she “protest[s] that she would not regard” (*PP* 205) the letter, it is because she suspects that it will challenge her. At this point, she has not read the whole letter anyway: she “put it hastily away” even “though scarcely knowing any thing of the last page or two” (*PP* 205). She is not in a position to judge the letter because she has not read the whole text. Reading the whole thing is the first part of education.

The second part is to read it all over again: “when she read, and re-read with the closest attention, the particulars immediately following of Wickham’s resigning all pretensions to the living, of his receiving in lieu, so considerable a sum as three thousand pounds, again she was forced to hesitate” (*PP* 205). She puts down the letter, deliberates, and then rereads again and again. It is not just the information Darcy provides that makes it possible for her to reformulate her judgement, but the fact that this information prompts her to think more carefully about other things she already knows about Wickham and about Darcy. It is not the revelation that Wickham tried to elope with Georgiana Darcy that causes her to change her mind; she does not rely as others do on Darcy’s judgement alone. The key to her education is the way in which new knowledge enlarges, revises, and enlightens previous knowledge. Elizabeth thinks on the past and focuses on her conversations with Wickham: “She was *now* struck with the impropriety of such communications to a stranger, and wondered it had escaped her before” (*PP* 207).

Elizabeth’s education comes from an intense engagement with a significant text that does not tell her how to think or how to live, but inspires her to rethink what she

---

entertainment is to find husbands for her daughters and solve the problem of the entail.

thinks of herself. The consequence of that education is that she is reminded that it is human to be wrong, not always but often, and that in order to know anything she must be humble and careful. In recognizing the extent of her error, she does find it humiliating, but in addition to the humiliation inherent in the situation it is important to note that she sees the justice of her new assessment of herself: “How humiliating is this discovery!—Yet how just a humiliation!—Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind” (*PP* 208). To persist in errors that occurred because she had “courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away” (*PP* 208) would be further folly. It is necessary for her to recognize her fault so that she can turn from it; she has to go to one extreme in order to rise to the other. It is not possible to learn anything if one cannot learn from one’s mistakes.

Elizabeth does not dwell on her humiliation once she has recognized that “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (*PP* 208), but moves on to further consideration of other things, this time, like Darcy, thinking of the pain of others rather than of herself. “From herself to Jane—from Jane to Bingley, her thoughts were in a line which soon brought to her recollection that Mr. Darcy’s explanation *there*, had appeared very insufficient; and she read it again” (*PP* 208). Once she knows herself, she does not focus on herself, because she is no longer humiliated: she is free to think of others. Again, the model of her education means that she reads, thinks, and rereads. This process as Austen dramatizes it in this passage is a more detailed, more imaginative, more serious, and more effective example of how education works than the seminar scene with Mr. Bennet. Mr. Bennet’s method of instruction is self-serving: his goal is his own entertainment, not the advancement of his students. As Elizabeth says to Jane in Volume Three, Chapter

Twelve, “We all love to instruct, though we can teach only what is not worth knowing” (*PP* 343). Virtue is not easily taught, as the example of Mr. Bennet’s attempt at instruction demonstrates. Some people, in fact, are incapable of learning much anyway. But the process of revising judgement on the basis of better information reveals, in the scene in which Elizabeth comes to terms with Darcy’s letter and with her own mind, that virtue can be learned.

Good judgement does not by any means come easily to Elizabeth following this scene. In fact, she is wary of judgement or action, as is apparent in her decision not to reveal Wickham’s character to anyone but Jane, and her subsequent lament after Wickham and Lydia elope that, as she says to Darcy, “Oh! had I known what I ought, what I dared, to do! But I knew not—I was afraid of doing too much” (*PP* 277-78). Once Wickham involves Lydia in his escapades, Elizabeth is firm in her revised judgement of him—“Wickham will never marry a woman without some money. He cannot afford it” (*PP* 283)—but she is also careful to acknowledge the limits of her knowledge: “As to what restraint the apprehension of disgrace in the corps might throw on a dishonourable elopement with her, I am not able to judge; for I know nothing of the effects that such a step might produce” (*PP* 283).

Although her judgement is moderated, as I argued in the introduction, it has not disappeared and it is still her own. Fraiman argues that “Darcy woos away not Elizabeth’s ‘prejudice,’ but her judgment entire” (81). This reading is based primarily on the passage in the novel in which Elizabeth begins

to comprehend that [Darcy] was exactly the man, who, in disposition and talents, would most suit her. His understanding and temper, though unlike



her own, would have answered all her wishes. It was an union that must have been to the advantage of both; by her ease and liveliness, his mind might have been softened, his manners improved, and from his judgment, information, and knowledge of the world, she must have received benefit of greater importance. (*PP* 312)

Fraiman objects to this passage, saying that “What may surprise and sadden us, . . . and what the novel surely registers with a touch of irony, is that a heroine who began so competent to judge should end up so critically disabled, so reliant for judgment on somebody else” (81). But Austen doesn’t say that Elizabeth would adopt Darcy’s judgements; she would benefit from his wider experience, which is simply a way to gain access to some of the aspects of more formal education that have been denied her as a woman. Their marriage will be a marriage of equals, as Mr. Bennet’s warning to Elizabeth about avoiding an unequal marriage indicates. Elizabeth does not see it as marriage to a superior any more than she sees it as marriage to an inferior, as I have discussed in the introduction.<sup>103</sup> By the time she marries Darcy she has already helped him to re-educate his own judgement, and so for him to share his knowledge of the world with her does not mean she will be subservient to all his views.

---

<sup>103</sup> Glenys Mary Stow has argued that Jane Austen “extended an inheritance, consonant mainly with Dr. Johnson’s moral thought, of a vision of ‘companionate’ marriage; marriage, that is, of people who are equal in their individuality rather than bound in the hierarchic, patriarchal, and possibly exploitative union implicit in a rival tradition and in cliché,” as Roger Gard has summarized in his note on her unpublished dissertation (London University, 1990). See Gard, *Jane Austen and the Art of Clarity* 224 n.14.

### Courage and Love

The process of learning good judgement, virtuous judgement, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is extremely difficult. How does one know how to judge without excessive prejudice, excessive anger, and without arrogance, self-righteousness, and rigid intolerance? The answer implicit in the novel is through the prudence and wisdom to adhere to good principles in the first place, but also through the courage to learn, accept, and revise the places where one goes wrong. *Pride and Prejudice* is about cultivating the courage to be open to education through a constant revision of self-knowledge in order to try to understand one's principles better and to act according to them. Paradoxically, courage requires humility. Those who resist Austen's insistence that after Elizabeth learns what Darcy has done to bring about Lydia's marriage, "For herself she was humbled; but she was proud of him" (*PP* 327), do not give full weight to the next sentence: "Proud that in a cause of compassion and honour, he had been able to get the better of himself" (*PP* 327). This passage highlights the paradoxical interdependence of virtues, for in order to act courageously in the name of honour, Darcy has had to humble his pride and act with compassion, not condescension. And Elizabeth is humbled not because he has condescended to help her family, but because she feels anew the injustice of her early treatment of him: "Oh! how heartily did she grieve over every ungracious sensation she had ever encouraged, every saucy speech she had ever directed towards him" (*PP* 327). This echo of the general Confession in the Book of Common Prayer points to the Christian nature of the humility with which both Darcy and Elizabeth

therefore approach marriage.<sup>104</sup> Both of them repent and confess, and resolve to act better in future: this pattern represents the eternal quest of the Christian soul to reach a state of grace. It is because Darcy and Elizabeth discover humility that they are both able to submit to each other in Christian marriage.

### Justice

Jane Austen is interested in how characters can act courageously in the service of truth and justice. Part of that service involves sympathy, as Darcy learns to see where he gives pain to others, and Elizabeth's knowledge of her self makes it possible for her to think more of others. David Gamble compares Elizabeth's education in sympathetic judgement to the process Adam Bede goes through when he learns he has misjudged Hetty Sorrel, and he concludes that "In the end, Lizzie and Adam both show that sympathy is not so much a matter of truth as it is a practical necessity for dealing with others and the world" ("Pragmatic Sympathy in Austen and Eliot" [1989] 360). Invoking Eliot's image of the pier-glass from Chapter 27 of *Middlemarch*, Gamble writes that "Our sympathy is itself a light which distorts its objects—the only difference is that it seems to work a little better than egoism" (360). While this is probably true of how sympathy works in Eliot's novels, Gamble is basing his argument about Austen on Elizabeth's injunction to Darcy to "Think on the past only as its remembrance gives you pleasure" (*PP* 368-69), and he suggests that Elizabeth is willing to forget the past "for the sake of

---

<sup>104</sup> In the words of the Confession, "We acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we from time to time most grievously have committed, By thought, word, and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty. We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings."

future amiability” (359). Like Gamble, Claudia L. Johnson thinks this is a serious statement of Elizabeth’s, and Austen’s, philosophy: she argues that

In making the wish for and experience of happiness and pleasure central to her novel, Austen is doing no less than redeeming a tradition of moral and political philosophy which antedates the postrevolutionary controversies that called it into question. Her acceptance of happiness as a morally acceptable goal proves not that she was a closet radical but rather that she and progressives were drawing on a shared tradition. (78)

Austen is not sending Elizabeth in pursuit of the freedom of pleasure, however, but in pursuit of happiness as a good. And Darcy does not believe Elizabeth believes what she calls her philosophy—“I cannot give you credit for any philosophy of the kind,” he says (*PP* 369). Elizabeth does not really believe this philosophy, given how much time she has spent in the course of the narrative going over the past, spending more time remembering painful things than pleasant, because she desires to learn from the most difficult things.<sup>105</sup>

In their discussion following the second proposal, Darcy says to Elizabeth about his letter that “I knew . . . that what I wrote must give you pain, but it was necessary” (*PP* 368). Justice is difficult and judgement of character and action can be painful, but the difficulty and the pain are sometimes necessary. Darcy regrets the bitterness of the beginning of the letter, but Elizabeth assures him that “The adieu is charity itself” (*PP* 368). In the same way that he limited his anger at the end of the first proposal by offering

---

<sup>105</sup> Her statement here therefore indicates that Darcy was right to point out in one of their conversations at Rosings that she finds “great enjoyment in occasionally professing

his best wishes for her health and happiness, he concluded the letter by saying, “I will only add, God bless you” (PP 203). Darcy’s own education, though not represented in the same detail as Elizabeth’s, arises equally from his gradual conviction of the rightness of her criticism of his conduct. Especially in her attack on the fact that he did not behave as a gentleman, he has received a shock, and he says that her words “have tortured me;— though it was some time, I confess, before I was reasonable enough to allow their justice” (PP 367-68). “Gentleman-like” behaviour is here not only manners, but morals, as Darcy, like Elizabeth, must recognize how to change in order to behave justly. Just behaviour is not simply the kind of restorative justice that Darcy brings about in the case of Lydia’s marriage to Wickham, either. Before either Darcy or Elizabeth can act to restore justice, they must reach a philosophical standpoint from which they can appraise their own minds justly.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, justice is achieved through education, and education is possible only through courage, humility, and love. As Maskell and Robinson rightly observe, “Without love education will not get far” (171). Integral to education is the ability to make good judgements about the world, a text, another person, and especially one’s self, in order to move beyond the self and enter into engagement with the world, through reading and through sympathizing with other people. I think Maskell and Robinson are right that “Jane Austen goes further” than Socrates does, in that “a life without judgement, her books strongly imply, would not be a human life at all” (54). The virtues in *Pride and Prejudice* are not simply a set of rules, and yet they do exist together in a kind of community of virtue. To be truly virtuous, civility must be accompanied by

---

opinions which in fact are not your own” (PP 174). The fact that Darcy is right about

genuine amiability (which Wickham does not have), and amiability must be exhibited through the forms of civility (which Darcy learns). Virtues may be thrown into competition with each other (as Elizabeth and Darcy discover when they try to uphold the virtues of civility, honesty, and patience), but although they can't always co-exist peacefully and simultaneously, the virtues certainly can't exist independently of one another.

It is in the education of judgement that virtue can flourish; courage and justice and love are the serious ideals of *Pride and Prejudice*. The novel brilliantly outlines ways to know what virtue is and how to practise it, and in doing so, *Pride and Prejudice* exemplifies Austen's fullest expression of the range of the virtues. Yet it is not an ethical manual or treatise, but a serious and comic novel of morals and manners. In its investigation of the serious questions of anger, prejudice and judgement, and the way in which they are integral to the tradition of the virtues of justice and love, *Pride and Prejudice* is, I think, Austen's best novel. At the conclusion of the novel, Elizabeth writes to her aunt Mrs. Gardiner, uniting the ideals of justice and happiness in the announcement of her union with Darcy: she writes that "I am the happiest creature in the world. Perhaps other people have said so before, but not one with such justice" (PP 382-83).

---

this does not belittle Elizabeth, however, because she is speaking in hyperbole.

**Chapter Five: The Habits of “a well-judging young woman” in *Mansfield Park***

“... the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of it’s individuals.”

—Jane Austen, “Catharine”

Poor prim, proper, prissy, priggish Fanny Price: most criticism of *Mansfield Park* eventually arrives at strong judgements about the heroine's virtue, judgements that usually either condemn Fanny for being too good and thus for marring a good novel, or praise the high seriousness of the novel and conclude that it is a masterpiece despite its heroine.<sup>106</sup> In a recent article, "Slipping into the Ha-Ha': Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen's Novels" (2000), Jill Heydt-Stevenson offers an alternative interpretation, which is that "Fanny is not the paragon of virtue that critics so often maintain" (329); instead, she argues, Fanny is guilty of acting and triumphs at the end of the novel "because she has dissembled—because she has performed the role that patriarchal rules dictate women should play" (332). This is one way to interpret a virtuous character in a more interesting light: argue that she is not so virtuous after all. But this reading of Fanny ignores the sympathy and seriousness with which the narrator of *Mansfield Park* so often treats Fanny's moral dilemmas, and while Heydt-Stevenson is right to draw attention to neglected aspects of the humour, including bawdy humour, in Jane Austen's novels, and especially in *Mansfield Park*, her conclusion that "Austen's final joke is that one of the fallen women is in the parsonage" (332) is clearly a misreading of the novel.

---

<sup>106</sup> Critics who argue that Fanny is too priggish include for example Tony Tanner—"She is never, ever, wrong" (*Jane Austen* 143); and Kingsley Amis—"She is a monster of complacency and pride" (qtd. in Tanner 143); and Gilbert and Gubar—"With purity that seems prudish and reserve bordering on hypocrisy, Fanny is far less likeable than Austen's other heroines" (165). D.W. Harding writes that Fanny is "all moral perfection, thoroughly oppressed, rather ailing, priggish, but finally vindicated and rewarded with the hero." He adds, "few people can stomach her" ("The Dexterity of a Practised Writer" [1965] 194). Avrom Fleishman calls her "a weak woman with self-defensive and self-aggrandizing impulses" (*A Reading of Mansfield Park* [1967] 5). Marilyn Butler says that "to some extent Fanny's is a negation of what is commonly meant by character" (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* 247).



Countless readers have derided or disliked Fanny, whether they see her as a prostitute (Heydt-Stevenson 328), a monstrous, vampirish character,<sup>107</sup> or merely observe that “the deep importance of the conventional virtues” makes Fanny “the least interesting of all the heroines.”<sup>108</sup> Finding it hard to get past Fanny’s own declaration to Edmund that “I can never be important to anyone” because of her situation, her “foolishness and awkwardness” (MP 26), and discounting Edmund’s defence of her “good sense,” “sweet temper,” and “grateful heart” (MP 26), critics persist in judging her character to be foolish, whether she is seen to be foolishly and obsessively adhering to strict rules of moral conduct, or foolishly and naively acting out complicity in patriarchal culture. Perhaps taking a cue from Henry Crawford, who asks “What is her character?—Is she solemn?—Is she queer?—Is she prudish?” (MP 230), many readers accept that she is all these things, and rather dull besides. But even Mr. Crawford admits that “I do not quite know what to make of Miss Fanny. I do not understand her” (MP 230). It is worth investigating her character further in order to try to understand her.

From Austen’s most loveable heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, I turn, then, to her least, Fanny Price. Fanny is perhaps Austen’s strongest heroine, however, even though she is not her most lively. In this chapter I explore what’s not to like about Fanny’s character,

---

<sup>107</sup> See Nina Auerbach, “Jane Austen’s Dangerous Charm” (1983) 212-13, and Paula Marantz Cohen, *The Daughter’s Dilemma* (1991) 74. Cohen says that either Fanny or Sir Thomas is the vampire, but that it isn’t clear which.

<sup>108</sup> Harding, “Regulated Hatred,” 182. Harding’s definition of the “conventional virtues” includes only “civilized seemliness, decorum and sound religious feeling.” In his article “Jane Austen and the ‘Relative Situation’: What Became of Mrs. Norris’s ‘Morally Impossible’ in *Mansfield Park*?” (1999) Brian Crick, critical of Fanny but not dismissive of her, asks, “Is it Fanny Price, not Emma Woodhouse, whom no one but Jane Austen could or would love?” (102). Mary Evans’s answer to why no one loves Fanny is that she is “difficult to accept precisely because of her capacity, that few people share, for absolute resistance to capitalist values” (*Jane Austen and the State* [1987] 29).

and test my hypothesis about her strength, in the context of the comedy, the theological import, and the moral seriousness of *Mansfield Park*. A predominant concern in the novel, exemplified most vividly by the contrast between Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, is the question of temperance. In the case of these two women, temperance has to do with the habits of living that all too easily tend toward either indolence or officious exertion. My exploration of Fanny's character will focus on the relation of the habit of temperance to other habits of mind and body. *Mansfield Park* has been characterized as a novel of stillness (Tanner 157), and I shall look at the extent to which this aspect of the novel's theme has become conflated with the apparent passivity of Fanny herself.<sup>109</sup>

When Edmund attempts to persuade Fanny to accept Henry Crawford, he tells her he has told the Crawfords that she was "of all human creatures the one, over whom habit had most power, and novelty least: and that the very circumstance of the novelty of Crawford's addresses was against them" (*MP* 354). He has explained and defended her by saying that "you could tolerate nothing that you were not used to" (*MP* 354). Is Edmund right that Fanny is a creature of habit; and, more importantly, is it true that habit prevents her from responding to anything new? If Fanny is inert, why is *Mansfield Park* so funny? Is the humour at her expense, throughout the novel, as Heydt-Stevenson would have it? What are Fanny's principles, and why does she resist Crawford's offer and the encouragement of the Bertrams and of Mary Crawford to accept it? Where is the line between humour and seriousness in the novel, and is habit a barrier to moral life? Fanny's recourse to principle and her tendency to act from habit call into question the

---

<sup>109</sup> Gilbert and Gubar base their criticism of Fanny on her extreme passivity: they argue that Fanny is a "model of domestic virtue" and that "she resembles Snow White not only in her passivity but in her invalid deathliness, her immobility, her pale purity" (165).

flexibility of the virtues in this novel. Whereas in *Pride and Prejudice* or *Sense and Sensibility* virtue is made possible by the habit of exercising judgement, in *Mansfield Park* it would appear that virtue does involve acting according to principle and the precedent of habit. How active is Fanny Price? Is she flexible, or is she not?

Moral education in *Northanger Abbey* as well as in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice* involves learning to judge characters and situations with prudence, strength, and justice. After the first few chapters of *Mansfield Park*, which describe Fanny's youth, Fanny seems to know almost infallibly how to judge character and action. The problem she confronts is how to keep judging correctly and abide by her judgements consistently. Unlike Catherine, Marianne, and Elizabeth, she seems to have little left to learn. Fanny Price is more like Elinor Dashwood in her confident knowledge of human nature. But Fanny is also like Elinor in that she struggles to hold fast to her principles. Both heroines, already well-educated, still find it hard to maintain their moral rectitude when they are surrounded by well-meaning people who pressure them to conform to morally relaxed expectations of society. Does Fanny need to learn anything more? Do her habits help or hinder her in moral actions? I shall argue in this chapter that Fanny is not a static, passive character: although she does often act according to habit, her virtue is often tested, and she is interested in growth and change. The narrator of *Mansfield Park* mocks the immoral behaviour of other characters, but almost always takes Fanny seriously as a model for the exercise of virtuous habits.

### Humour and Comic Faith

Others have remarked on the differences in the attitudes adopted by Austen's narrators toward their heroines. The narrator of *Persuasion*, for example, is thought to treat Anne Elliot with sympathy, while the narrator of *Emma* treats Emma Woodhouse with playful irony. Does the narrator of *Mansfield Park* laugh at Fanny Price? Or is Fanny, like Mr. Darcy, "without fault" and therefore someone who cannot abide humour directed at her, and is unable to laugh at herself? Heydt-Stevenson believes that "Austen's irreverent humor leads her to conjoin her seemingly purest, most evangelical heroine to the overdetermined figure of the masked woman" (331),<sup>110</sup> and suggests that the joke is on society, because Fanny's disguises allow her, "the outcast little cousin," to manipulate her way into a position of authority as "the heiress to the Park (or at least the heiress to the owner's affections), while the daughter, Maria, is exiled" (332). But while she may have gained the affections of Sir Thomas and the hand of his son, she will not inherit the estate, and it is not clear from this argument if Heydt-Stevenson thinks Fanny is conscious of the powers of her supposed disguise. This article thus falls victim to the fallacy of limited readership that Mary Poovey posits and which I alluded to in the previous chapter: the idea is that although Fanny, the Bertrams, and contemporary readers of Austen's novels would not have realized the full extent of the author's radical critique of women's position in society, two centuries later we can now understand it and laugh about it.

---

<sup>110</sup> David Monaghan has argued convincingly that in fact neither Fanny nor *Mansfield Park* as a whole represents the evangelical frame of mind ("*Mansfield Park* and Evangelicalism: A Reassessment" [1978]).

What is at stake here is again the crucial question of whether Austen was looking forward to a commodity culture or reaching for a tradition in which a heroine like Fanny Price could be taken seriously. The problem with reading *Mansfield Park* as a narrative in which “Fanny herself is little more than a fetishistic commodity, essentially bought and sold by members of her family, encouraged to prostitute herself for rank and wealth, and doubly deserted by both her immediate and her adopted relatives” (Heydt-Stevenson 328) is that it obscures Fanny’s resistance to being bought and sold. Fanny isn’t a commodity; to see her as such is to look at her from the viewpoint of the Crawfords, and to a lesser extent the Bertrams. And the ideological position of the Crawfords is antithetical to Fanny’s view of the world. It is true that the narrator’s voice is more lively than Fanny’s, but this does not imply that the narrator is aligned with Mary Crawford.<sup>111</sup> Throughout the novel the narrator criticizes the Crawfords along the same lines as Fanny does, and thus the ending is not a belated attempt to suppress the liveliness of the worldly characters, as critics such as Gilbert and Gubar have argued (164-68). In *Paradise Lost* Milton makes Satan a fascinating character, but there is no doubt that he’s on the wrong side of the conflict between good and evil. Austen’s interest in Mary Crawford is an interest in human nature, in the effects of nurture on a lively mind; the narrator’s judgement is always distinct from Mary Crawford’s, particularly in the fact that the narrator does not see Fanny as a commodity.

Yet the things Mary Crawford says are part of the sharp wit and humour of the novel, just as the things Mrs. Norris says contribute to the ironic comedy of life at

---

<sup>111</sup> Eileen Gillooly (*Smile of Discontent: Humour, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* [1999] 101-102), Pam Perkins (“A Subdued Gaiety: The Comedy of

*Mansfield Park*. When Mary jokes about “*Rears, and Vices*” (60) she is wanting to be suspected of a pun, and entreating others to hear her joke about sodomy among naval officers, and Austen is not unconscious of the connotations of her words. And the scene at Sotherton from which Heydt-Stevenson takes her title is certainly a good example of bawdy humour. Her article focuses on, for example, the sexual suggestiveness of the locked iron gate, the missing key, the torn dress, Fanny’s warnings to Maria about hurting herself or “slipping into the ha-ha,” and the wilderness through which the characters wander. When Maria Bertram, feeling trapped by the iron gate at Sotherton, exclaims, “I cannot get out, as the starling said” (99), she is indeed referring to Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1768), and the reference to the caged starling may well suggest that Maria feels trapped by conventional expectations of female behaviour. But to argue, in this case, that those expectations are “patriarchal” (Heydt-Stevenson 315) misses the point that Maria chooses to marry Rushworth with her eyes wide open to his faults, and in defiance of her father’s conviction and assurances that “her happiness must not be sacrificed” to considerations of wealth and advantage (*MP* 200).

There is another allusion in Maria’s words, “I cannot get out,” and although it is less direct, as it does not include the starling, it is nevertheless distinctly relevant to Maria’s situation. These words echo the cry of the Man of Despair in John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), who laments that he is “shut up in [despair], as in this iron cage. I cannot get out, O now I cannot” (78).<sup>112</sup> When Christian asks him how he came

---

*Mansfield Park*” [1993] 1-25), and Heydt-Stevenson (324) claim that the narrator resembles Mary Crawford.

<sup>112</sup> See Stephen Derry “*Mansfield Park*, Sterne’s Starling, and Bunyan’s Man of Despair” (1997), who concludes that “Maria’s inadvertent quotation from Bunyan thus grimly prefigures her destiny,” which is to be “shut up” (*MP* 465) with Mrs. Norris (Derry 323).

to be in this state, he answers that it was “For the lusts, pleasures, and profits of this world; in the enjoyment of which I did then promise myself much delight” (79).<sup>113</sup> Maria’s resistance to the confinement of the iron gate at Sotherton thus prefigures her eventual confinement with Mrs. Norris following the adulterous elopement with Henry Crawford in which she had expected to find the pleasures of the world. Her words invoke the despair of one whose heart is hardened to Christian love and repentance, as well as allude to the dilemma of the bird or woman imprisoned. Maria’s confinement has more to do with her own choices than with her family’s or her father’s expectations of her: although she feels the “restraint which her father imposed” at Mansfield (*MP* 202), she has been trapped into the engagement by her own desires for “a larger income than her father’s” and “the house in town, which was now a prime object” (*MP* 38) and she will choose to marry Rushworth in pursuit of “independence and splendour” and of “all

---

<sup>113</sup> In addition to the allusion to the Man of Despair, there are a number of parallels between *Mansfield Park* and *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and it would be worth investigating the connections further. Derry notes that the gate at Sotherton can stand for the gate to the Celestial City, and that Henry Crawford can be compared to Mr. Worldly-Wiseman (“An Allusion to Bunyan in *Mansfield Park*” [1993] 466-67); however, Mr. Worldly-Wiseman convinces Christian to turn away from the gate, whereas Henry convinces Maria to slip through. Austen’s use of these allusions is creative and their allegorical meaning is complex. I think that the estate of Mansfield Park can be read as the celestial city in the end, as well as the city of destruction early on. Portsmouth is one of the tests Fanny must endure in her journey towards the celestial city; London, I think, is the Town of Carnal Policy. Fanny, after all, is “disposed to think the influence of London very much at war with all respectable attachments” (*MP* 433). (Jane Austen’s mother once wrote that London is a place in which “one has not time to do one’s duty either to God or man” [qtd. in Jarvis 38].) Mary Crawford might be seen as Wanton (Bunyan 115), while Lady Bertram is Pliable, Mrs. Norris is Obstinate, Maria Bertram is Passion (Bunyan 75). Fanny Price is Patience (Bunyan 75), and as Fanny’s story demonstrates, the last shall be first, whereas he that would save his life shall lose it (Bunyan 66). Like Christian, Fanny travels alone toward the truth, because her neighbours experience varying degrees of blindness (Bunyan 69).

the comfort that pride and self-revenge can give" (*MP* 202). Not surprisingly, pride and self-revenge lead her not to comfort, but to despair.

In criticizing Heydt-Stevenson's argument for the bawdiness of Austen's humour, it may appear that I have simply reinstated the interpretation of *Mansfield Park* as a morally serious novel, in which the comedy is limited to ironic observations of human behaviour, while the most important aspect of the narrative is its intense investigation of good and evil. Yet I think it is crucial that even in *Mansfield Park*, bawdy humour, ironic humour, and serious morality are coexistent. To make this argument, I want to invoke Robert Polhemus's phrase "comic faith," and the epigraph he uses for his book *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce* (1980): he cites Christopher Fry's statement that "Comedy is an escape not from truth, but from despair: a narrow escape into faith." The "narrow escape" suggests both a close call, as in the narrow escape of *Mansfield Park* from moral ruin, and an escape to the narrow path, the Christian path to salvation. This is the kind of comedy that Austen's novels employ: like Chaucer, like Shakespeare, Austen uses humour, including bawdy humour, in her explorations of the truths of human life.

The faith that underlies Austen's novels is Christian, and the Christian story is a tragedy with a happy ending. *Mansfield Park*, says George Whalley, is in Aristotelian terms a tragedy with a prosperous outcome ("Jane Austen: Poet" [1976] 133). Polhemus writes that

Shakespearean comedy blends comic and religious experience. . . . Out of his comedy emerges a lovely reverence for the renewal of virtue and love in mirth. The comic resolutions in these plays depend on supernatural



means, and metaphorically they still do fit into a broadly Christian framework. Shakespeare's comedies, however, stress mysterious and wonderful forces of natural regeneration operating in *this* world. (11)

The infrequency of explicit references to religious faith in Austen's novels does not mean that it is absent as a defining influence; on the contrary, *Mansfield Park* as a particular example concludes with regeneration in the earthly world, but its comic resolution alludes to a larger metaphorical and strongly Christian context. Julia Prewitt Brown suggests, "True to the paradox that ends Shakespeare's comedies, the novels end in a beginning—that is, a marriage—which in Austen as in Shakespeare is conceived of as a charm against the passage of seasons, against aging, and ... against the sense of oncoming death" ("The Feminist Depreciation of Jane Austen: A Polemical Reading" [1990] 307). Brown has elsewhere argued against the importance of religious faith in Austen's novels,<sup>114</sup> but here she seems to be gesturing toward the conclusion that Polhemus reaches: regeneration in the comedies of Austen and Shakespeare is not just a charm against death, but a symbol of the grace that triumphs over death.

The comic faith of *Mansfield Park* derives from Austen's familiarity with Christian tradition and awareness that she wrote within that tradition: Henry Crawford might say that it was part of her constitution, as he says of Shakespeare that "one is intimate with him by instinct" (*MP* 338); yet I would suggest that for Austen, that instinct is rounded out by considered judgement, and by extensive reading and thinking, not by happening to recognize a tradition despite not having read anything of it since the age of fifteen, as in the case of Crawford's own familiarity with Shakespeare. For different

reasons than mine, in an article on “Racial Memory and Literary History” (2001), Stephen Greenblatt invokes the Shakespeare-reading scene in *Mansfield Park*. Greenblatt is interested in the way Crawford thinks of Shakespeare’s plays as a substitute for a written constitution of England, and as a biological or social imperative that has “the force of a racial characteristic” (51). It is not my purpose here to analyze the question of racial memory, however; instead, the part of Greenblatt’s article that is relevant to my investigation of Fanny’s character and Austen’s comic faith concerns Fanny’s attitude toward Shakespeare. Greenblatt writes, “*Mansfield Park* is deeply concerned with moral discriminations, with the importance of detecting dangers in apparently attractive objects, with the necessity of painfully renouncing pleasure to secure what is proper” (51). So far, so good. But he goes on to say that

Fanny’s rejection of a spectacular, seductive, histrionic suitor is in keeping with the puritanical sobriety of her character, but it is all the more striking that she has no moral reservations whatever about Shakespeare, whose intrinsic merit is acknowledged alike by the prudent and the rakish, the restrained and the wild. (51)

Greenblatt finds a receptiveness to Shakespeare in Fanny’s response to Crawford’s reading, but can’t allow himself to think that receptiveness might require a reassessment of the stereotype that Fanny’s character has become. Far from attempting to reconcile the necessity of renunciation with the love of even the wilder, bawdier aspects of Shakespeare, he persists in finding Fanny’s love of Shakespeare peculiar. Instead of asking why prim Fanny likes Shakespeare, it would be worthwhile to rephrase the

---

<sup>114</sup> See *Jane Austen’s Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (1979) 100 and “Private

question: what does it tell us about Fanny that she does like Shakespeare's plays? The answers to that question might modify what we think of Austen's as well as Fanny's perceived propriety. That Fanny likes Shakespeare suggests that while she is prudent and restrained, she is not averse to comedy. Fanny may wish that the people around her were more restrained, but she does not advocate restricting or censoring art. It is through art, rather than solely through experience, that she has learned about the darker aspects of human nature. Fanny Price is neither prim nor priggish.

### A Model Woman

There is a critical reluctance to allow Fanny the power of a heroine: it is almost as if literary criticism has marginalized her in the same way that the Bertrams do at first. When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield and commences her education along with her cousins, Maria and Julia think her "prodigiously stupid" (*MP* 18), while Sir Thomas and Mrs. Norris decide that "though far from clever, she showed a tractable disposition, and seemed likely to give them little trouble" (*MP* 18). Mrs. Norris points out to her nieces that "there is a vast deal of difference in memories" (*MP* 19), and although she gives this as a reason why Maria and Julia should pity Fanny's "deficiency," the fact that their supposedly superior memories are exercised by the recitation of "the kings of England," "the Roman emperors," "the Heathen Mythology," "the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers" (*MP* 18-19), rather than by the synthesis of ideas they have learned, demonstrates instead that their education is deficient. Fanny, on the other hand, "could read, work, and write, but she had been taught nothing more" (*MP*

18). Nothing more—when reading and writing are the foundations of education. As long as she continues to practise reading and writing, she is not likely to be really deficient. Her cousins, Austen reveals, are “entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility” (*MP* 19). So, for that matter, is Mary Crawford, and the narrator’s early criticisms of Maria and Julia are consistent with later criticisms of Miss Crawford as well, while Fanny is shown to be generous and humble, willing to serve others. Self-knowledge is a virtue for all Austen heroines, as Elizabeth Bennet’s epiphany demonstrates vividly: “Till this moment, I never knew myself” (*PP* 208). The narrator says of Sir Thomas’s daughters, however, that “In every thing but disposition, they were admirably taught” (*MP* 19). Is it possible to teach disposition? How does Fanny acquire hers, and is it really tractable?

Much later in the novel, during the ball at Mansfield, Sir Thomas undertakes to demonstrate to Henry Crawford that Fanny is a malleable character, easily persuaded to follow the wishes of those in authority. “[I]nterfering a little with her inclination,” he advises her to go to bed—“‘Advise’ was his word, but it was the advice of absolute power. . . . It might occur to him that Mr Crawford had been sitting by her long enough, or he might mean to recommend her as a wife by showing her persuadableness” (*MP* 280-81). Taken on its own, this statement by the narrator could be an indictment of the patriarch’s power. But going to bed a little earlier than she wishes is a relatively small sacrifice for Fanny to make in order to preserve peace, especially as “her inclination and strength for more [dancing] were pretty well at an end” anyway (*MP* 279). When it comes to the important decisions of her life, she does not respond out of habitual

deference to authority; she is not tractable; she is not a docile, easily persuaded, passive young woman. She does, however, understand sound advice.

Her docility is what everyone counts on, from Henry Crawford, who once he has resolved to marry her “warmly expatiated on” Fanny’s “graces of manner and goodness of heart,” her “gentleness, modesty, and sweetness,” her “patience and forbearance” (*MP* 294); and Mary Crawford, who exclaims that ““You will have a sweet little wife; all gratitude and devotion”” (*MP* 292); to Edmund, who urges her to ““prove yourself grateful and tender-hearted; and then you will be the perfect model of a woman, which I have always believed you born for”” (*MP* 347).<sup>115</sup> Edmund thinks that proving herself ““upright and disinterested”” (*MP* 347) is only the first step on the way to model womanhood, and he asks her to act as she always has in the ordinary course of life at Mansfield Park; that is, to act out her gratitude by conforming to the wishes of her friends. What they expect of her are the “spaniel-like virtues” that Mary Wollstonecraft criticizes so vehemently—or, to adapt her expression to this novel, perhaps they are the “pug-like virtues.” The Bertrams and Crawfords ask Fanny to submit once again, as she

---

<sup>115</sup> In *The Age of Virtue: British Culture from the Restoration to Romanticism* (2000), David Morse cites the phrase “the perfect model of a woman” as a statement of narrative fact about Fanny as part of his argument about Fanny’s faultlessness (168), ignoring both Edmund’s suggestion that Fanny isn’t that yet, and Fanny’s determination never to submit to what her relatives require of “the perfect model of a woman.” Morse argues that the contrast between the moral darkness of the Crawfords and “Fanny’s spotless white . . . precludes the very thing that Jane Austen does best: the depiction of long delayed and complex processes of change.” His major criticism of *Mansfield Park* is that “Had she allowed Fanny more time to discover what the Crawfords truly were, had she given more weight to Henry’s vacillations, then the novel might have been as masterly as it promises to be” (171). Although the ultimate revelation of “what the Crawfords truly were” takes place quickly, I argue in this chapter that Fanny’s early judgement of them is not hasty at all. As for Henry, Austen’s point is that he never really does vacillate, as the habit of inconsistent behaviour in pursuit of pleasure is too strong to permit him to consider his actions very carefully.

has in the past in serving others. It is one thing for Fanny to sacrifice her time and energy for the comforts and whims of others, but it is quite a different thing to sacrifice her body and soul to the preferences of those she cannot trust. Resisting that sacrifice means sacrificing the good opinion of many, possibly forever. The decision Fanny makes, to reject Crawford on the basis of a carefully considered judgment of his past behaviour, is not priggish, it is admirable. And she does reject him on that basis: it is her judgment of his character even more than her prior love for Edmund, that leads her to this decision. She may have been docile in the past, easily serving others and never asserting herself, but to speak out, to resist, and to hold fast to her decision is not proof of morally prim and proper behaviour, but of strong, independent judgment coming from someone long used to submit.

### Independence

The Bertrams and Crawfords can't quite believe that she has this much power. Edmund in particular has trouble accepting her strength because he persists in thinking he has formed her mind and her judgment, and therefore continues to exert control over it. When he and Fanny first discuss Miss Crawford's character, Edmund concludes that they think alike—"I am glad you saw it all as I did" (*MP* 64)—and the narrator suggests that "Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him" (*MP* 64), but even so early in the novel, she does not think entirely as he does, calling Miss Crawford's comments about her uncle "ungrateful" despite Edmund's assessment that they are merely "indecorous" comments, and questioning the good nature of a brother who doesn't trouble to write to his sisters. Edmund's conclusion is that Mary

Crawford is “perfectly feminine, except in the instances we have been speaking of. *There she cannot be justified*” (MP 64). Fanny has not withdrawn her criticisms, and so Edmund’s conclusion is evidence more of his deference to Fanny’s definition of what is feminine and appropriate than of his power over her judgements. In fact, he saw it all as she did.

Early in the novel, at Sir Thomas’s departure for Antigua, Fanny is a good judge of her own character. Like her cousins the Miss Bertrams, she is relieved that he is going, but unlike them she recognizes that her feelings on the occasion are deficient. She knows that she should love and care for him, and she “grieved because she could not grieve” (MP 33). This recognition is the appropriate assessment of what is due to someone who has cared for her, not a reluctant submission to authority. Fanny is very much aware of the workings of her own mind, in a way that Maria and Julia are not, and in the course of the novel her reliance on its powers becomes both more frequent and more interesting.

If she were truly priggish, presumably she would be either always self-righteous in her moral judgments, or else self-righteous in her submission to the moral judgments of others. She is neither. When she first forms her opinion of Crawford’s reprehensible behaviour toward and with her cousins, the narrator says that “had her confidence in her own judgment been equal to her exercise of it in every other respect, had she been sure that she was seeing clearly, and judging candidly, she would probably have made some important communications to her usual confidant” (MP 115). Instead, she “only hazarded a hint, and the hint was lost” (MP 115). This scene could have been a major turning point in the novel, if only Fanny *had* been priggish in her condemnation of

Crawford, and capable of convincing Edmund that she was right, by telling him what she witnessed between Maria and Crawford at the gate of Sotherton. Although Mrs. Norris believes that the elopement of the adulterous pair could have been prevented if only Fanny had married Crawford, to the extent that Fanny can be blamed for any of it, it is her lack of confidence in her own judgement that means she can't assert herself at this point to expose their behaviour at Sotherton. Fanny knows her own mind, but doesn't yet trust it.

Fanny's judgement and Edmund's are early on distinct, and they diverge even more when the question of acting in *Lovers' Vows* arises. When Edmund proposes to Fanny that he act the part of Anhalt in order to prevent his brother from admitting Charles Maddox, an outsider, to the intimacy of their party at Mansfield Park, he is aware that she does not think as he does—"I see your judgement is not with me" (*MP* 154)—and when Sir Thomas returns home and interrupts the theatricals, Edmund is clear that Fanny's judgement has been right, and that it has been different from his own—"Fanny is the only one who has judged rightly throughout, who has been consistent" (*MP* 187). Yet when it comes to Crawford's proposal for marriage, Edmund's memory is faulty and he professes blindness to their differences in the past as well as in the present. At precisely the moment when it should be clearest to him that Fanny's thoughts are not only different from his own and his father's, but strongly opposed to them, he attempts to maintain the illusion that she is still his pupil, still following the lines of his judgement. To her objection that "I am afraid we think too differently, for me to find any relief in talking of what I feel," he protests, "Do you suppose that we think differently? I have no idea of it. I dare say, that on a comparison of our opinions, they would be found as much alike as



they have been used to be'" (*MP* 346). Edmund has to reach far back to the time when his and Fanny's ideas were one; he is oblivious to the change in her and to her increased confidence in her own mind. This blindness is ironic, especially as it is probably partly because of his commendation of her consistent and correct judgement following the episode of *Lovers' Vows* that she has learned to place her trust in herself.

I say partly because of his approbation of her behaviour, because I think that the greater part of her confidence in her judgement comes simply from having thought about the matter a great deal, and worked through her reservations in order to arrive at a conviction of her own intelligence and rectitude. She does not make her decision about the play easily, and she agonizes over the decision even after she has made it: she retires to bed that night with her mind full of the problem (*MP* 150), and finds no comfort in sleeping on the question. In an article entitled "Jane Austen and the Economy of Salvation: Renewing the Drifting Church in *Mansfield Park*" (2000), Michael Giffin suggests that the white attic that is Fanny's bedroom is an allusion to Attic thought (27). It is not the attic, however, where the life of the mind thrives for Fanny, but the East room: "The little white attic, which had continued her sleeping room ever since her first entering the family, proving incompetent to suggest any reply" to her dilemma, "she had recourse, as soon as she was dressed, to another apartment, more spacious and more meet for walking about in, and thinking, and of which she had now for some time been almost equally mistress" (*MP* 150).

Although I think highly of Giffin's argument about the theological context for renewal in *Mansfield Park*, I must point out here that his theory about the "image of lighting the fire in the cold attic" (28) conflates the attic bedroom with the East room, and

thus that his argument about the symbolism of Sir Thomas confronting Fanny about Crawford's proposal in the attic doesn't work. He says the scene is "loaded with Kantian symbolism that was current in Austen's age: the cold attic is pure reason and the life of the mind, while the fire is pure feeling and the life of the heart. Here, because Sir Thomas has ventured into the attic (and by analogy, God has become involved in his creation), the tensions between reason and feeling; between classical and romantic, are reconciled in a particular theological context that I would call Theist" (28). Sir Thomas encounters Fanny in the room where she thinks, not where she sleeps. His acknowledgement that "'In your bedchamber I know you *cannot* have a fire'" (MP 312) raises the question of whether Fanny is sexually cold, but the fact that her mind has flourished in the East room even without a fire for physical comfort might indicate that given the opportunity she could make her bedchamber warm too. The symbolism Giffin is looking for isn't exactly the Kantian contrast between the cold attic mind and the fire of feeling, but he is right that when the fire has been lit, "Sir Thomas's composure and solicitude towards Fanny" return (28).

When she is agonizing about the play, after Edmund has consulted her and made his decision to play Anhalt, Fanny assures herself of her own decision—"She could not feel that she had done wrong herself, but she was disquieted in every way. Her heart and her judgement were equally against Edmund's decision" (MP 159)—it has not been easy for her to arrive at that certainty. Pacing in the East room, she has explored her mind and her motivations: "she had begun to feel undecided as to what she *ought to do*; and as she walked round the room her doubts were increasing. Was she *right* in refusing what was so warmly asked, so strongly wished for?" (MP 152-53). Beginning to feel that perhaps

she owes her cousins as well as her uncle gratitude and obedience, she is interrupted by Edmund's knock and his conversation about whether he should participate in the play. Through a combination of solitary reflection and engagement with her cousin on the subject of ethical behaviour, Fanny arrives at the conviction that she has been right to refuse to act. The idea that Edmund could be inconsistent in his principles is disconcerting to her, and prompts her to hold all the more strongly and consistently to her own.

It may be objected that it is Fanny's jealousy of Miss Crawford, heightened as it is by the realization that Edmund is going to act for and with *her*, that is the ultimate motivation for Fanny to stick to her principles. She laments that "Alas! it was all Miss Crawford's doing. She had seen her influence in every speech [of Edmund's] and was miserable" (*MP* 156). Her misery over the question of her own participation appears to dissolve in the misery of unrequited love exacerbated by the knowledge that the beloved prefers another: "The doubts and alarms as to her own conduct, which had previously distressed her, and which had all slept while she listened to him, were become of little consequence now. This deeper anxiety swallowed them up. . . . it was all misery *now*" (*MP* 156-57). But to return to the passage quoted above, it is both Fanny's heart and her judgement that are equally against Edmund's decision, as "she could not acquit his unsteadiness; and his happiness under it made her wretched" (*MP* 159). Her love for Edmund and her respect for his judgement in other things serve to emphasize for her how misguided it is to be inconsistent in moral behaviour.

Edmund has taught Fanny well to begin with, but his infatuation with Mary Crawford, which he later admits was not with her as a woman, but as "the creature of my

own imagination”—as Christina Rossetti would say, he has admired her “Not as she is, but as she fills his dream”<sup>116</sup>—has led him to teach Fanny more by his wrong-headed example than by theoretical moral instruction. As a clergyman, Edmund hopes to be of use not only as a preacher, but as an example: he tells Miss Crawford when they are in the Sotherton chapel that ““where the parish and neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct,” a good clergyman will be able to influence ““public manners,” which he says ““might rather be called *conduct*, perhaps, the result of good principles” and of the doctrines they teach (*MP* 93). His speech is reminiscent of Chaucer’s description of the Parson in the General Prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*: “This noble ensample to his sheep he yaf / That first he wroughte, and afterward he taughte” (ll. 498-99). That is, he not only preaches but practises it before he dares to preach it to others. Edmund’s conclusion, which grants a great deal of power to clergymen, suggests that ““it will, I believe, be every where found, that as the clergy are, or are not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation” (*MP* 93).

But although Edmund’s decision to act spreads moral consequences to Tom and Maria Bertram—“Edmund had descended from that moral elevation which he had maintained before, and they were both as much the better as the happier for the descent” (*MP* 158)—his influence has rather the opposite effect on Fanny. Edmund’s behaviour may represent the general moral tenor of life at Mansfield Park at this point, but it does not have the power to alter the whole fabric of moral life in this nation in miniature. At this point Edmund is not yet a clergyman, but he claims to be thinking as if he is one, as

---

<sup>116</sup> “In an Artist’s Studio” (1896), l. 14.

can be seen in his initial protest that he should not play Anhalt because “the man who chooses the profession itself, is, perhaps, one of the last who would wish to represent it on the stage” (*MP* 145). The “nation,” however, is shown to depend for its welfare not on the virtue of its clergymen, but on the virtue of its individuals, as Jane Austen has Mrs. Percival suggest in “Catharine” (*MW* 222), in the phrase I have used as the epigraph for this chapter. In this case, on the virtue of one individual only.

Because of her love for Edmund, Fanny learns from his example, whether that example is positive or negative. She learns this partly because he has taught her well, but also because she has read a great deal—among her reading materials in the East room is Johnson’s *Idler*, for example. And Austen’s description of Susan Price offers a further insight into the formation of Fanny’s mind, principles, and independent judgement.

Although Fanny first despairs of Susan’s character, she comes to realize that Susan has natural advantages:

Her greatest wonder on the subject soon became—not that Susan should have been provoked into disrespect and impatience against her better knowledge—but that so much better knowledge, so many good notions, should have been hers at all; and that, brought up in the midst of negligence and error, she should have formed such proper opinions of what ought to be—she who had no cousin Edmund to direct her thoughts or fix her principles. (*MP* 397-98)

This passage suggests that Fanny didn’t necessarily need Edmund’s guidance to develop her mind either, and Fanny’s recognition of this possibility helps her to prepare for further resistance to Henry Crawford, whose visit to Portsmouth follows in the very next

chapter. Having learned from Susan's example that her own mind is both less indebted to and less reliant upon Edmund's teaching and example, Fanny is bold enough to say confidently to Crawford's flattery of her—"Your judgment is my rule of right"—that he is quite wrong: she exclaims, "Oh, no!—do not say so. We all have a better guide in ourselves, if we would attend to it, than any other person can be" (MP 412). That "if we would attend to it" is important, as it implies both that most people don't listen to that better guide, and that she has not always attended to it confidently herself.

### Habit and Duty

Because of her gratitude to Sir Thomas, Fanny has often been aligned with his moral code by critics wishing to establish that she is passive, obedient, and long-suffering—a model niece, a model daughter, and the perfect wife for any man, whether Henry Crawford or Edmund Bertram. I have argued thus far instead that Fanny's moral principles are distinct from Sir Thomas's and from Edmund's, despite a number of similarities, and despite her acquiescence to the wishes of her aunts and uncle in matters of everyday life and conduct. In fact it is because her principles are higher than theirs, that she submits to serve her aunts and show her gratitude to her uncle. Having discussed Fanny's independence of mind and judgement, I want to turn now to her habit of submission. Is Fanny's adherence to principle the outcome of her acceptance of strict high standards? Is principle a matter of habit for her? Is it the stillness of rote repetition and the habit of duty? The frequent emphasis in the narrative on the very word *principle* appears to suggest that she does act according to rules. Perhaps she does think about

what she is doing (as I have argued above), but perhaps she also finds safety in the ultimate recourse to a code of conduct that regulates her life.

What kind of habits does Fanny have, then, and how are they related to her sense of duty? Tony Tanner says of her that “She prefers custom and habit to novelty and innovation, and her resolute immobility, frail and beset though it is, is a last gesture of resistance against the corrosions of unfettered impulse and change” (157). He criticizes Fanny along the usual lines, saying that it makes her even less sympathetic that

She is never, ever, wrong. Jane Austen, usually so ironic about her heroines, in this instance vindicates Fanny Price without qualification. . . . But Fanny always thinks, feels, speaks, and behaves exactly as she ought. . . . She does not put a foot wrong. Indeed, she hardly risks any steps at all . . . [and] there is an intimate and significant connexion between her virtue and her immobility. (143)

As I have already argued, although Fanny is eventually vindicated in her moral choices, she sometimes thinks she is wrong, and she has to struggle to learn to trust herself, risking being wrong. And she does not always behave as she ought, but she is often aware of not doing so, and that she is aware of it means that she is participating in moral growth. It is Sir Thomas and Edmund who say that she behaves “as she ought”; that is, as they wish her to.

In his book *Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature* (1993), S.L. Goldberg argues against Alasdair MacIntyre’s reading of *Mansfield Park* as Aristotelian, saying that MacIntyre is wrong to identify Fanny’s rejection of Henry Crawford as the central act of courage in the novel. Goldberg writes that “It is made absolutely clear in the novel

itself that no one in it would expect a girl, even with Fanny's 'mediocre' social position to look forward to, to marry without feeling love or some semblance of it" (285). While it may be clear to the reader, to Jane Austen, and to Fanny that no one *should* expect Fanny to marry without love, it is not so clear for her guardian and his wife. Sir Thomas acknowledges that Fanny does "not owe [him] the duty of a child," but he makes it known that if either of his daughters had refused such a proposal, he would "have thought it a gross violation of duty and respect" (*MP* 319). Lady Bertram voices the social and familial opinion about what Fanny ought to do: in what is "almost the only rule of conduct, the only piece of advice, which Fanny had ever received from her aunt in the course of eight years and a half," she tells her niece that she must accept Henry Crawford's proposal, because "you must be aware, Fanny, that it is every young woman's duty to accept such a very unexceptionable offer as this" (*MP* 333). But Fanny has a better sense of where her duty really lies: after her second interview with Sir Thomas, she tries to understand why he insists on her marrying Crawford, yet she resolves that "She must do her duty, and trust that time might make her duty easier than it now was" (*MP* 331).

Tanner's interpretation of Fanny's immobility is problematic: she is not immobile, nor does she desire to be. MacIntyre is right that Fanny shows courage in her refusal of Crawford. She is strong, she wishes for exercise, and she desires to be helpful to the family. Although the wish to be helpful is taken for granted, the wish for exercise is less often gratified. Call it constancy rather than immobility: she does not choose physical immobility, and she certainly does not suffer from the indolent consequences of an inactive mind. If she were a hero rather than a heroine, would this characteristic be



more likely to be called prudence, courage, or constancy? Tanner admits that “In her stillness she is not inactive: on the contrary, she is often holding on strenuously to standards and values which others all around her are thoughtlessly abandoning” (22). But he maintains that “tranquillity” is what she desires above all, contrasting Mary Crawford’s claim during the game of “Speculation” that “I will stake my last like a woman of spirit. No cold prudence for me. I am not born to sit still and do nothing” (*MP* 243). Fanny is not born to sit still and do nothing either. Even when she is sitting still, under the constraints of her family, she is not doing nothing. She is thinking, long and deeply, contemplating the consequences of her thoughts and her actions, consequences both for herself and for the actions of others. The habit of contemplation that she relies on means that she is not the tractable relation, the immobile cousin, “the stationary niece” (as Susan is called on page 472), but a woman with a fiercely active and courageous mind: Fanny’s action is in the contemplative life. Of all Jane Austen’s heroines, she is the one who reaches the philosophical wisdom of *sophia*.

The habit of contemplation means that she can exercise her independent judgement, but what about her habit of doing what others ask—does she submit in body, though not in spirit? And does this make her hypocritical? For example, when Mary Crawford calls to visit her and to scold her for not loving Henry, Fanny sees this visit as a “formidable threat”—she has lived “in continual terror” of the visit—yet when her guest implores her for the opportunity to speak alone together, Fanny cannot resist: “Denial was impossible. Her habits of ready submission, on the contrary, made her almost instantly rise and lead the way out of the room. She did it with wretched feelings, but it was inevitable” (*MP* 356-57). The habit of politeness requires her to submit to the

interview. Just as Elinor Dashwood's politeness makes claims on her behaviour that may oppose her feelings, Fanny's decorum prohibits her from refusing her guest's wishes. Like Elinor, however, she finds it possible to balance her judgement and her behaviour. Fanny does submit to Miss Crawford's wish, but she remains silent through much of this scene, listening to but not acquiescing in her visitor's concerns. At one point, both women are quiet, "each thoughtful; Fanny meditating on the different sorts of friendship in the world, Mary on something of less philosophic tendency" (*MP* 360). Fanny is indeed philosophical here, contemplating, as many philosophers have before her, the nature and definitions of varieties of friendship. While her silence allows Mary to misconstrue her meaning and exclaim that she hopes Fanny's "reverie" is due to her thinking "of one who is always thinking of you" (*MP* 360)—that is, Henry—it probably wouldn't much matter what Fanny said here, because Mary, like her brother and the Bertrams, is determined that Fanny will think in conformity with all their wishes at last.

Fanny's habit of outward conformity, then, does lead those around her to believe that she is submissive. The difference in her habits of submission, however, is that while she performs the tasks her relatives require of her out of a sense of gratitude and therefore of love and duty, she obeys Miss Crawford's demands on her time because she is used to obeying her relatives. As the narrator says of Fanny's visits to the parsonage to visit Miss Crawford once her cousins have left Mansfield Park, she went "without any sense of obligation for being sought after now when nobody else was to be had" (*MP* 208). Is she wrong to fall in line with Miss Crawford's wishes too easily? Should she perhaps shun her company and assert her dislike of her? Does she see Miss Crawford out of a jealous desire to know her rival? She visits with her, but she sets limits on their intimacy,

and she never pretends to show affection for her when she feels none. And her sense of politeness and charity toward others means that she cannot shun her neighbours completely. If she did, that would be priggish, wouldn't it?

Her habit of obeying orders means also that she even has to obey Mrs. Norris. During the preparations for the play, she follows orders, yet she does not submit more than she has to: "She worked very diligently under her aunt's directions, but her diligence and her silence concealed a very absent, anxious mind; and about noon she made her escape with her work to the East room, that she might have no concern in another, and as she deemed it, most unnecessary rehearsal of the first act, which Henry Crawford was just proposing" (*MP* 168). It may appear hypocritical of her to work diligently and conceal her absent, anxious mind; but the alternative is unthinkable: to tell everyone about her anxieties? or to refuse to work, pleading indisposition? How honest does a virtuous person have to be? Virtue often has as much to do with not telling as with telling and revealing. In this scene Fanny's mind is absent not because she is not thinking at all, but because its freedom exists symbolically in the East room, which is where she goes as soon as she can in order to think. This example demonstrates the way in which Fanny maintains her freedom: she submits to work that requires her physical presence, but her mind is elsewhere, thinking.

Although it appears easy to accept tranquillity as Fanny's normal state—after the ball, for example, "she could afterwards bring her mind without much effort into its every-day state, and easily conform to the tranquillity of the present quiet week" (*MP* 284)—she enjoys movement, excitement, and novelty. It's just that she's not used to such activity, and has few opportunities to experience or enjoy it. The night of the ball,

she is “sore-footed and fatigued,” true, but she is also “restless and agitated” and feels “in spite of every thing, that a ball was indeed delightful” (MP 281), and the following day, before she conforms to the habits the household expects of her, she “thought and thought again of the difference which twenty-four hours had made in that room,” meditating on the “hopes and smiles, bustle and motion, noise and brilliancy” everywhere (MP 283). Because she can’t experience action repeatedly, the exercise is in her mind: “Fanny thought and thought again.” This thinking and re-thinking is similar to Elizabeth Bennet’s process of reading and re-reading in *Pride and Prejudice*.

She welcomes new experiences, if they are beautiful and ethical, and her habits don’t prevent her from accepting what is new simply because it is new. On the drive to Sotherton, the road is new to her, and she “was soon beyond her knowledge,” but she “was very happy in observing all that was new, and admiring all that was pretty” (MP 80): she is happy to be beyond her knowledge, and hence to be able to extend that knowledge. Edmund is certainly wrong to say later that “you could tolerate nothing that you were not used to” and that “habit had most power” over her, “and novelty least” (MP 354). Significantly, on the way to Sotherton, she “was not often invited to join in the conversation of the others, nor did she desire it” (MP 80). This is why the others are unaware of her receptiveness to what is new. “Her own thoughts and reflections were habitually her best companions” (MP 80); she is not afraid to know herself or to be left to her own thoughts. That is not a bad habit.

The question thus appears to be not, is habit in itself a limiting and confining thing, but what kinds of habits are good ones to have? How does one distinguish between a good habit and a bad habit? Fanny is often taken as the symbolic

representative of tradition and of the resistance to change in *Mansfield Park*. But here again I would say that the question has to do with what kind of tradition, what kind of change? In fact, Jane Austen often identifies Fanny with the growth and development of the mind, as well as the change and growth of the natural world.

### Growth and Wisdom

The East room, which I have said represents the mind, is frequently analyzed as the repository of family possessions without much value to the rest of the family, odds and ends that they have either outgrown or discarded, such as the “faded footstool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing room, three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies . . . ; a collection of family profiles thought unworthy of being anywhere else” and then of course the prized sketch of H.M.S. Antwerp, drawn by William Price (*MP* 152). These are the “comforts” (*MP* 152) of Fanny’s room: they symbolize the past, and her care of them symbolizes her guardianship of the estate and of tradition, even of outmoded tradition.

However, the very first items mentioned in the description of the East room, prior to the list I have just quoted, suggest a symbolism that is quite different. The reasons given for her initial visits to the deserted schoolroom are that she goes there “when she visited her plants, or wanted one of the books, which she was still glad to keep there, from the deficiency of space and accommodation in her little chamber above” (*MP* 151). Gradually, she adds to the possessions there, and spends more time in the room; the plants and books—in that order—are mentioned again: “The comfort of [the room] in her hours of leisure was extreme. She could go there after any thing unpleasant below, and

find immediate consolation in some pursuit, or some train of thought at hand.—Her plants, her books—of which she had been a collector, from the first hour of her commanding a shilling—her writing desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach” (*MP* 151). Plants and books: both represent growth and development, not immobility and unchanging stillness.

The plants in particular point to her interest in life and its changes. When she seeks the comfort of the East room she does so partly “to see if by looking at Edmund’s profile she could catch any of his counsel,” but also to see if “by giving air to her geraniums she might inhale a breeze of mental strength herself” (*MP* 152). When Fanny is confined in Portsmouth, she misses her relatives and the orderliness of life at Mansfield Park, but she also misses “all the pleasures of spring”:

She had not known before what pleasures she *had* to lose in passing March and April in a town. She had not known before, how much the beginnings and progress of vegetation had delighted her.—What animation both of body and mind, she had derived from watching the advance of that season which cannot, in spite of its capriciousness, be unlovely, and seeing its increasing beauties, from the earliest flowers, in the warmest divisions of her aunt’s garden, to the opening leaves of her uncle’s plantations, and the glory of his woods. (*MP* 431-32)

Valuing the newness of the beginnings of spring, the progress of growing plants, trees and flowers, Fanny is not insensible to the beauty of change and the importance of development. It is not just any season that inspires her with such joy, but the most capricious one, the unpredictable season of novelty and new beginnings.

Even November can have its beauties, however, and it is useful to return to Fanny's conversation with Mary Crawford the previous autumn on one of her visits to the parsonage, visits that to Miss Crawford, who values social life far more highly than the natural world, are "most acceptable" in the "gloom and dirt of a November day" (*MP* 208). During one of their walks in the shrubbery, Fanny discourses at length on the changes there: "Every time I come into this shrubbery I am more struck with its growth and beauty" (*MP* 205). As Hermione Lee notes, Fanny's "reflective outdoor mood" here "indicat[es] that she is not irrationally rigid in the dislike of improvements she showed in the conversation about Sotherton" (90-91). Her attention to nature leads her to consider human memory, and she exclaims, "How wonderful, how very wonderful the operations of time, and the changes of the human mind!" (*MP* 208). Miss Crawford has absolutely no response to make to this long speech, which indicates one of the reasons for Fanny's many silences: when she speaks at length on intellectual subjects, she is ignored.

In this case, she introduces what she thinks should interest Mary Crawford, which is Mrs. Grant's part in the development of the shrubbery—but even here her listener is not attentive. Fanny turns instead to talking about "the growth of the laurels and the evergreens," and her interest in these leads her into a less articulate speech, which she calls "rhapsodising": she is impressed by "The evergreen!—How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!—When one thinks of it, how astonishing a variety of nature!" (*MP* 209). Mary Crawford's most memorable remark in this scene is her comment that "I see no wonder in this shrubbery equal to seeing myself in it" (*MP* 208-10), but Fanny is also seeing *herself* in it. Her pleasure in the year-round constancy of the evergreen—"I am so glad to see the evergreens thrive!" (*MP* 209)—indicates her

own consistent behaviour and the thriving constancy of her own heart and mind, as well as her interest in the welfare and growth of the natural world. The sharpness of the contrast couldn't be more compelling.

### Habit and Good Sense

The development of the right kind of habits, especially the habit of constancy, is a crucial question in the one scene in which Henry Crawford almost manages to please Fanny. The scene is the one in which Crawford not only reads Shakespeare well, but demonstrates that he has thought carefully and critically about the subject of reading aloud (even if he hasn't actually read Shakespeare himself since he was fifteen). After Henry has delivered a reading from *Henry VIII* that captures Fanny's attention, he and Edmund discuss the problems that arise from a lack of attention to how to read aloud—problems that all proceed “from the first cause, want of early attention and habit,” and Fanny listens to them “with great entertainment” (MP 339). Edmund gives the clergy as an example of a profession that has paid too little attention to “the art of reading,” and says that there have been recent improvements, and that the “subject is more justly considered” (MP 339-40). These, too, are improvements Fanny would approve; she would not hold blindly to the habits and practices of the past as a resistance to the “spirit of improvement abroad” (MP 339). One of the reasons clergymen pay more attention to this art, Edmund suggests, is that their congregations possess “a more critical knowledge” than before, and are thus able to “judge and criticize” (MP 340).

Crawford then proves himself to be one of those people, informed and able to judge and criticize, as he “proceeded to ask [Edmund's] opinion and give his own as to



the properest manner in which particular passages in the service should be delivered, shewing it to be a subject on which he had thought before, and thought with judgment” (MP 340). The narrator has previously pointed out, in connection with Crawford’s flirtation with the Miss Bertrams, that he is not a gentleman very much “in the habit of examining his own motives and of reflecting to what the indulgence of his idle vanity was tending” (MP 114-15). And when Fanny has tried to interpret Mary Crawford’s note following Henry Crawford’s proposal, she has had difficulty understanding their inconsistent behaviour, because “There was every thing in the world *against* their being serious, but his words and manner. Every thing natural, probable, reasonable was against it; all their habits and ways of thinking, and all her own demerits” (MP 305). In the end, it will be a “return to London habits” (MP 417)<sup>117</sup> that will spoil all the chances of both brother and sister for any respectable connection to the family at Mansfield Park, but here, in the conversation about Shakespeare and reading, Henry Crawford displays that he does have some good habits. They are the habit of good reading abilities, and the habit of thoughtful criticism.

Unfortunately for Crawford, good reading with him is merely a matter of style, not substance. He has good taste, but although he has practised acting, the “early habit of reading was wanting” (MP 419). This quotation about the early habit of reading appears in a comment on Susan Price, not on Crawford, but it is the same problem. Perhaps if he had continued to read Shakespeare after his fifteenth birthday, his habits might have been

---

<sup>117</sup> Compare the point at which Mary Crawford struggles with herself and with what is the right response to the elopement of Henry and Maria: Edmund reports that “I imagined I saw a mixture of many feelings—a great, though short struggle—half a wish of yielding to truths, half a sense of shame—but habit, habit carried it. She would have laughed if she could” (MP 458).

better, just as, if Maria and Julia had understood that education does not cease at the age of seventeen, or if Aunt Norris had corrected them when they expressed that belief (55), they might have had happier lives. As Leah Price suggests in *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel* (2000), even Crawford's limited knowledge of Shakespeare may have come from excerpts in anthologies rather than from reading the plays. Reading is a good habit; reading Shakespeare's plays, Austen suggests, is one of the best.

One of the strongest defences of the value of habit appears in the Sotherton chapel scene. The attack on the habit of family prayers comes of course from Mary Crawford, who argues that it is an improvement to life at Sotherton that the household no longer assembles for morning and evening prayer in the chapel, insisting that it is better to "leave people to their own devices on such subjects" because "Every body likes to go their own way—to choose their own time and manner of devotion," and it is no good to oblige people to attend chapel "starched up into seeming piety, but with heads full of something very different" (MP 87). Edmund's response is to say that if people really cannot fix their thoughts on the proper attitude of devotion during a service, that is "a weakness grown into a habit from neglect," and a problem that is not likely to be solved by leaving people to random private prayer (MP 87). His argument is that the formality and regularity of the service, the very fact of its being a routine, may make it possible for people to attend to devotion and prayer; he asserts that "the influence of the place and of example may often rouse better feelings than are begun with" (MP 88).

Fanny's agreement with his argument about example and habit, as demonstrated by her emphatic "Certainly" following his speech about the example of a good clergyman's good conduct (MP 93), as well as by her lament that "It is a pity . . . that the

custom [of household prayers] should have been discontinued. It was a valuable part of former times” (*MP* 86), suggests that she supports the idea of a family assembling in order to collect their thoughts and fix their devotion on God. Some readers of this passage have objected that her statement that “A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of prayer, is fine” (*MP* 86) has more to do with her romantic notions of what a chapel should be (“This is not my idea of a chapel. There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy, nothing grand” [*MP* 85]) than with the notion that regular chapel services exist for the worship of the glory of God. But here her agreement with Edmund’s defence of the reasons for the habit of prayer suggests otherwise.

### Comfort

The distinction between good and bad habits also depends on one’s definition of comfort. There are many examples of how characters define comfort differently, with Lady Bertram’s reliance on Fanny’s care as her comfort throughout the novel being one of the most frequent.<sup>118</sup> The best definition of comfort is revealed when Mrs. Norris proposes to accompany Fanny and William on their trip to Portsmouth. She is tempted to join them because Sir Thomas is to pay for them to travel comfortably by post, and Fanny and William are, not surprisingly, “horror-struck at the idea” (*MP* 373). As the narrator says, “All the comfort of their comfortable journey would be destroyed at once” (*MP*

---

<sup>118</sup> Yet even Lady Bertram’s attitude toward Fanny changes by the end of the novel: this is evident in the fact that although she looks forward to Fanny’s return to Mansfield following the crisis, she herself is no longer indolent, and thus is more sincere than she has been wont to be when she greets her by saying, “Dear Fanny! Now I shall be comfortable” (*MP* 447).

373). This comment raises (and answers) the question of whether true comfort consists in ease, or in peace.

The definition of comfort is important because peace is moral comfort, whereas ease is only the avoidance of irritation. Edmund falls into the trap of equating comfort and ease when he tells Fanny he will not try to stop his siblings from putting on *Lovers' Vows*. His reasoning is that “Family squabbling is the greatest evil of all” (*MP* 128). Here he is the one who does not want to disturb the comfortable habits of his family, habits in which each sibling is bound and determined to have his or her own way. It is Tom and Maria especially whose habits are fixed, and who are slaves to what they are accustomed to. In the end, sobered by his illness, Tom reforms his habits, and for Sir Thomas, “There was comfort also in Tom, who gradually regained his health, without regaining the thoughtlessness and selfishness of his previous habits” (*MP* 462). For Maria, on the other hand, there is little hope of change: her habits of selfishness are firmly fixed, and despite their disastrous consequences, her father can only hope that she will be penitent (*MP* 465).

### Authority

There is one more place in the novel where I want to look at the effects of habit, and to return to my original question about Fanny's submission to Sir Thomas's rules. Even late in the narrative, after she has learned to trust her considered judgements, and has been brave enough to tell Henry Crawford that we should all attend to our own better judgment rather than rely on the authority of others, she has occasion to apply to Sir Thomas's authority. She reads Mary Crawford's letter to her in Portsmouth and although

she feels “disgust at the greater part of this letter” (*MP* 435), she cannot help but be tempted by the offer of the Crawfords to deliver her to Mansfield Park. Mary has preyed upon her sympathies for her relatives as well as on her personal desire to be at home (for “Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home” [*MP* 431]), saying that “you cannot in conscience (conscientious as you are,) keep away, when you have the means of returning” (*MP* 435). But Fanny is also reluctant to be the means of reuniting Miss Crawford with Edmund, and so she feels “incapable of judging whether the concluding offer might be accepted or not” (*MP* 435).

Although some might think the narrator is being ironic about Fanny in saying, “Happily, however, she was not left to weigh and decide between opposite inclinations and doubtful notions of right; there was no occasion to determine, whether she ought to keep Edmund and Mary asunder or not” (*MP* 436), Fanny has already weighed right and wrong. She is not merely a creature of habit and deference to authority, and although some might see the invoking of “a rule to apply to, which settled every thing” (*MP* 436) as a mere capitulation to patriarchal authority, the situation is more complex. The narrator does say that “Her awe of her uncle, and her dread of taking a liberty with him, made it instantly plain to her, what she had to do. She must absolutely decline the proposal” (*MP* 436). However, the reason she does not have to examine her motives regarding Edmund and Miss Crawford is that she has in fact already considered the ethical implications of accepting the offer of conveyance to Mansfield. She relies on her own judgement as well as the confirmation of authority.

Before deciding that she will abide by Sir Thomas’s rule of right, she has determined that it would be “a material drawback” to her happiness at being “transported

to Mansfield” to owe “such felicity to persons in whose feelings and conduct, at the present moment, she saw so much to condemn; the sister’s feelings—the brother’s conduct—*her* cold-hearted ambition—*his* thoughtless vanity” (*MP* 435-36). At the thought of having Henry Crawford “still the acquaintance, the flirt, perhaps, of Mrs Rushworth!—She was mortified. She had thought better of him” (*MP* 436). It is Fanny’s vanity here that is mortified, of course, but her sensitivity to injuries to her own self-consequence is part of her contemplation of the inappropriateness of accepting the offer. She refuses it “absolutely,” not primarily because of either a disinclination to bring her cousin and Miss Crawford together, or a dread of the rule of Sir Thomas, but because it would be humiliating to her to accept the condescension of the Crawfords, and because she still trusts her own assessment of their characters. To some extent, in turning to Sir Thomas’s authority, Fanny finds that service to a rule of law can be liberating: even those who are capable of asserting independent and considered judgement sometimes find comfort in the idea that they are also protected by rules and customs, that not everything has to be judged for the first time every time. It is a relief to Fanny that she can give this perfectly acceptable social reason for refusing in her letter to Miss Crawford, but it is nevertheless evident from the text that she has once again thought carefully about acting before she does anything.

In contrast to Descartes and other philosophers of the Enlightenment, Fanny sees philosophical contemplation as something that takes place within a community—within a family—and that involves a consideration of what is due to others as well as what is due to the self. Instead of seeing her own thoughts as the sole foundation of her view of the world and of virtue, Fanny considers tradition and authority as well. She never does so

unthinkingly, however, as she consults both her own judgement and her guardian's authority. The virtues as she practices them, then, have to do with active principles carefully considered in the context of a community that includes herself and others. She acts on the principle that it is reasonable to have a "dread of taking liberties" with someone she respects.

Sir Thomas is not a static figure of authority any more than Fanny is.<sup>119</sup> The inconsistent and selfish behaviour of his daughters, especially when contrasted with the constant and unselfish behaviour of his niece, leads him to re-evaluate his own authority towards the end of the novel. The narrator concludes that he thinks carefully not only about the conduct of his daughters, but about his own behaviour: "Sir Thomas, poor Sir Thomas, a parent, and conscious of errors in his own conduct as a parent was the longest to suffer" (*MP* 461). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bennet acknowledges regarding Lydia's elopement that "who should suffer but myself? It has been my own doing, and I ought to feel it," yet he quickly concludes that "I am not afraid of being overpowered by the impression. It will pass away soon enough" (*PP* 299). Sir Thomas, on the other hand, takes responsibility for his daughter's education. He feels that in allowing Maria to marry Rushworth, "he had sacrificed the right to the expedient, and been governed by motives of selfishness and worldly wisdom" (*MP* 461).

In the first part of the last chapter of *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen gives her readers an intimate portrait of the mind of Sir Thomas, thereby demonstrating that she does in fact deal with most male characters apart from their interactions with women. Sir Thomas thinks about morality in a way that is classically Aristotelian: he becomes aware

that for Maria and Julia, “the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually contrasted with his own severity” (*MP* 463). Mrs. Norris has been excessively attentive; Sir Thomas has been defective in his attention to the education of his daughters, and “Bitterly did he deplore a deficiency which now he could scarcely comprehend to have been possible” (*MP* 463). The deficiency is that Maria and Julia have not learned moral principles, but it is also that they have not learned how to practise these principles in relation to their duty to family and community. Sir Thomas “feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice” (*MP* 463). The problem is the gap between theory and practice: “They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice” (*MP* 463). The combination of theoretical and practical religion requires faith. Jane Austen’s focus on the importance of the “daily practice” of religion points once more to her belief that faith undergirds moral behaviour. Although it has been suggested that *Mansfield Park* is a novel of moral principles (Goldberg 282), these principles, while important, are shown to be subservient to the education of the disposition: Sir Thomas laments that “He had meant [his daughters] to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility he feared they had never heard from any lips that could profit them” (*MP* 463). Analyzing the importance of practice for the cultivation of a virtuous disposition, Sir Thomas embodies Aristotelian principles.

---

<sup>119</sup> It would be worthwhile to study in detail Sir Thomas’s attitude toward the virtues in conjunction with studying the virtues of Austen’s heroes.



Like Fanny, Sir Thomas thinks carefully, if belatedly, about the behaviour of those around him, and judges his own behaviour most strictly. Both he and Fanny consider not only what is best for themselves, but what is best universally. This emphasis on the universal is a sign of Jane Austen's interest in *sophia*, what is true regardless of time or place, age or gender. The fact that both of them engage in philosophical contemplation about what is ethical, what is good, what is true, indicates that Jane Austen sees wisdom as central to *Mansfield Park*. Fanny's wisdom involves not just the strength of her own mind and the rightness of her own judgement, but also the ways in which she thinks in the context of tradition and authority. Carefully considering both her independence and her dependence, Fanny exercises her mind in the realm of *sophia*.

Fanny Price is Jane Austen's contemplative heroine. She is virtuous and wise, and she knows how to be temperate. She resembles Elinor Dashwood and Anne Elliot in her consistent moral awareness and judgement, but Austen gives her a room of her own in which to think and philosophise. The most important achievement in the depiction of Fanny Price is the realization of a wise female character who knows how to think deeply even when her virtue is most strongly tested. *Mansfield Park* is funny, and sometimes even bawdy, and the places where Jane Austen's comedy works best are in situations where it combines serious thought and lively satire. Poking fun at Dr. Grant's intemperate habits at meals, Lady Bertram's slothful obliviousness to her children's lives, or the Crawfords' vain estimation of their worth and their powers, Austen works in a tradition of comic faith. Recalling Elizabeth Bennet's words, "follies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies" (*PP* 57) are amusing, and *Mansfield Park* exploits such opportunities for humour. But Fanny, ultimately, is not funny: she is not priggish, she is

virtuous and wise. To echo Elizabeth's words again, "I hope I never ridicule what is wise or good" (*PP* 57). Jane Austen's achievement in *Mansfield Park* is to create a female character who embodies not merely the ideal of pure sexual virtue, but the tradition of virtue as philosophical contemplation.

**Chapter Six: “To think and be miserable”:** Learning the Art of Charity in *Emma*

**“But lovely as I was the Graces of my Person were the least of my Perfections. . . . In my Mind, every virtue that could adorn it was centered; it was the Rendez-vous of every good Quality of every noble sentiment.”**

—Jane Austen, “Love and Freindship”

*Emma* is about education, and about the role of misery in the process of education. Although Emma Woodhouse never suffers severe physical pain or loss, in the course of the novel she is required to undergo suffering that contributes to her education, and the kind of pain she endures is the torment of coming to consciousness of her own errors. In contrast to Fanny Price, who possesses a firm knowledge of herself, but struggles to act with confidence, Emma acts confidently but has to learn to think about the consequences of her actions; she thus resembles Elizabeth Bennet. It has often been argued—or in many cases simply taken for granted—that Jane Austen does not take on real misery, the anguish and agony of severe human suffering, in the way that other great writers such as Tolstoy and George Eliot do. But it seems to me that to some extent at least it is a question of degree: who but God can say which sins exactly are worse than others, what suffering is worse? It is certainly possible and important to make certain judgements about the differences, but it is difficult to set up a hierarchy of quantitative suffering.

As many critics have argued, *Emma* is the story of how a young woman who appears to have everything comes to realize that she doesn't quite have it all, and, moreover, that she definitely doesn't know everything. Some have suggested that the process she has to go through to arrive at that realization is education by humiliation, and that she is required to submit to the better knowledge of her moral superior, her friend/brother/father-surrogate, whose testing of her moral worth is rewarded by her hand in marriage. A number of critics have objected to the idea that Emma must be disciplined by Mr. Knightley in order to be worthy of becoming his bride. I think instead that Emma is responsible for her own moral education. Her education is dependent on her choosing

to change, not on her submitting to Mr. Knightley's wishes. I see Emma as independent and self-reliant, even in her education in recognizing her own errors, and I think that Mr. Knightley himself knows that she is.

Unlike Marianne Dashwood, who learns mostly from her sister, and Elizabeth Bennet, who learns primarily from reading, and Fanny Price, who learns from her cousin and her reading, Emma Woodhouse doesn't listen and she doesn't read. How, then, does she learn? What is it that brings her to understanding and humility, and how does she discover what's missing from the "best blessings of existence" that her life at the start of the novel seems to incorporate? Emma has "some" of the "best blessings of existence" (*E* 5) from the opening sentence onwards, but what does she lack? What she starts with is that she is "handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition," and the added comfort that her life thus far has been unruffled by bad fortune of any form: she "had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her" (*E* 5). But although she seems to have everything, what's missing is charity. To some extent this absence recalls the lack of love in *Lady Susan*, but whereas love never gains prominence in Lady Susan Vernon's life, it gradually does in Emma's. At the beginning of the novel, Emma hasn't yet either had to experience the charity of others, or had to learn how to practise charity toward others.<sup>120</sup> And as Paul says in I Corinthians, "though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing" (13:2b). Emma needs to learn what charity is, and to do so she must suffer in some way.

---

<sup>120</sup> Marilyn Butler suggests that the virtues Emma needs to learn are "the Christian virtues of good nature and humility" (*Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* 270); I argue instead in

### Education and Solitude

At the beginning of the novel, having lost the constant companionship of her governess and friend Miss Taylor, who has now become Mrs. Weston, Emma is “in great danger of suffering from intellectual solitude” (*E* 7). Austen’s irony is directed at Emma here, of course, as Emma won’t really be cut off from all social discourse, but to what extent does intellectual solitude constitute real danger? The focus here is on Mr. Woodhouse, whose valetudinarian habits prevent him from engaging in any “activity of mind or body”, and thus he is “no companion” for his daughter (*E* 7). She will have to look outside her home for intellectual companionship, then, because what she fears, though she may not be fully aware of the fact, is the reality of being left with her own mind.

Emma claims to be quite able to depend on her own mind for strength, but one of the things she has to learn is that she is not self-sufficient. When Harriet Smith presses her for her reasons for not marrying, and her plans for the future in lieu of marriage, Emma says confidently that ““If I know myself, Harriet, mine is an active, busy mind, with a great many independent resources”” (*E* 85); however, she does *not* know herself yet, and that is part of the point of the novel. Is learning that she is not self-sufficient part of acknowledging an essential feminine weakness? Does Emma have to come to terms with society’s expectation of her, and reshape her conception of her own strength to fit a model that requires her to be supported by a much stronger and more independent gentleman? Does Austen require that Mr. Knightley learn anything, or is he permitted to be genuinely self-sufficient? Unlike Mr. Darcy, who has to adjust his perspective when

---

this chapter that she needs to learn charity, which is, after all, one of the primary

he falls in love, Mr. Knightley represents a static, unchanging standard of gentlemanlike virtue. To what extent is he Emma's teacher?

Emma's fear of loneliness means that she welcomes company, even if it is not quite up to the standard of Mrs. Weston's friendship. Facing another of the "long evenings" in which her only company is hearing Mrs. Goddard, Mrs. Bates, and Miss Bates in conversation and "quiet prosings" with her father over cards, she welcomes the introduction of Harriet Smith to the circle at Hartfield (*E* 22). The addition of Harriet appears to promise a kind of relief from intellectual solitude, sort of. Harriet is a distraction, and Emma can take her on as a project, and improve her, despite the fact that "She was not struck by any thing remarkably clever in Miss Smith's conversation" (*E* 23). What Harriet mainly alleviates is the problem of lonely exercise, not the problem of intellectual solitude. The conversation may not be challenging, but "As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how useful she might find her. . . . She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant, and a Harriet Smith, therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges" (*E* 26). Although Emma tells herself that the appeal of Harriet's companionship is that "Harriet would be loved as one to whom she could be useful" (*E* 26-27), it is clear that the real appeal is that Harriet is useful to Emma, as a kind of decorative, serviceable addition. To adopt Edith Wharton's description in *The Custom of the Country* (1913) of Undine Spragg enjoying her husband's presence mainly as a

---

Christian virtues in a way that the sub-categories of humility and good nature are not.

decorative accessory to her life, I think Emma sees Harriet's "presence at her side" as "distinctly ornamental" (*Custom* 956).<sup>121</sup>

What might be more useful to Emma at this point in her career is a little more intellectual solitude. She has little time for contemplation of her own mind or her place in the world, partly because she is richly blessed with the outward markers of what her place in the world is—beauty, money, and independence—and partly because she is too busy participating in society, laughing at the mistakes of others. When her brother-in-law Mr. John Knightley suggests to her that Mr. Elton "seems to have a great deal of good will towards *you*" (*E* 112), she does not even consider the possibility that her confident assessment of her social life might be wrong, and receives this warning simply as a joke: "she walked on, amusing herself in the consideration of the blunders which often arise from a partial knowledge of circumstance, of the mistakes which people of high pretensions to judgment are for ever falling into" (*E* 112).

---

<sup>121</sup> In her recent book *General Consent in Jane Austen: A Study of Dialogism* (2000), Barbara K. Seeber argues that Harriet is "the other heroine" of the novel, and that "the dominant narrative tries to naturalize Harriet's exclusion and to naturalize her inferior class position as her inferior personal worth" (43). Seeber suggests that "Harriet, like Frankenstein's monster, takes on a life of her own and it is precisely this that the main narrative cannot accommodate" (43). While I think Emma does make use of Harriet more as an accessory than as a friend, Harriet is not monstrous, she is just ordinary. Upon their marriages both she and Emma take up new responsibilities that mean their parting is not "The 'unmerited punishment' of Harriet Smith" that Seeber's chapter title claims it to be. When Seeber argues that Harriet is "exiled to the periphery of Highbury" (45), she cites the passage in which Emma thinks that "every blessing of her own seemed to involve and advance the sufferings of her friend, who must now be even excluded from Hartfield" (*E* 450). But in this passage Emma still believes that Harriet is in love with Mr. Knightley, and she imagines the exclusion of Harriet as necessary to spare Harriet the pain of seeing Emma and Mr. Knightley happy together. Once Emma discovers that "Harriet had always liked Robert Martin" (*E* 481), their friendship begins to "change into a calmer sort of goodwill" (*E* 482), but there is no banishment, no punishment here.



She does, however, see some things clearly, early on; she is not entirely blind to the meaning of the workings of society. Although she doesn't judge herself, she does judge Frank Churchill to be in error for not visiting his new step-mother (Austen's term is "mother-in-law") Mrs. Weston (*E* 122), even though she later defends his behaviour to Mr. Knightley, arguing that dependence and indebtedness to others can make it difficult to do what is right in a given situation (*E* 146). She finds herself "taking the other side of the question from her real opinion, and making use of Mrs. Weston's arguments against herself" (*E* 146). It could be argued here that her judgment of Frank's non-appearance in Highbury has to do with her own interest in seeing him, and finding out whether her imagined connection with him has any basis in reality, but it is also important that she can see that it is the right thing to do for him to visit his father's new wife. She can see this well before Mr. Knightley stresses to her that "There is one thing, Emma, which a man can always do, if he chuses, and that is, his duty. . . . It is Frank Churchill's duty to pay this attention to his father" (*E* 146).

One of the ways in which Emma shows that she does know her mind is that it is very difficult for her to pretend that she is in love with Frank Churchill, even after she has met him and been charmed by him. She may not be able to see that she loves Mr. Knightley, but she is intellectually and emotionally aware of the fact that she is not in love with Frank Churchill. Emma thinks through her flirtation with Frank, and her self-knowledge in this situation makes it possible for her to think through other aspects of her own behaviour and feelings. It is through her analysis of where her love lies that she begins to know more about how she engages with other people in society. When Frank leaves Highbury after his first visit, Emma spends time alone thinking about her feelings,

and after examining her reaction to his departure she concludes that “I do suspect that he is not really necessary to my happiness. So much the better” (*E* 264). She sees that he is changeable and that she does “not altogether build upon his steadiness or constancy,” and that “Every consideration of the subject, in short, makes me thankful that my happiness is not more deeply involved” (*E* 265). She knows herself too well to play at lovesickness, and she knows something about her own happiness. The problem, still, is that she has difficulty knowing the happiness of others.

The roots of this problem lie, I think, in her initial conception of what charity is. She has thought that it would be charitable to be useful to Harriet (when in fact she uses Harriet as a pawn in her own matchmaking game), that it would be charitable to Mr. Elton to find him a pretty wife (when she has used him as the object of that game), and also, that it would be charitable to Frank Churchill for her to bestow her affections on him. This is charity conceived of as condescension. Emma Woodhouse, proud, elegant, and benevolent, might condescend to treat “a Harriet Smith” as a friend, to arrange the local clergyman’s love life for him, and to fall in love with a long-lost neighbour. But charity is not about power.

In contrast to Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Morland, whose revelations of self-knowledge come quite late in their respective novels, Emma has her first encounter with the pain of enlightenment relatively early, in Chapter 16. Marilyn Butler argues in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* that it is not until Emma learns that Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax are engaged that she finally judges herself clearly—“At last she accepts the need for self-criticism” (258). But Emma is forced to criticize her own mind well before the climax of the novel. After Mr. Elton has proposed to her—“actually making violent

love to her” (*E* 129)—in the carriage on the way home after the Westons’ Christmas Eve party, she is obliged to acknowledge her blindness regarding the object of her charitable matchmaking scheme. She doesn’t yet know how blind she has been to Harriet’s feelings in the whole affair with Robert Martin, or how reprehensible it is that she has directed Harriet to love Mr. Elton, but she does see how wrong she has been about interpreting Mr. Elton’s behaviour, and how her encouragement of his attentions could have been misinterpreted as welcoming his affection for her.

When she arrives home that night she is obliged to compose herself for her family’s sake, and to wait until she is alone to think things through: “her mind had never been in such perturbation, and it needed a very strong effort to appear attentive and cheerful till the usual hour of separating allowed her the relief of quiet reflection” (*E* 133). Quiet reflection may be a relief of sorts, but it is not comfortable, as “Emma sat down to think and be miserable.—It was a wretched business, indeed!” (*E* 134). Thinking, especially about one’s own mistakes, is difficult, painful, and miserable. It is something Mr. Woodhouse almost never does—later in the novel Emma blesses his “favouring blindness” to her interest in Frank Churchill’s attentions to her, and Austen says that “the entire deficiency in him of all such sort of penetration or suspicion, was a most comfortable circumstance” (*E* 193). In this case his deficiency provides comfort for Emma, but presumably in most cases it provides comfort for him: he worries, but he doesn’t think, and thus even his complaints are part of the comfort of his own complacency. With such a father it is either surprising or inevitable, depending on the influence granted to genes or the exigencies of circumstance, that Emma does have to think for herself.

When she does, she is miserable. She forces herself to look back “as well as she could; but it was all confusion. She had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it” (*E* 134). The more she thinks about the past, the more she realizes her responsibility for what has happened: “If *she* had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that *he*, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken her’s” (*E* 136). The result of her miserable intellectual solitude is that she sees that

The first error and the worst lay at her door. It was foolish, it was wrong, to take so active a part in bringing any two people together. It was adventuring too far, assuming too much, making light of what ought to be serious, a trick of what ought to be simple. She was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more. (*E* 136-37)

This language suggests that Emma begins to see herself as chief among sinners,<sup>122</sup> and that she is contrite about her sin. In taking blame upon herself, she is beginning to acknowledge that she cannot do everything right by herself, but needs help.

Following the debacle with Mr. Elton, Emma is angry not with him, but with herself: “She wished him very well; but he gave her pain, and his welfare twenty miles off would administer most satisfaction” (*E* 182). Although she would be more comfortable if he never returned to Highbury, she knows the value of seeing him as a reminder of her faults. Austen says that “his sight was so inseparably connected with some very disagreeable feelings, that except in a moral light, as a penance, a lesson, a

---

<sup>122</sup> Cf. 1 Timothy 1:15, where the Apostle Paul writes, “This [is] a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.”

source of profitable humiliation to her own mind, she would have been thankful to be assured of never seeing him again” (*E* 182). Seeing him is painful, but morally useful.

As far as Harriet is concerned, Emma is obliged to think again about separating her from Robert Martin. When Harriet sees Mr. Martin and his sister in Ford’s, she is flustered and doesn’t know what to do, especially when they are kind to her despite her rejection of the proposal and the family as beneath her. At Hartfield Harriet turns automatically to Emma to assuage her nervousness, saying ““Oh! Miss Woodhouse, do talk to me and make me comfortable again”” (*E* 179). But Miss Woodhouse, having had to acknowledge her error about Mr. Elton, is a little more wary of providing immediate comfort without thinking carefully about the consequences: “Very sincerely did Emma wish to do so; but it was not immediately in her power. She was obliged to stop and think. She was not thoroughly comfortable herself” (*E* 179). As in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*, the desire to be amiable and make others comfortable conflicts with the desire to be wholly truthful. Emma’s discomfort at this point is not enough to make her seriously re-examine her initial judgment that Robert Martin is not good enough for Harriet, but it is enough to make her stop and think. And if she does this often enough, Austen implies, she will approach a better understanding of truth, and will be better equipped to behave charitably to others.

### Charity as Style

What charity is not, therefore, is looking after others by telling them how to live. This is Mrs. Elton’s idea of charity, and it is clearly shown to be misguided, as her officious exertions on behalf of Jane Fairfax demonstrate. In addition to directing the

lives of the less fortunate, Mrs. Elton also sees charity as a matter of style. Charity is what those in power offer to those without power: it both assists the beneficiary, and increases the positive social image and self-image of the benefactor. Early in the novel, Emma is guilty of conceiving of charity in just this way, and the introduction of Mrs. Elton to Highbury is a reminder to her of how charity should not be conducted. For example, Emma feels for Jane when Mrs. Elton insists that her servant will pick up Jane's mail, or when she insists on arranging a governessing position for Jane.

Even when Mrs. Elton is planning her part in the strawberry party, her focus is on her image, and her ability to make Jane over in her own image. She tells Mr. Knightley that "I shall wear a large bonnet, and bring one of my little baskets hanging on my arm. Here,—probably this basket with pink ribbon. Nothing can be more simple, you see. And Jane will have such another" (*E* 355). But this kind of charity—"Look, you too can be perfectly stylish just like me—it's easy"—is vanity, as Mrs. Elton's repeated insistence on image at the expense of feeling shows. At the strawberry-picking party at Donwell, "Mrs. Elton, in all her apparatus of happiness, her large bonnet and her basket, was very ready to lead the way in gathering, accepting, or talking" (*E* 358), and her insistence on being first in everything belies her attempts to provide charity to others.

Is it necessary to have equipment for virtue, apparatus for happiness? It is easier, no doubt, to offer charity to others if one has much to offer, but charity resides more in the disposition of a person than in objects or wealth to be dispensed. The question of external circumstances necessary to the virtuous life arises when Emma and Harriet discuss the situation of Miss Bates. Emma is defending the idea that she herself proposes to remain single, and argues that while "a very narrow income has a tendency to contract

the mind, and sour the temper,” “a single woman, of good fortune, is always respectable, and may be as sensible and pleasant as anybody else” (E 85). She acknowledges that Miss Bates does not fit in the category of miserly old maid, however: “Poverty certainly has not contracted her mind: I really believe, if she had only a shilling in the world, she would be very likely to give away sixpence of it” (E 85). Like Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion* and like the biblical widow who gives her last mite to those poorer than herself, Miss Bates is an exemplar of charity. Thus although Emma professes to believe that it is necessary to have wealth in order to be generous and good-natured, she has to except Miss Bates, the example of the single woman’s life that is closest to home, because Miss Bates does not lack charity. She is “only too good-natured and silly to suit” Emma (E 85), but she is not uncharitable. Equipment for virtue may make charity easier, as Austen has suggested in other novels, especially earlier novels such as *Sense and Sensibility*, but it is not always necessary, as characters in both *Emma* and *Persuasion* demonstrate.

Emma has drawn on the resources of Hartfield in order to offer charity to Mrs. and Miss Bates, in much the same way that she visits the poor. She sends Hartfield pork to the Bates household—as her father says, “Now we have killed a porker, and Emma thinks of sending them a loin or a leg; it is very small and delicate” (E 172); Emma replies that she has done more than that: “My dear papa, I sent the whole hind-quarter. I knew you would wish it” (E 172). She is generous, but her charity here is mostly action, not thought. Although she has to be thoughtful enough to go to the trouble of sending this gift to them, the action doesn’t really alter her attitude toward the recipients of her charity. It is more a matter of form than of goodwill to others.

In her conversation with Harriet, just after they have established that Miss Bates is not an uncharitable old maid, Emma speaks uncharitably of Jane Fairfax—“I wish Jane Fairfax very well; but she tires me to death” (*E* 86)—and then she moves easily into the role of Lady Bountiful, dispensing tangible charity to the poor of the parish. There is no irony, however, in Austen’s description of Emma’s attitude toward the people she visits here: “Emma was very compassionate; and the distresses of the poor were as sure of relief from her personal attention and kindness, her counsel and her patience, as from her purse” (*E* 86). So it is not empty action, but compassionate aid, as she “entered into their troubles with ready sympathy, and always gave her assistance with as much intelligence as good-will” (*E* 86). It is Emma’s own ironic observation after they have left the cottage that it can be difficult to fix one’s mind on the sufferings of others when there are potential distractions in one’s own life, as she says smilingly, “I hope it may be allowed that if compassion has produced exertion and relief to the sufferers, it has done all that is truly important. If we feel for the wretched, enough to do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy, only distressing to ourselves” (*E* 87). She does not believe that sympathy alone will help: action and benevolence in proportion to the need of those in distress will be helpful, but thinking without acting will not.

That Emma knows the difference between the sentimental pretensions of claims to suffer along with others in distress, and the more realistic attempt to help others without drowning in their misery with them, suggests that she is critical of the idea of charity as style. She is not, of course, as stylishly charitable as Mrs. Elton, and she does offer real help. In contrast to critics who have argued that Emma’s attitude toward the poor expresses her class snobbery, I think that the problem is not so much with the



charity she offers to the poor, as with the charity that she, like Mrs. Elton, claims to offer to those whose social situation is not quite so distant from her own. Mrs. Elton fixes on Jane; Emma fixes on Harriet, and then tries to help Jane as well. In both of her fixations, Emma is attracted to the object of her charity partly because of the idea of helping a beautiful young woman who appears to need help. This attraction makes Emma resemble the eponymous hero of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, heroic and sympathetic rescuer of beautiful women in distress. Harriet is not as desperate as Mirah Lapidoth, and Jane is not as tragic as Gwendolen Harleth, but nevertheless the rescuer in each case is predisposed to offer help because of the beauty not of the action of rescue, but of the recipient. As in the epigraph I have chosen for this chapter, from "Love and Freindship," the graces of the person are conflated with the graces of the mind; and thus the beauty of the woman in question makes charity that much more appealing.

In *Emma* Austen is concerned with the difference between charity as love and charity as image. The issue is highlighted in an exchange between Emma and Frank Churchill in which Frank proposes to purchase gloves at Ford's as proof that he is "a true citizen of Highbury"; he says "It will be taking out my freedom" (*E* 200). Emma laughs that "You were very popular before you came, because you were Mr Weston's son—but lay out half-a-guinea at Ford's, and your popularity will stand upon your own virtues" (*E* 200). It isn't that it would be charitable of Frank to support the business of Ford's, but that to be seen to patronize the same shop as everyone else would serve as a sign that he subscribes to the image of Highbury society. Frank proves his virtues by exercising the power of purchasing. But this is not a version of virtue Austen condones:

for her, virtue has to do with consistency between charitable thought and charitable action.

### Benevolence and Friendship

Frank needs to prove his virtues, because not everyone in Highbury is convinced that he has them. Prior to his arrival there, Emma and Mr. Knightley have speculated on his character, with the latter insisting, on the basis of Frank's seeming reluctance to visit Mrs. Weston at the proper time, that he will prove to be "a very weak young man" (*E* 148). Mr. Knightley's opinion is that Frank "can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very "aimable," have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people: nothing really amiable about him" (*E* 149). Amiability, as I have suggested in previous chapters, is an important virtue for Austen. Emma teases him that this kind of amiability might be enough for Highbury, as "We do not often look upon fine young men, well-bred and agreeable. We must not be nice and ask for all the virtues into the bargain" (*E* 149).

Their conversation raises the question of the difference between good will and friendship, an issue that recurs in the novel. Although Emma says she doesn't expect all the virtues, she does appear to imagine that Frank will be everyone's friend: she says that "My idea of him is, that he can adapt his conversation to the taste of every body, and has the power as well as the wish of being universally agreeable" (*E* 150). Mr. Knightley objects to this description as the ideal of amiability, because if true it would mean that Frank would adapt his character so well to the demands of those around him that he would be insufferable: "What! At three-and-twenty to be the king of his company—the

great man—the practised politician, who is to read every body's character, and make every body's talents conduce to the display of his own superiority” (*E* 150). Mr. Knightley is already jealous of Frank, of course, but his objection holds, and the kind of universal good will that caters to every individual while serving primarily to emphasize the charitable person's own superiority is insufferable in the great as well as in the inexperienced twenty-three-year-old.

Emma experiences the problem of an older man's universal amiability later in the novel when she realizes that Mr. Weston does not discriminate among his acquaintances, even though he treats them each as a particular and exclusive friend. When it comes to the evening of the ball at the Crown, it turns out that he has invited a large number of friends to come early to inspect the rooms, giving each to believe that he relies on his or her taste alone. It is not Emma's vanity alone that is damaged by being considered “the favourite and intimate of a man who had so many favourites and intimates” (*E* 320); although her vanity is hurt here, she is right to see the contradictions inherent in this way Mr. Weston has of treating everybody. Consciously or not, she recalls the earlier conversation with Mr. Knightley, and reflects that “General benevolence, but not general friendship, made a man what he ought to be.—She could fancy such a man” (*E* 320).

Where is tolerance and where is charity, in the debate about the difference between benevolence and friendship? How does one determine who one's friends are, and how treatment of a friend differs from treatment of everyone else? Does one merely tolerate all others, or does tolerance also require one to be amiable, charitable, and benevolent? It seems exclusive to gather a small group of friends, and leave the rest to chance and charity, and yet that is what Austen leaves us with at the end of the novel: a

“small band of true friends” who witness the wedding of Emma and Mr. Knightley (*E* 484). She doesn’t say exactly who makes it into that category, but there is no question that it is small and exclusive.

### “Perfect Happiness”

Critics such as Rachel Brownstein and Julia Prewitt Brown have discussed the idea of perfection in Jane Austen’s novels, especially in *Emma*, and the meaning of what constitutes perfection is very much bound up with an understanding of virtue.

Brownstein suggests, rightly, that “The gap between ‘real’ Austen heroines like Catherine or Emma or Fanny and the ideal mere picture of perfection Jane Austen thought other people admired too much is in effect the subject of all her novels” (“England’s *Emma*” 233). “Pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked,” Austen wrote (*Letters*, 23 March 1817), and it is worth remembering this statement of hers when we find Fanny especially “too perfect” or “too good.” Is perfection always sickening? Or is there a worthwhile distinction between being perfect and becoming perfect?<sup>123</sup> Or is the question of “becoming” inexact; that is, how can one be *becoming* perfect? This confusion is why it is perhaps more useful to speak of “practising” or “exercising” as the word that describes a process in the service of perfection, rather than “becoming.”

Julia Prewitt Brown’s argument in *Jane Austen’s Novels* (1979) deconstructs Austen’s use of the term “perfect,” calling the happy endings of the novels “unsettling.” She suggests that “The paradox of truth and truth’s compromise accounts for the paradoxical mood of uncomfortable harmony with which most of the novels close” (69).

Like many of Austen's critics, Brown interprets the perspectivism of the novels as relativism, and thus has difficulty accepting the "absolute assertions of the endings" (70). Her solution is to argue that "By the time we reach the conclusion of *Pride and Prejudice* we understand the limitations of such words as 'perfect' and know how to interpret them; when we close the pages of *Emma* we have learned enough about Emma and Mr. Knightley and Highbury and life in general there to know exactly how much perfection and how much happiness are included in the narrator's 'perfect happiness'" (70). This is a dark view of the novels, and allows a more consistent irony to triumph. While Austen surely recognizes the limitations of the "perfect happiness" and wedded bliss that she alludes to in the concluding paragraph of *Emma*, it seems unlikely that she intends her readers to shake their heads sadly over the disillusionment that awaits Emma and Mr. Knightley. On the contrary, her earlier description of Mr. Knightley offers a better way of understanding her choice of these words: when he and Emma reach an understanding, "Within half an hour, he had passed from a thoroughly distressed state of mind, to something so like perfect happiness, that it could bear no other name" (*E* 432). "Perfection" in Austen's era was often a term of excess or exaggeration, but unlike some of her contemporaries, she used such words with a complex understanding of their weight. What, then, does the word "charity" mean?

If charity is not about one's own image, one's condescension to others, then how does it function in *Emma*? Is it generosity, or is it grace? I think Austen believes it should be generosity of spirit and genuine love and grace towards other people. How does one achieve the right attitude toward one's self and others, and how would one

---

<sup>123</sup> Elaine Bander thinks there is a useful distinction here: she suggests that "Perfection,

know exactly when it was right? It is, of course, a difficult balance. Emma's reaction following Mr. Elton's proposal to her causes her to repent her errors, and to resolve to behave better and more carefully in the future. She confesses to Harriet that she was wrong to have encouraged the pursuit of Mr. Elton, and this confession "completely renewed her first shame" (*E* 141). Emma thinks that "It was rather too late in the day to set about being simple-minded and ignorant; but she left [Harriet] with every previous resolution confirmed of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life" (*E* 142). Her repentance is genuine, and the turn to humility is part of the traditional response of the contrite sinner following confession, although her vow to repress imagination forever is a bit extreme, and more along the lines of Marianne Dashwood's sober plans for her cheerless virtuous future than along the pattern of Christian confession. The person confessing prays to be granted "that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings may be ordered by thy governance,"<sup>124</sup> all the while knowing that the fallen nature common to all will mean that each day we fall into some kind of sin. Emma repents, knowing that she won't be able to avoid being wrong about something else yet again. But in this situation, she confesses to Harriet, and she worries that "she should never be in charity with herself again" (*E* 141). Is it the aim of virtue to be in charity with one's self?

### Understanding and Misery

When Emma infamously chides Miss Bates at Box Hill for having to limit herself to saying only three dull things at once in response to Frank Churchill's game (364), she

---

for Austen, is not being but becoming" (*Emma: The Pique of Perfection* [1999] 161).

doesn't at first realize that she has been uncharitable. Emma carries on blindly with her conversation with Frank and Mr. Weston, and it does take Mr. Knightley's later reprimand to cause her to review her conduct. At first she "tried to laugh it off," saying that "It was not so very bad. I dare say she did not understand me" (E 374), but he explains to her the implications of her insult to someone like Miss Bates whose "situation should secure [Emma's] compassion" (E 375). Would Emma have realized this herself? Having recognized in the situation with Harriet and Mr. Elton just how wrong her behaviour could be, is Emma any more likely to see clearly the occasions on which she condescends to those around her? Perhaps she would in time have come to see the folly of treating Miss Bates this way, but moral education is slow and time-consuming as well as painful. Would it have taken her years or at least months to learn where her charity is deficient?

When during the ball at the Crown Mr. Knightley and Emma had discussed the problem of Emma's attempt to marry Harriet to Mr. Elton, Mr. Knightley's attitude was that "I shall not scold you. I leave you to your own reflections" (E 330), with Emma's subsequent question, "Can you trust me with such flatterers?—Does my vain spirit ever tell me I am wrong?" (E 330). His reply was that she could be trusted to distinguish between her vain spirit and her serious spirit: "If one leads you wrong, I am sure the other tells you of it" (E 330). Yet at Box Hill, he sees that her serious spirit has not told her of it, as he witnesses her continued attempts at amusement with the others, with no sign of apology to Miss Bates. Is he trying to save her the trouble of having to learn to come to a consciousness of her mistakes? In trying to teach her virtue, is he making her

---

<sup>124</sup> The Order for Morning Prayer, in *The Book of Common Prayer*.

moral education less painful, or more? Or is his reprimand partly the result of his own vanity: he wants Emma to be perfect too, despite his objection to Mr. Weston's clever remark that the letters "M. and A.—Em—ma" stand for perfection (*E* 371)? I think the reason he reprimands her is that he knows she won't learn by reading. She does learn by thinking things through, but it took Mr. Elton's outburst to provide the occasion for her to reconsider that situation, and there is no way that Miss Bates would ever confront Emma. There needs to be something that instigates Emma's thinking about her conduct. Mr. Knightley's speech here parallels Mr. Elton's declaration of love in that it prompts Emma to think.

There is no need for Mr. Knightley to continue to argue the point, as Emma immediately sees "[t]he truth of his representation" (*E* 376). And from here on, she is left in intellectual solitude, despite Harriet's presence in the carriage, and "Time did not compose her. As she reflected more, she seemed but to feel it more. She had never been so depressed" (*E* 376). Once she gets home, she realizes that her attitude toward her father ought to have guided her attitude toward Miss Bates. To him, she has been patient and kind in thought as well as in action. Towards Miss Bates, "She had often been remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious" (*E* 377). Mr. Knightley has chided her only for the one public remark, but Emma's conscience tells her that she has been thinking scornfully of Miss Bates all along, even while sending her pork and paying her visits. And she has spoken of her ungraciously to Harriet. In fact, Emma's own conscience is more severe in judging her thought and action than Mr. Knightley is. The realization that she has not loved her



neighbour as herself is Emma's second moment of revelation, and it is far more painful than the earlier revelation that she has misjudged the situation with Mr. Elton.

### Charity and Love

Emma's third revelation is the recognition "that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!" (*E* 408). Once again, however, it takes someone else's prompting to get her to examine her own perceptions. As soon as Harriet has revealed that she not only aspires to love Mr. Knightley, but actually has some idea that he returns her affections, Emma's mind starts working, and "A mind like her's, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress" (*E* 407). This description is important: Emma has the kind of quick mind that can analyze behaviour thoroughly. Her intelligence is sharp, but her initial perceptions are a little dull, perhaps because she is so confident of her social position that she lacks the critical impulse. From the moment Harriet tells her love, thinking is painful once more for Emma. While Harriet "give[s] the history of her hopes with great, though trembling delight," Emma's "mind was in all the perturbation that such a development of self, such a burst of threatening evil, such a confusion of sudden and perplexing emotions, must create" (*E* 408-409).

In the opening paragraphs of the novel, Jane Austen reveals that the "real evils" of "Emma's situation were the power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself" (*E* 5). Added to these evils, or perhaps a result of them, has been a resistance to thinking very deeply. The things that need to be adjusted to make the "best blessings" of her life more complete are the way she treats others, and the way she thinks of herself. Yet while it sounds reasonable, as Mr.

Knightsley says elsewhere in the novel, that “Fine dancing, I believe, like virtue, must be its own reward” (E 258), virtue in *Emma* is rewarded with more material blessings, just as fine dancing is often rewarded with a fine partner. Virtue may be worth pursuing for its own sake, but it doesn’t hurt that one’s reputation improves, or that benefits accrue to virtuous behaviour. Parallel to the two things that need to be adjusted in Emma’s world are two possible definitions of charity: Emma needs to learn to be charitable to others in thought as well as in action, and to be less forgiving of her own faults. Thinking makes her miserable, especially when she’s thinking of her own errors, but careful thought is essential to the practice of charity, and Emma comes to understand not only what her blessings mean for her own life, but what these blessings require of her in her attitude toward those who are less blessed and who suffer more. Emma has to learn to love her neighbour as herself, and to be in love and charity with her neighbours rather than with herself.

Like Fanny Price, Emma has to think hard, and negotiate the tension between knowing her own mind and heart and knowing how to behave to relatives and friends around her. Self-knowledge can conflict with charity toward one’s neighbours, but ideally one will endeavour both to know one’s self and to love God and neighbour. Emma Woodhouse experiences moments of moral recognition, and each of these three major revelations causes her to think carefully and to challenge her usual view of the world. In contrast to Elizabeth Bennet, who experiences one significant epiphany after reading Darcy’s letter, Emma undergoes three revolutions of mind in order to effect her moral education. Like Elizabeth, however, she finds that her education is prompted by the reminders the hero gives her to revisit her interpretation of the world. In *Emma*

**Austen focuses on the theological virtue of charity, and explores its meaning as the Christian love of neighbours as well as its meaning as romantic love. Emma Woodhouse learns how to think about charity, and how to live out charity in action.**

**Chapter Seven: The Unity of the Virtues in *Persuasion***

**“My temper is even, my virtues innumerable, my self unparalleled.”**

**—Jane Austen, “Jack and Alice”**

Love comes late for Anne Elliot. Like Catherine Morland, she has had to learn prudence first and love afterwards. Anne “had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older” (*P* 30). The difference is that romance comes much later for her than for Catherine. Having followed the advice of her dear friend and surrogate mother, Lady Russell, Anne has lost her lover, Frederick Wentworth, to the claims of economic prudence. While Wentworth wishes she had been firm in her resolve to love him at all costs, he has been too proud to court her again in the eight years since they parted, even though he has made a name and a fortune for himself. Anne may not have been firm—she did yield to the persuasion of a friend—but she has certainly been constant in her love for Wentworth, despite the long lapse since her refusal to marry him. She has been unhappy, but like Miss Bates, in fact, she has not been made mean or unkind by spinsterhood. She has resources of mind and spirit to support her—resources that Emma Woodhouse thinks she has herself. But Emma’s resources are not tested, whereas Anne’s are. Emma suffers and is miserable when she learns more about her own mind, but her moral education is rewarded with “perfect happiness” relatively quickly. Anne has to seek harder to know her own happiness because it seems she has forfeited her one chance at happiness through marriage.

Firmness is a central concern in *Persuasion*—or perhaps I should say firmness in resisting persuasion is a central concern for Austen in this novel. When is firmness a good thing, and how is firmness related to strength and fortitude? A number of critics have argued that *Persuasion* marks a change in Austen’s work, especially in her attitude

toward family and independence.<sup>125</sup> Rather than seeing *Persuasion* as a more passionate or more political novel than the earlier works, however, I think this novel provides clues to Austen's Aristotelian and Christian view of virtue, which can help to illuminate the other novels and explain how Austen sees the virtues in harmony as well as in tension with one another.<sup>126</sup> *Persuasion* investigates firmness, fortitude, and hope, and while like the previous novels it looks at tensions and problems related to pride, amiability, and civility, it also takes up the question of constancy and explores how faith, hope, and love make the practice of classical virtue possible.

### Firmness

The central tension between Anne Elliot and Captain Wentworth has been over the relative merits of persuadability and firmness of mind. Wentworth confides his abiding belief in firmness to Louisa Musgrove, whose “character of decision and

---

<sup>125</sup> Those who see *Persuasion* as a departure from the previous novels include Litz, Duckworth, Auerbach (cited in Morgan, *In the Meantime* 169), and Monaghan, Poovey, and Tanner (cited in Wiltshire 157); see also Jane Millgate's article “Prudential Lovers and Lost Heirs: *Persuasion* and the Presence of Scott” (1996), and Christopher Clausen's recent article “Jane Austen Changes Her Mind” (1999). The most common term applied to *Persuasion* has been Lionel Trilling's description of the novel as “autumnal.” Recent critics have challenged this description, however, suggesting instead that Austen shifts her political focus onto the democratic virtues of the navy. I agree with John Wiltshire (*Jane Austen and the Body*) and Susan Morgan (*In the Meantime*), who argue that *Persuasion* is very much of a piece with Austen's previous novels. Wiltshire objects to readings of *Persuasion* that see this novel as “anticipating the modern, or even postmodern, conviction of the relativity of all value and perception,” and suggests that such readings are most likely “motivated by the still-lingering embarrassment that a novel should be ... ‘only a novel’” (159).

<sup>126</sup> Julia Prewitt Brown argues in her article “Private and Public in *Persuasion*” (1996) that in this novel “no Aristotelian ethical mean is put forth as a solution” to the ethical dilemmas raised; however, as I shall argue in this chapter, *Persuasion* is actually more explicit about the importance of finding the mean and acting according to it than the earlier novels are.

firmness” he praises over her sister Henrietta’s lack of resolution: “It is the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it can be depended on,” he says, and concludes, “Let those who would be happy be firm” (P 88). Quite apart from the irony of Wentworth’s theory that Louisa should persuade her sister to resist persuasion, this reflection of his recalls his own inability to succeed in persuading Anne not to be persuaded by Lady Russell. What Wentworth doesn’t yet recognize is that Anne does have a strong mind, a stronger and more enduring kind of firmness than any of the women around her. When he describes to his sister Mrs. Croft the kind of woman who could capture his heart he lists “A little beauty and a few smiles, and a few compliments to the navy” as the only requirements, but when he “more than seriously described” the woman he would like to marry, “A strong mind, with sweetness of manner’, made the first and last of the description” (P 62). Austen says that when he thinks of these qualities, “Anne Elliot was not out of his thoughts” (P 62), and yet we know that he thinks her mind is not strong or firm enough; presumably he is looking for a woman who possesses Anne’s virtues, with the added attraction of firmness.

After Louisa’s fall, Anne contemplates Wentworth’s adherence to the absolute virtue of firmness:

Anne wondered whether it ever occurred to him now, to question the justness of his own previous opinion as to the universal felicity and advantage of firmness of character and whether it might not strike him that, like all other qualities of the mind, it should have its proportions and limits. She thought it could scarcely escape him to feel that a persuadable

temper might sometimes be as much in favour of happiness as a very resolute character. (*P* 116)

Austen's reference to the proportions and limits on desirable qualities recalls Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Though Wentworth himself doesn't know it, he does think that to be sometimes persuadable is a good thing, as he has recommended that Louisa persuade Henrietta to be firm. Perhaps one of the reasons he dislikes the idea of persuasion is that in the situation where it most mattered to him, he failed to persuade Anne to marry him against all opposition. He comes to value Anne's decisiveness as exemplified in her response to the accident at Lyme, and he consults her as to the best way of breaking the news to the Musgroves, showing a "deference for her judgement" (*P* 117) that suggests he might almost be persuaded by her if her opinion in this case were to be different from his own.

In conversation at the concert in Bath, Wentworth confesses to Anne his sense of responsibility for Louisa's fall, and in doing so suggests that his values have not changed: "It had been my doing, solely mine. She would not have been obstinate if I had not been weak" (*P* 183). He appears to criticize his own lack of firmness rather than Louisa's too firm resolution. Such a reading would imply that Wentworth has learned little from the accident, and that he has not begun to question the universal justice of firmness. However, when this confession and explanation are read in light of his previous engagement to Anne, and of his further reflections on his own pride at the conclusion of Chapter 23, it becomes clear that Wentworth has reconsidered his own character. He comes late to an understanding of himself: "I was proud, too proud to ask again" (*P* 247), he exclaims when he realizes that his own self-will has been the cause of six and a



half years of their separation, and Lady Russell's persuasion in the name of prudence was really only responsible for separating them for two years, the length of an ordinary long engagement. Just as he takes responsibility for the consequences of Louisa's stubbornness, he sees himself as blamable for having been too weak, too proud, and too confident in his assessment of Anne as proud and weak herself to propose to her after he achieves some financial independence.

Thus Wentworth has come to question firmness, and in doing so has learned something of Anne's Aristotelianism, as well as of her Stoic fortitude and Christian patience and humility. As Austen summarizes his explanation to Anne of what happened to him after the events at Lyme, "he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind" (*P* 242). His education means that Anne's "character was now fixed on his mind as perfection itself, maintaining the loveliest medium of fortitude and gentleness" (*P* 241). It is Wentworth, not Anne, who must change in this novel. Juliet McMaster points out that Anne acts as a tutor to a number of characters in the novel, including Wentworth (*Jane Austen on Love* [1978] 59). This is in contrast to Elizabeth and Darcy, who must both readjust their pride in relation to their ideals of justice, and it is more like the union of Emma and Mr. Knightley, where Emma is the one who must alter her behaviour to become virtuous. Yet Anne is a more nearly perfect arbiter of justice than Mr. Knightley, and because of her perfections she is often read as less lovable than his imperfect Emma. She is, however, more loving. She is patient with the foolishness of her family and friends and she is faithful to the Christian ideal of charity: "Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not

itself, is not puffed up” (I Corinthians 13:4). Although Anne resembles Fanny Price in her kindness and adherence to moral principles, and although both women exemplify the virtue of constancy, Anne is more hopeful than Fanny.

### Hope and Fortitude

For Anne, the primary virtue is hope. Although it may seem that she resists a temptation to hope, in that she hardly dares allow herself to think that Wentworth might renew his addresses to her, what she is avoiding is false hope, or expectation. She maintains her spirits and her very existence by not succumbing to the temptation to despair, even surrounded as she is by a cold family and wounded as she has been by her past disappointment. Elizabeth Bowen writes of Anne that “Endlessly, if she so willed, she could fret and brood. But no: she shows an unbroken though gentle spirit and, with that, a calm which does not fail” (“*Persuasion*” [1957] 166-67). She is patient, she is kind, and she has faith and hope. Being with the Musgrove family lends support to her spirits: as Isobel Grundy writes, Anne “does not wait to be loved and happy before she can be amused; she begins to feel this way as soon as she begins to mix at large in society. Indeed for lifting her melancholy and offering her resources, being anxiously in love seems almost as effective as being happily in love” (“*Persuasion: or, The Triumph of Cheerfulness*” [1996] 9). Grundy locates Anne’s happiness in her cheerfulness, however;<sup>127</sup> I would situate it instead in the virtue of hope.

In *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction* (1980), Susan Morgan argues that Anne hopes, and she too suggests that it is a hope not merely

---

<sup>127</sup> Elaine Showalter says it’s optimism (“Retrenchments” [1996] 189).

for an eventual reunion with Captain Wentworth, but also because she loves other people. It is in her engagement with other minds, other spirits, that she finds happiness. Morgan writes, “That is her hope for the future on which her strength depends. That is her self-love” (189-90). But self-love and hope won’t fit together so neatly. Anne’s hope is something outside herself: if it exists at all, it is inspired by and directed toward something other than her self. If it were a selfish kind of hope, it would be simply for that reunion with Wentworth. In contrast to Grundy’s, Morgan’s, and my own readings of Anne, A. Walton Litz argues that Anne experiences the “despair” of the “modern ‘personality’” (qtd. in Wiltshire 178). John Wiltshire argues against despair, saying that for Anne “there is no terror in her comparative emotional isolation, and her self-reflection and self-consciousness are depicted as at least in part a strength, a resource” (178). According to Aristotle, it is necessary to love one’s self before loving another in friendship, but that self-love is a love of one’s best or higher self—it is not selfishness.<sup>128</sup>

The supreme value of hope is reinforced for Anne in her friendship with Mrs. Smith, who has far less reason than Anne to hope for happiness in her future life. Anne observes the vitality of her friend’s spirits, and “finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only” (P 154). Perhaps Anne has in mind her own strength and acceptance of her fate when she reflects that “A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more;

---

<sup>128</sup> For further discussions of the classical idea of love of self, see Basil Willey, *The English Moralists* (1965) 64, and Julia Annas, *The Morality of Happiness* (1993) 127. Although Michel Foucault has written about love of self as *The Care of the Self* (Volume 3 [1984] of *The History of Sexuality*), his idea of self-love is as an end in itself, not as a way to improve friendship and the love of another person. He is interested in an art of the self that “emphasizes the importance of developing all the practices and all the

here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning readily from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from nature alone" (*P* 154). Anne's understanding of the value of employment confirms that she herself has passed through the initial stages of resignation and fortitude after her broken engagement, and she has found the kind of "elasticity of mind" in which hope can thrive. Her relief at being thought helpful to her sister Mary (*P* 33), and her way of serving others by playing the piano at the Musgroves—despite her tears, "she was extremely glad to be employed" (*P* 71)—and finally her "strength, and zeal, and thought" in the moments after Louisa's fall (*P* 111) demonstrate that she has not given in to despair and unhappiness, and that while she cannot live as she would like, she nevertheless is capable of action.

Austen's use of the word "elasticity," and the high value both she and Anne place on Mrs. Smith's ability to maintain this quality of mind through all adversity, suggests an understanding of hope and virtue as dispositions that can never be fixed or static. Mrs. Smith's hope, which is called "the choicest gift of Heaven" (*P* 154), is something that must be exercised to be strong. It is no more possible to maintain a strong mind without exercising it than it is to preserve strong muscles. Anne thinks of this gift as one of the qualities of mercy that come from heaven—it is a "merciful appointment" (*P* 154). The description of Mrs. Smith's virtues has been described as "what is probably [Austen's] most explicit statement of Christian virtues,"<sup>129</sup> but the emphasis on strength and elasticity also has to do with Stoic virtue, the determination to withstand the fluctuations

---

exercises by which one can maintain self-control and eventually arrive at a pure enjoyment of oneself" (238).

<sup>129</sup> Roger Gard, *Jane Austen: Emma and Persuasion* [1985] 89.

of fortune, and with the exercise of Aristotelian virtue. In his book *Jane Austen and the Body* (1992), John Wiltshire remarks as well on the influence of the Stoic tradition in *Persuasion*:

The exclusively male ethics and practices developed during the first centuries of Christendom become, in the eighteenth and nineteenth, a means by which the socially disempowered woman converts her powerlessness into self-definition. Though not codified formally, enough features of the stoic regimen are displayed incidentally in the first volume of *Persuasion* to demonstrate that Anne Elliot has absorbed many of the characteristic exercises through which the Stoics both guarded and constituted the self . . . . Her attempts to ‘harden’ herself are a version of the Stoic’s armour against calamity. (175-76)

One such attempt appears early on when Anne is passed over as a companion for her sister Elizabeth in Bath, and Mrs. Clay is chosen instead: “Anne herself was hardened to such affronts, but she felt all the imprudence of the arrangement quite as keenly as Lady Russell” (P 34). The transition from masculine to feminine stoicism is recorded in Jane West’s *Letters to a Young Lady* (1806). West advocates that “Patient fortitude and strength of mind . . . is not masculine, but angelical” (qtd. in Wiltshire 168). Mary Astell as well, writing specifically about wives and husbands in “Some Reflections on Marriage” (1694) proclaims that

There is not a surer sign of a noble mind, a mind very far advanced towards perfection, than the being able to bear contempt and an unjust treatment from one’s superiors evenly and patiently. For inward worth

and real excellency are the true ground of superiority, and one person is not in reality better than another, but as he is more wise and good. (2281)

Anne exemplifies the inward excellences of fortitude, patience, and elasticity.

### Vain, but Agreeable

Anne has far more in common with Mrs. Smith than with either of her own sisters. Her sister Elizabeth lives by a code determined not by what is good, but by what is pleasant, and that to herself alone. Called upon by family duty to show some form of hospitality to the Musgroves when they are in Bath, Elizabeth undergoes an internal struggle, because she can't bear to have the Musgroves witness the inferiority of the Elliots' situation in Bath as it would be evidenced during a formal dinner. And, "for a short time," she suffers "a good deal," before deciding on an evening party instead: "It was a struggle between propriety and vanity; but vanity got the better, and then Elizabeth was happy again" (P 219). Here Austen makes use of the language in which virtue involves tension and struggle, but for Elizabeth this struggle is a conventional one between good and evil, the virtues of propriety and the vices of self-interest. For her, as for her father Sir Walter Elliot, "Vanity was the beginning and end" of character (P 4).<sup>130</sup> Inger Sigrun (Thomsen) Brodey argues that in *Persuasion* Austen follows Hume in suggesting that vanity can lead to virtue (1993 and 2000). But while Brodey may be right that vanity is not always completely wrong, because proper pride can be virtuous, pure vanity is selfishness. Recalling the importance of truthfulness as discussed in Chapter

---

<sup>130</sup> Wiltshire notes the correspondence between Sir Walter's ideas of beauty and behaviour and John Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*: Lavater neatly

Three on *Sense and Sensibility*, I think that proper pride has to do with a correct and accurate estimation of one's own abilities. Negotiating tensions that surround the social virtue of truthfulness has to do with accurately gauging one's own worth as well as with deciding when honesty is more important than civility. Elizabeth Elliot, like Sir Walter, is interested in propriety and vanity, rather than civility and truthfulness.

The hypocritical character of Mr. William Elliot poses some difficulties of interpretation for Anne and for Austen's readers. Like Elizabeth and Sir Walter Elliot, he is proud, but that he "judged for himself in everything essential" (*P* 146) is a mark in his favour, as are the attributes of being "sensible," "agreeable," and "a man of principle" (*P* 160). His present conduct to Anne's family seems proper—"He certainly knew what was right, nor could she fix on any one article of moral duty evidently transgressed"—and still Anne cannot explain the inconsistency of his previous with his current behaviour (*P* 161). She suspects that bad habits die hard, and she even makes the Evangelical complaint that one of those bad habits has been "Sunday travelling" (159). Anne's conversations with and judgements of Mr. Elliot make clear the difficulty of assessing virtue or vice adequately. She can see that he is proud, but she isn't yet sure what kind of pride he has. He is proud, but seems amiable.

She wants to leave open the possibility that her cousin could change, and so instead of basing her distrust of him on events from the past, she fixes on his current sensibilities as the subject of her criticism: "Mr. Elliot was rational, discreet, polished, but he was not open" (*P* 161). This sounds at first like a complaint of Marianne Dashwood regarding the evils of the reserved character, but Anne's criticism goes deeper

---

summarizes that "virtue and vice, with all their shades, and in their most remote

than Marianne's would, for she concludes her early analysis of Mr. Elliot's character with the judgement that he "was too generally agreeable. Various as were the tempers in her father's house, he pleased them all" (*P* 161). How can agreeableness be considered a bad thing? Here Anne's judgement resembles Mr. Knightley's judgement of Frank Churchill, who he thinks may be "aimable," but not truly amiable. Aristotle's theory of amiability requires that we behave alike to intimates and to strangers, and so it may seem odd that one might be "too generally agreeable." But Mr. Elliot, though he may be adept at judging for himself, and though he has judged Mrs. Clay to be contemptible in her designs on Sir Walter, persists in behaving excessively agreeably to all, without regard for the individual claims of each person's situation or understanding. In this he is like Frank Churchill or Mr. Weston, or Sir John Middleton.<sup>131</sup>

Once again, amiability is an extraordinarily difficult balancing act that takes into consideration what is due to each person, not solely on the basis of birth or fortune, but on the basis of understanding and value. Sir Walter is famously blind to the value of his middle daughter: "Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was nobody with either father or sister; her word had no weight, her convenience was always to give way—she was only Anne" (*P* 5).<sup>132</sup> "Only Anne" here is like "only a novel" in *Northanger*

---

consequences, are beauty and deformity" (qtd. in Wiltshire 162-63).

<sup>131</sup> Somehow, though, excessive amiability is less forgivable in a young man than in an older man. Austen is far more critical of Mr. Elliot and Frank Churchill than she is of Frank's father or Sir John. It is the pretensions of a man of "three-and-twenty" to be wise and benevolent, as Mr. Knightley complains, that are insufferable (*E* 150).

<sup>132</sup> In an article on "The Slow Process of *Persuasion*" (1996), Judith Terry argues that although "We recognise easily enough on a first reading how Anne is excluded by her family and their friends ... we are much less likely to notice how she is also squeezed out of the text, how the text itself seems calculated to make everyone else seem—not



*Abbey*—only the sweetest, kindest, most elegant and intelligent woman in *Persuasion*.

Mr. Elliot, like Wickham, has been dissolute in the past and has been succeeding in recent society on the basis of good manners and the appearance of virtue. The difference here, however, is that while the inhabitants of Longbourn and Meryton accept Wickham's goodness in ignorance of his past, the Elliot family is much more to blame for receiving and encouraging the flatteries of someone they know to have behaved badly towards them and in general in the past.

Mrs. Smith is the means of confirming for Anne what no one else in her family has suspected or remembered, and that is that Mr. Elliot's old maxim rules his life now as it did in previous years: as Mrs. Smith says, "To do the best for himself' passed as a duty" (P 202). Mr. Elliot may have matured into a greater sense of the importance of respectability as well as of financial gain in the interests of self, but his mode of acting has changed very little beneath the veneer of assumed good breeding. Anne suspects that he is guilty only of the fault of not being open: "There was never any burst of feeling, any warmth of indignation or delight, at the evil or good of others" (P 161). Irving Massey has posited in his book *Find You the Virtue* (1987) that "the ethical man is always indignant" (185); I think his statement should be qualified, and therefore suggest instead that the ethical man is sometimes indignant, at the right time, and for the right reasons. To be sure, ethics is always, as Massey says, "under siege" somewhere, but to be indignant always is to risk inaction *and* rash judgement. The proof of Mr. Elliot's consistently negative character comes in the letter Mrs. Smith shows Anne, an occasion

---

*better*—but more interesting" (126). However, if we perceive, with Jane Austen's direction, how Anne is squeezed out by family and friends, then the text is *not* squeezing her out.

which Anne realizes transgresses a code of honour: “She was obliged to recollect that her seeing the letter was a violation of the laws of honour, that no one ought to be judged or to be known by such testimonies, that no private correspondence could bear the eye of others” (*P* 204). Despite this breaking of the rules, however, Anne must judge what is most important, most tending toward virtue, in this situation.

Like Elinor Dashwood, like Fanny Price, Anne has to struggle with all the strong moral principles she holds in order to determine which principle is most important in a given situation. Situations such as this one demonstrate how Austen’s characters inhabit a world where there is a whole range of virtues related to every act, every character. Aware of the range of virtues, the educated heroines choose how to balance the claims of different virtues, in the most virtuous way. They do not choose from a list of virtues or rules, and decide which one to apply—the virtues are not a grab bag of possibilities—but they aspire to approach life as a process of making judgements and decisions in the way that best maintains harmonious unity among the virtues. In this case in *Persuasion*, the code of honour that protects a man’s private life and letters conflicts with the attempt of two women to establish the truth. In this case, truth must win in order for Anne to preserve her own character, and to separate herself and her family from the designs of Mr. Elliot. Honesty is shown to be more important than a code of honour, and the real virtue of truth triumphs over mere rules, not merely for the pragmatic preservation of the Elliot pride, but for the greater good. For Anne, as for Elizabeth Bennet, character is complex and difficult, but not impossible, to interpret.

### Constancy

In her well-known discussion with Captain Harville about the nature of constancy, Anne Elliot engages with questions about philosophical authority. It is Captain Harville, not Anne, who anticipates the objection that the books he would quote (if he could but remember them) on the subject of “‘woman’s inconstancy’” were all written by men (*P* 234). And in her response on the difference between men and women as to who loves longest, Anne insists that she not be misunderstood, and that she is far from claiming constancy as a solely female virtue. Answering Harville’s argument that “‘all histories are against you—all stories, prose and verse,’” Anne agrees that “‘Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything’” (*P* 234).

Metaphorically taking the pen into her own hands just moments after Captain Wentworth’s “pen had fallen down” (*P* 233) while he was writing his letter(s), Anne argues that the difference in constancy has to do with the presence of an “‘object’”; that is, that although men may be “‘capable of everything good and great in their married lives,’” they are less likely than women to love when hope, or the life of the beloved, is gone (*P* 235). In dismissing the authority of books Anne appears to rely on women’s experiences: she says that both men and women will tend to build on the “‘bias towards our own sex’” and to interpret anecdotes from within their own circles in light of that bias (*P* 234). Yet she admits that often these experiences will be “‘precisely such as cannot be brought forward without betraying a confidence, or in some respect, saying what should not be said’” (*P* 234). Thus, although she has dispensed with tradition as a judge of the

virtue of constancy, she has not given a single instance of experience in favour of her argument that women are more constant than men. The reader and Captain Wentworth, who overhears her, know it is from her own experience that she speaks, but Captain Harville does not, and he bases his acceptance of her conclusion on the fact that “when I think of Benwick, my tongue is tied” (*P* 236). Neither Anne nor Harville alludes to Louisa as an example of inconstancy, despite the fact that Harville was not the only observer who had considered Louisa and Wentworth to be as good as engaged (*P* 242-43).

Is constancy more a female virtue than a male virtue? Captain Wentworth proves ultimately to have been constant in his love for Anne, though admittedly “he had been constant unconsciously, nay unintentionally; . . . he had meant to forget her, and believed it to be done” (*P* 241). Charles Hayter’s constancy in his regard for Henrietta Musgrove outlasts her inconsistent temporary preference for Wentworth even though he “had met with much to disquiet and mortify him in his cousin’s behaviour” (*P* 77), and once Louisa has persuaded her sister to fix her affections, Henrietta and Charles are reunited. But Anne’s later assessment of the necessity of an object would be right in this case: Charles still has an object and a reason for his constancy, as Henrietta “had too old a regard for him to be so wholly estranged as might in two meetings extinguish every past hope” (*P* 77).

What Anne claims for women is the virtue “of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone!” (*P* 235). She is surely thinking of herself when she imagines a woman loving a man long after his death, in contrast to Benwick’s short-lived mourning for Fanny Harville. She has imagined, during an earlier conversation at Uppercross, what

her feelings would have been had she read of the death of “a gallant Captain Wentworth,” as he describes it, “in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspaper” (P 66). But has she really lost all hope? She may have lost the power of seeing Wentworth as a possible object of matrimonial desire, but even during the eight years of their estrangement she knew that he was alive, and in recent months she has been seeing him as a very present object, while at the same time trying not to love him. Despite her early disappointment and loss of the hope that he would ever be her husband, she has not lost all hope.

Anne may not credit histories of women’s inconstancy, but she has been obliged nevertheless to rely on the male-authored word for news of Wentworth in the intervening years: “She had only navy lists and newspapers for her authority, but she could not doubt his being rich; and, in favour of his constancy, she had no reason to believe him married” (P 30). As Jocelyn Harris has noted, Anne is like Chaucer’s Wife of Bath in her suspicion of men’s tales of women,<sup>133</sup> and I believe that Jane Austen is like Chaucer in her exploration in *Persuasion* of whether birth or behaviour is the source of true nobility and virtue. Both Austen and Chaucer suggest that it is behaviour rather than the accident of birth that makes for a noble character. But Jane Austen, like any great writer, never merely represents or incorporates writers or ideas of the past; and her articulation of the tradition of the virtues is something she has made her own.

---

<sup>133</sup> The Wife of Bath swears,  
 By God! If women hadde write stories,  
 As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
 They wold han written of men more wikkednesse  
 Than all the mark of Adam may redresse!  
 (*The Wife of Bath’s Prologue and Tale* 693-96).

I have analyzed the importance of constancy in *Persuasion* because it has been said that this virtue is Austen's extension of the tradition (MacIntyre 241-43). Although I think Alasdair MacIntyre is right that Austen stresses constancy as virtuous, constancy is not a new virtue, but the natural consequence of uniting the classical virtue of fortitude with the Christian virtue of hope. Austen is Aristotelian, and she is also Christian. David Fott argues that Austen "leaves us to decide for ourselves whether it is possible to reconcile Aristotle and Christianity" (29); however, Austen is not an ambivalent writer, and I believe it is through constancy and faith in *Persuasion* that she demonstrates the unity of the virtues. Constancy is a result of the union of the classical and Christian traditions. Another way of looking at constancy, however, is to see it as the faith on which all the virtues are grounded. Anne Elliot is able to be constant because she is strong and hopeful, but prior to the exercise of these virtues, she has faith. Her strength is not just stoicism, and her hope is not just romantic. She has faith in something larger than herself, larger than her own life; that is, she has faith in God. In *Persuasion*, as in Austen's other novels—aside from *Lady Susan*—religious faith underlies the virtues of the heroines. As Lesley Willis argues, "An affirmation of the fundamental importance of God in Jane Austen's fictional world is to be found in her references to prayer, for no one can pray to an abstraction." Referring to the aftermath of Louisa's fall at Lyme, Willis says that in *Persuasion* "prayer is seen as the heartfelt response of people of faith to a crisis" ("Religion in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*" [1987] 68).<sup>134</sup> Not surprisingly, Anne has more faith in God than in man.

---

<sup>134</sup> Willis also suggests that in *Sense and Sensibility* and *Mansfield Park* especially Austen demonstrates "both that religion vitalizes and sustains community and that lack of religious faith, and the morality which attends it, lead to isolation" (69).

She is sceptical about male writers on constancy not just because they are male, but because they are human and prone to distort truth. Austen raises the question of whether constancy is a gender-specific virtue, but Anne's argument in favour of women's superior constancy is not borne out by the text. Wentworth is shown to be just as constant in his enduring love, if not as conscious of it, as Anne is, and other characters in the novel, both men and women, demonstrate the more common behaviour of human inconsistency in love. As Wickham would like to have it in *Pride and Prejudice*, "We are none of us consistent" (*PP* 81). But some are consistent, and that both Anne and Wentworth prove to be so despite vicissitudes suggests that the ideal is possible. And Anne's rejection of the authoritative male writers, which is ironically instigated by Captain Harville presuming to speak for her, is contradicted by her famous injunction to Captain Benwick that he study the works of "our best moralists" in order to "fortify the mind by the highest precepts and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurances" (*P* 101).<sup>135</sup> For Austen, male authority is worth questioning, but not necessarily dismissing; and the conventionally female virtue of constancy is neither limited to women's love, nor superior to male virtues.<sup>136</sup>

Austenian constancy in *Persuasion* is not so much an extension of Aristotelian and Christian tradition as it is part of a unification of the two traditions. Constancy is closely related to faith: Anne has kept faith with the one she loves, and has done so because she has faith in the theological virtues. She is loving, hopeful, and faithful.

---

<sup>135</sup> Anne does not specify male moralists, but it is probable that she is thinking of such writers as Johnson, Sherlock, Bishop Butler, Samuel Clarke, and William Law (*Devlin* 49).

*Persuasion* raises the problem of firmness and then shows that elasticity and flexibility are more important to the practise of virtue than is firm adherence to rules. Flexibility does not imply relativism, however, as in this novel it has to do with the adaptability that hope gives to fortitude. The classical virtues are thus revived in Austen's work through the theological virtues. Far from reading *Persuasion* as a departure from the ideas Austen puts forth in her earlier novels, I see her last completed novel as a continuation of her work towards uniting classical and Christian traditions. In its focus on constancy, flexibility, and the elasticity of hope, the novel can even help to illuminate the earlier novels. *Persuasion* is in fact Austen's clearest articulation of her interest in both classical and Christian virtues, as the passages on the proportions and limits of Wentworth's idea of firmness, and on Mrs. Smith's elasticity and hope demonstrate. If she had lived to revise this novel, perhaps she would have made the references to virtue more subtle, as they are in other novels, but as it is in *Persuasion*, we have references to balancing the claims of virtue, and to the importance of flexibility in the practise of virtue. While *Pride and Prejudice* offers the best examples of how to practise the virtues, and *Mansfield Park* reveals Austen's strongest heroine in the act of philosophical contemplation, *Persuasion* contains the closest thing to an explicit theory of the unity of classical and Christian virtues.

---

<sup>136</sup> Isobel Grundy observes in "*Persuasion: or, the Triumph of Cheerfulness*" that "Throughout this novel, men and women repeatedly contradict the stereotypes of what male and female ought to be" (9).



**Conclusion: “After Austen”**

**“Even people whose lives have been made various by learning, sometimes find it hard to keep a fast hold on their habitual views of life, on their faith in the Invisible . . . .”**

**—George Eliot, *Silas Marner***

What happens to the virtues after Austen? There is certainly an Austen-inspired tradition of the country-house novel and/or the novel of manners,<sup>137</sup> but is there a tradition of novels after Austen that represent the classical and theological virtues as a coherent, positive, and flexible tradition of ethical thought and behaviour? When MacIntyre addresses this question, he suggests Henry James as the author after Austen who has the best claim to the continuation of the tradition, yet he qualifies this possibility by pointing out that by the time James was writing, the “substance of morality was increasingly elusive” (243). Robert B. Pippin argues in *Henry James and Modern Moral Life* (2000) that James wrote in a time of “historical crisis . . . which greatly complicated our moral assessments of each other.” Pippin suggests that this “complexity has to do with the increasing unavailability of what we used to be able to rely on in interpreting and assessing each other” (11).<sup>138</sup> A common language of morality becomes harder and harder to find. For James, as for Edith Wharton, also a novelist of morals and manners, ethical thought is tremendously important, but incredibly difficult, almost to the point of being impossible.

If James is part of the possible tradition of the virtues after Austen, is this tradition related to the “Great Tradition” of English novelists that F.R. Leavis famously identified? In some ways, yes, as George Eliot also stresses the importance of the moral life in her novels, and Leavis included both James and Eliot in his book.<sup>139</sup> One of the defining

---

<sup>137</sup> For a discussion of the country-house novel after Austen, see Clara Tuite’s article “Decadent Austen Entails: Forster, James, Firbank, and the ‘Queer Taste’ of *Sanditon*” in *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees* (2000).

<sup>138</sup> See also Kenneth Graham, *Indirections of the Novel: James, Conrad, Forster* (1988).

<sup>139</sup> Leavis argues that the tradition extends from Jane Austen through George Eliot, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad, with the possible inclusion of Charles Dickens and D.H. Lawrence. His book *The Great Tradition* treats Eliot, James, and Conrad, and includes

characteristics of a “great” novelist was, for Leavis, moral seriousness.<sup>140</sup> He did not include Edith Wharton in his list, but in my view, the best candidates for the “great, effective, imaginative voice” for the continuation of the tradition of the virtues after Austen are Eliot, James, and Wharton, although there are certainly many other writers who represent aspects of the tradition, and many who try to capture something of the harmony of that tradition even in the midst of the uncertainty of the postmodern world. In this conclusion, therefore, I begin with a brief look at how these first three writers approach the virtues, go on to suggest possible areas for fruitful future research on the novel after Austen in relation to the virtues, and conclude with my assessment of Austen’s achievement.

### George Eliot

George Eliot, like Jane Austen, clearly sees the dangers of a life lived according to an inflexible moral code. In *Silas Marner* (1861), she describes the coldly regulated ethical life of Nancy Lammeter, later Mrs. Godfrey Cass:

It was as necessary to her mind to have an opinion on all topics, not exclusively masculine, that had come under her notice, as for her to have a precisely marked place for every article of her personal property: and her

---

brief discussions of Dickens and Lawrence. The mention of Jane Austen is cursory, even though she inaugurates this tradition, probably because Q.D. Leavis had done extensive work on Austen’s novels and at one point planned a book on Austen (which never appeared).

<sup>140</sup> To analyze the differences between Leavis’s “Great Tradition” and the tradition of writers who represent the range of the virtues, however, would require more space than this conclusion permits; and my focus in this dissertation is primarily on Austen’s engagement with the tradition that precedes her, rather than with defining a canon of moral writers who follow her.

opinions were always principles to be unwaveringly acted on. They were firm, not because of their basis, but because she held them with a tenacity inseparable from her mental action. On all the duties and proprieties of life, from filial behaviour to the arrangements of the evening toilet, pretty Nancy Lammeter, by the time she was three-and-twenty, had her unalterable little code, and had formed every one of her habits in strict accordance with that code. She carried these decided judgements within her in the most unobtrusive way: they rooted themselves in her mind, and grew there as quietly as grass. (216)

In describing Nancy, Eliot nicely characterizes the subtle way in which ethics can become prematurely fixed and inflexible. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Eliot criticizes the inadequacy of ethical systems advocated by the “men of maxims” (403).<sup>141</sup> In this novel Maggie Tulliver provides a stunning criticism of her brother Tom’s unchristian and uncharitable belief in his own righteousness, thereby suggesting what the preferable path to true virtue might be. Maggie tells Tom, ““You boast of your virtues as if they purchased you a right to be cruel and unmanly as you’ve been today”” (283); she chides him for having ““no pity””:

“you have no sense of your own imperfection and your own sins. It is a sin to be hard; it is not fitting for a mortal—for a Christian. You are nothing but a Pharisee. You thank God for nothing but your own virtues—you think they are great enough to win you everything else. You

---

<sup>141</sup> See Mary Jacobus, “The Problem of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*” (1983).

have not even a vision of feelings by the side of which your shining virtues are mere darkness!" (282)

Tom's assurance of his own virtues is excessive; just as Benjamin Franklin needed to be reminded by a friend to add "Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates" (150) to his list of the virtues to strive for, Tom needs to learn how to rate his own virtues more reasonably and more humbly.

Maggie's outburst here signals a central concern in George Eliot's fiction generally, which is the importance of sympathy. The thrust of Maggie's criticism, however, is not that Tom needs to learn more about the range of rightly practised virtues, which would make him more humble and more kind to others, but that the route to virtue is found through sympathy to the feelings of others. The imperative to sympathize is a consistent theme in Eliot's novels, as writers such as Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth (1985) and James Eli Adams (1991) have argued. Although this is not the place to analyze in detail the implications of the importance of sympathy for Eliot's characters, I do think that sympathy becomes the primary virtue in the world of these novels, not replacing the range of the virtues entirely, but displacing them in importance to become the reigning moral duty. Sympathy is the alternative to faith as the grounding of all virtue, and without it ethical behaviour is not possible.

One of the few characters to criticize the concept of sympathy is Will Ladislaw, who argues against Dorothea's conviction that "'I should like to make life beautiful—I mean everybody's life'" (152) by saying,

"I call that the fanaticism of sympathy. . . . If you carried it out you ought to be miserable in your own goodness, and turn evil that you might have

no advantage over others. The best piety is to enjoy—when you can. . . . I suspect that you have some false belief in the virtues of misery, and want to make your life a martyrdom” (153).

Although Will Ladislaw is right in this instance, he is not the moral authority in *Middlemarch*. The moral authority is Dorothea, among the characters, and above all it is the narrator. And the narrator’s primary lesson to the reader—through the narrative technique of alternating storylines chapter by chapter in order to show how to understand other people’s lives, and through explicit interventions that enjoin the reader to imagine the feelings of the less likeable characters—is that it is the reader’s duty to sympathize with other people, whether fictional or real. As Rohan Maitzen writes, “Over and over . . . *Middlemarch* challenges the assumption that a single point of view suffices for understanding. Just as individual characters learn by revisiting, rethinking, what they have seen or done, the novel and its implied author enact the moral obligation to see things from a different angle” (“The Moral Life of *Middlemarch*: Martha Nussbaum and George Eliot’s Philosophical Fiction” [2001] 43). In *Middlemarch*, Dorothea does ultimately renounce the “fanaticism of sympathy,” choosing to moderate her devotion to the needs of others, but although she does not become a martyr to Casaubon’s work after his death, she turns her talents toward sympathetic support of Will in his political activities, and as many critics have argued, her powers are not really challenged in this new sphere.

George Eliot makes sympathy not just the first of the virtues, but also the end of the virtues. Sympathy is not necessarily the path through to the other virtues, including justice and faith, but more often an all-encompassing virtue that is related to love, but

even more closely related to tolerance. In Eliot's novels, faith is discussed explicitly and frequently, because it is often either lost or endangered. In her life, faith had already disappeared, and moral duty alone remained. She may have hope that the education in sympathy will prove effective, but the melancholy mode of her work suggests that she does not entirely believe that humanist optimism will triumph.<sup>142</sup> This is perhaps why the virtue of sympathy in her novels does not function as an aspect of the range of classical and theological virtues.

### Henry James

What is missing from Henry James's novels is, I think, hope. James values the ethical awareness of his characters very highly, perhaps too highly. His characters analyze, agonize, and make excruciatingly careful discriminations about ethics, but they rarely act, and they have little confidence that ethical deliberation will lead to positive ends, let alone to happiness and fulfillment. Defining a character as virtuous is not sufficient as a key to character either, as the case of Madame Merle demonstrates in *The Portrait of A Lady* (1881). Ralph Touchett identifies her as someone who "pushes the search for perfection too far— . . . her merits are in themselves overstrained," and he tells Isabel Archer that "She's indescribably blameless; a pathless desert of virtue" (204). In many of the novels of previous writers, the characterization of a woman as perfectly virtuous might make her seem dull, but at least one would know that she could

---

<sup>142</sup> An anonymous reviewer for the *British Quarterly Review* wrote in 1873 that "The melancholy at the heart of [*Middlemarch*], no criticism of course can attenuate, for that is of its essence. George Eliot means to draw noble natures, struggling hard against the currents of a poor kind of world, and without any trust in any invisible rock higher than

be counted on to be virtuous. This is emphatically not the case with Serena Merle, as Isabel eventually discovers. In the meantime, however, ethics in this novel does seem elusive in the way that MacIntyre suggests. And even once Isabel has asked Madame Merle, ““Who are you—what are you? . . . What have you to do with my husband? . . . What have you to do with me?”” (417), and begins to understand the situation, the ethical atmosphere does not clear. Morality has become hazy, and the process of deliberation, judgement, and action that is so necessary for Austen’s characters no longer seems possible. As Edith Wharton’s heroine Susy Lansing experiences this dilemma in *The Glimpses of the Moon* (1922), “The queer edifice of Susy’s standards tottered on its base—she honestly didn’t know where fairness lay, as between so much that was foul” (33).

By the time of James’s later novels, virtue seems not just a mysterious desert, but an unfathomable sea. The preoccupation of Lambert Strether throughout *The Ambassadors* (1903) with the question of whether or not Chad Newsome’s relationship with Madame de Vionnet is “a virtuous attachment” (101), and the unwillingness of other characters to specify what constitutes a virtuous attachment, is evidence of the shifting nature of the language of virtue and value. Strether comes to see that what is more important for Chad than virtue is “the truth that everything came happily back with him to his knowing how to live” (276). Aesthetics has replaced ethics. Chad’s confidence, elegance, and taste are the foremost indicators of the quality of his life—it is not morality, piety, or charity that defines happiness or the ultimate good for him.

---

themselves to which they can entreat to be lifted up. Such a picture is melancholy in its very conception” (429).



In *The Golden Bowl* (1904), the code by which Prince Amerigo and Charlotte agree to abide has to do not with charity or truth, but with “care,” a less precise term of kindness. James describes what is for them “that intimacy of which the sovereign law would be the vigilance of “care,” would be never rashly to forget and never consciously to wound” (268). Although the language of this ideal sounds like general benevolence, it in fact allows the two to carry on their illicit liaison, while guarding their respective spouses from the harmful knowledge of their intimacy. For them, the creation of an alternative language of care makes possible the tolerance of unethical situations. Ethical deliberation here works toward not what is right or good, but toward what is valuable to those concerned.

It can of course be argued that the Prince and Charlotte do not represent the moral center of the novel (and neither does Chad Newsome in *The Ambassadors*) and that there are unethical characters in Austen’s novels as well, who manipulate language to try to cover vice. But in Austen’s novels it usually becomes clear where the real moral center of the novel is, and in *The Golden Bowl* even Maggie Verver’s ethical sense is imprecise, despite all of James’s attempts to portray the finest nuances of character and feeling. For Maggie, the old house, Fawns, represents her sphere of ethical influence:

Here was a house, she triumphantly caused it to be noted, in which she so bristled with values that some of them might serve, by her amused willingness to share, for such of the temporarily vague, among her fellow guests, such of the dimly disconcerted, as had lost the key to their own.

(473)

Increasingly for James's main characters, the virtues are replaced by the values of modern life, values that are negotiable rather than flexible. The absence of a narrative point of view in the later novels has been seen as a way of demonstrating an increased focus on the ethical lives of the characters, but as Maitzen argues, "In a way, James's effacement of authorial responsibility allows him to avoid moral responsibility: his commitment to subjectivity as an aesthetic perfection precludes the activity of negotiation crucial to ethical decision-making. This is not to argue that James is not interested in moral problems, but it is to suggest that his interest in them is clinical: the interest of an analyst, not a moralist" (19). James is interested in analysing the ethical life, in knowing the subtleties of how it works, but not in judging it. Just as for Eliot I think that the main virtue becomes sympathy, for James I think the main virtue becomes knowledge.<sup>143</sup>

The important thing may be the process of searching for knowledge, as the following exchange between Isabel Archer and her aunt early in *The Portrait of a Lady* suggests. Isabel says,

"But I always want to know the things one shouldn't do."

"So as to do them?" asked her aunt.

"So as to choose," said Isabel. (59)

---

<sup>143</sup> For further analysis of the power of knowledge in James's work, see for example G.L. Hagberg, *Meaning and Interpretation: Wittgenstein, Henry James, and Literary Knowledge* (1994). Michael Bell suggests instead in *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling* (2000) that the main virtue for James was kindness (171-86). He writes that "although kindness now seems the most unquestionable of virtues it never made it into the big seven of the morally confident Christian conception. And Charity, as one of the three theological virtues, is strictly speaking the love of God before the love of man. Against this background, mere kindness has something of a fall-back status, a diminished ambition suitable to a confused and secular age" (171).

Clearly concerned with ethical choice, Isabel sees the intellectual aspect of morality as central. Neither rule-following nor rule-flouting, she seeks above all to understand the context in which she acts, whatever the action might be. Knowledge as a virtue, then, in James's novels, might have to do with process and ethical deliberation, with the searching for intellectual understanding, but does James portray knowledge as something that can be achieved? In other words, does he have hope that intellectual wisdom can be reached? In order to understand James in the context of the tradition of the virtues, it would be worth looking at these questions further. In the meantime I suspect that, like many writers schooled in nineteenth-century thought and skepticism, both James and Eliot found it difficult to imagine faith and hope as active parts of the moral life.

### Edith Wharton

If the definitions of "virtue" were shifting at the time that Austen was writing, the very concept of morality had been translated into the more vague language of value by the time James and Wharton took up the novel of morals and manners. In *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Edith Wharton shows her hero, Newland Archer, in contemplation of his fiancé, coming to recognize what their life together will mean. When he pictures "his permanent relation with May Welland," Newland "perceived that such a picture presupposed, on her part, the experience, the versatility, the freedom of judgment, which she had been carefully trained not to possess" (1050). May possesses negative virtue in a different way from Madame Merle: while the latter's apparently perfect virtue in fact covers a multitude of deceptions, the former's virtue has been trained to be perfectly empty. There is nothing to hide because there is nothing there; that is, there is no

independence of thought, no intellectual vitality or individuality. May Welland lacks precisely the powers of intellectual engagement that Austen's heroines learn to develop through the moral education they experience. May's education is complete in its emptiness. She has not developed her ability to judge, and therefore will be incapable of meeting ethics in any complex or flexible way.<sup>144</sup>

Ellen Olenska, by contrast, is independent, and loves Newland because he loves honour more than he loves her, but while Wharton emphasizes the value of their love, she sees little possibility for hope in their lives. Q.D. Leavis has suggested that Wharton is not a great writer because she could see "only negatives, her values emerging I suppose as something other than what she exposes as worthless" ("Henry James's Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton" [1938] 207). I take this to mean that Wharton's novels, like those of James and Eliot, lack hope. Hope does not require happy endings, but it does require faith in something positive. The furthest that Ellen and Newland get is a kind of compromise between their values and the values of their society: "It was the perfect balance she had held between their loyalty to others and their honesty to themselves that had so stirred and yet tranquillized him; a balance not artfully calculated, as her tears and her falterings showed, but resulting from her unabashed sincerity" (1211). At first this passage appears to hint at the kind of tensions that Austen's heroines have to balance, as Ellen finds a balance between loyalty to forms and honesty to self.

---

<sup>144</sup> If May represents empty virtue, are there characters in the novels of Wharton, James, and Eliot who represent fulfilled virtue? The virtuous characters in their novels are more likely to be in the tradition of Fanny Price than after the model of Elizabeth Bennet: see for example Eliot's Dinah Morris and Daniel Deronda, or Wharton's Gerty Farish in *The House of Mirth*. The virtuous character is less likely to be dramatically interesting (Dinah and Deronda are both almost too consistently good) or heroically central (Gerty is

But the larger aim in the service of which these characters strike this balance is authenticity and sincerity of the self, rather than the cultivation of good habits, a disposition to act rightly, or a desire to serve others or God. For Wharton's hero and heroine, then, the ruling virtue is love, but the ruling value is authenticity.<sup>145</sup>

The notion of authenticity in Wharton's novels deserves closer study than I can give it here. For the moment, however, let me suggest that although Wharton is sharply critical of what she calls "all the dim domestic virtues" (1091), she is not able in her novels to find a way for her characters to participate in all the vivid social and spiritual virtues. Instead, she focuses on sincerity as a common value. But while it is difficult for her to represent hope in her fiction, I do think that she works out ways of allowing faith as well as love to continue in her work.<sup>146</sup>

#### Victorian Virtue and Twentieth-Century Virtue

My intent in analyzing these three writers is to suggest that those who have most claim to the tradition after Austen lack crucial aspects of that tradition, and that those aspects are essentially theological: Eliot lacks faith, James lacks hope, and Wharton is just barely holding on to the positive and redemptive power of love. Wide as their range of moral interest is, it is restricted by their focus on a sole virtue—whether that virtue is sympathy, knowledge, or sincerity—to sustain moral life. If Eliot, James, and Wharton,

---

drab in comparison with the less virtuous Lily Bart, just as Fanny may seem dull in comparison with the apparently more vibrant Mary Crawford).

<sup>145</sup> For a discussion of the sources of "authenticity" as a value "relatively new and peculiar to modern culture," see Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (1991) 25-29.

<sup>146</sup> I have argued in an unpublished conference paper that in her representation of love and faith in *The Custom of the Country* and *The Glimpses of the Moon*, Wharton captures more than a glimpse of the theological tradition of the virtues.

brilliant as they are, do not represent the full range of the classical and theological virtues in their work, then MacIntyre may well be right that Austen is unique in the literature of the last two centuries in her extensive understanding and demonstration of how these virtues can be lived as well as analyzed philosophically.

There are many nineteenth-century writers—such as Dickens, Gaskell, or Hardy—whose names might be put forward as possible inheritors of the tradition of the virtues, and it may well be that there are important and useful things to be learned from looking at the Victorian novel among the virtues. Victorian virtue is much more complex than the stereotype of the Victorian virtue of “respectability” would lead us to believe. Thomas Carlyle identified one of the prevailing virtues of the “profit-and-loss” moral philosophy of the time in *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), when Teufelsdröckh asks, “What . . . is the universally-arrogated Virtue, almost the sole remaining Catholic Virtue, of these days? For some half century, it has been the thing you name ‘Independence’” (175). As Barry V. Qualls points out in *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as a Book of Life* (1982), the age-old maxim “Trust in God” received “the superbly Victorian addition of ‘yourself’” so that it began to read, “Trust in God *and* yourself” (61).

In a time of individualism and scepticism, the Christian virtues were disappearing or at least diminishing, and for so many Victorians novelists, as for the poets of the time, the “sea of faith” was sounding its “melancholy, loud withdrawing roar.”<sup>147</sup> Hope, therefore, was rather feeble. Charity was the only theological virtue that still held strong,

---

<sup>147</sup> Matthew Arnold, “Dover Beach,” lines 21 and 25. Edith Wharton has an unpublished poem called “High Pasture” that is, I believe, an answer to “Dover Beach”: in it she talks of “vast, ethereal, and irradiate seas” and, in lieu of a “darkling plain,” she sees a place in which we are called to “a keen hill-pasture” where there is “day and still more day.” This

as it manifested itself in good works and romance in literature as well as in life. Further study of Victorian virtue after Austen might profitably focus on Dickens, whose appreciation of the Aristotelian mean makes an appearance in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48). Near the end of the novel, Mr. Morfin explains Dombey's pride in dealing with his bankruptcy honourably: "Ah Miss Harriet," he says, "it would do us no harm to remember oftener than we do, that vices are sometimes only virtues carried to excess. His pride shows well in this" (684). The novels of Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Hardy would also be good candidates for similar studies, and it would be particularly interesting to see what happens to virtue when it is analyzed from a Unitarian perspective, as in Gaskell's novels, and when it is perceived as determined and therefore as inflexible, in Hardy's novels. The relationship of Sue Bridehead and Jude Fawley in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) as they exchange their Christian and pagan perspectives on ethical behaviour would, I think, be an especially rich area for further work.

In the twentieth century, one possible line of inquiry would be to trace the virtues as they appear in positive and negative ways in the work of Catholic novelists such as James Joyce, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, and Flannery O'Connor. When I have asked colleagues and friends to recommend possible candidates for the continuation of the virtues after Austen, I have received answers that point to writers as various as, for example, Walker Percy, Barbara Pym, Rohinton Mistry, and J.K. Rowling. As I have not yet been able to pursue these various possibilities, I cannot speak definitively about the extent to which they might continue the tradition. But I look forward to learning more about possible inheritors of the tradition of the classical and theological virtues that Jane

---

poem offers further evidence for Wharton's attempt to affirm faith as well as love in her

Austen offers to other writers. In future research it would also be worthwhile to explore in more detail the virtues of Austen's heroes, and the tradition of the virtues as it relates to her juvenilia.

### Austen's Achievement

From an early interest in virtue in her juvenilia, as noted here in my choice of epigraphs for my own chapters, Austen went on to develop her understanding and dramatic representation of a range of virtues in her novels. Although her earliest short novel *Lady Susan* understands right behaviour through a playful investigation of wrong behaviour, and her early novel *Northanger Abbey* is thin in its analysis of ethical deliberation and action, Austen's mature novels—and I include *Sense and Sensibility* in this category—represent a considered approach to ethics, an approach that I believe is formed through her immersion in a tradition of Christian thought that incorporates classical ideals of regulated behaviour and heroic choices. Whether she knew the work of such writers as Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Dante in the original Greek, Latin, and Italian, in translation, or simply through cultural references to their writings, she inherited a relatively coherent ethical framework of four cardinal virtues and three theological virtues, and her novels reflect that inheritance.

Not only did she inherit ideas about virtue, but she extended them to include a more intimate focus on how the virtues work in women's lives, how women acquire the kind of moral education that can lead them to wisdom, and how the virtues function in dramatic tension in domestic life as well as in social and political life. In highlighting

---

work.



particular virtues in each novel, even while incorporating a whole range of virtues, Austen provides a reference point for the interpretation of her work. Focussing on the education of the heroines in the novels, I have emphasized the development of virtue as a process of learning to handle the tensions among virtues in a flexible way, while still adhering to absolute principles of ethical behaviour. The source of those absolute principles is, I think, Austen's own Christian faith, which firmly underlies her work and the world of her novels. Faith, I have argued, comes first for her most mature heroines, including Elizabeth, Fanny, Emma, and Anne. In contrast to readers who have seen love as the guiding force behind the novels, I suggest that faith was so firmly there to begin with that Austen's characters are able to rely on faith to help them practise other virtues. Unlike Eliot or Gaskell, Austen does not discuss faith often or very explicitly, but it is not a great leap to move from arguments that establish Austen's own strong and devout faith, to arguments that suggest her fictional world is founded on faith in God as well.

With faith as a foundation, in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth and Darcy demonstrate how love can exert an educative power that leads to the establishment of the beautiful and harmonious relations of justice. Although *Emma* has a strong claim to be considered one of Austen's masterpieces, its exploration of the process of intellectual awakening and subsequent education is not as well-developed as the exploration of the same process is in *Pride and Prejudice*, and Mr. Knightley's consistent virtue distracts from even as it contributes to Emma's education in virtue. *Pride and Prejudice*, then, is Austen's most successful treatment of the practice of the virtues. While in *Sense and Sensibility* I think that Elinor needs to be given more credit for the exercise of her virtue under pressure, and Marianne needs to be allowed more power as the discoverer of

Christian grace in the midst of suffering, this novel is still flawed in its relatively didactic method of having the sisters teach each other through example. My chapter on *Mansfield Park* reveals Fanny as far more interested in growth and development than has hitherto been suggested by other critics, and as much closer to philosophical wisdom than Austen's other heroines are. Many of Fanny's habits are defensible, and dramatically interesting as well as ethical, and the importance for her of ongoing and active contemplation of things that are universally true means that Fanny Price reaches the wisdom of *sophia*. Anne Elliot is taken seriously and appreciated for her virtues by the author if not by most of the characters in *Persuasion*, yet the fact that the process she had to go through in order to arrive at her calm sense of self, with a heart full of hope, is not dramatized in the novel, means that her character is less engaging than that of Emma Woodhouse or Elizabeth Bennet. Both Emma and Elizabeth undergo painful moral education under the eyes of the reader, thereby demonstrating both that moral education is possible, and that this kind of education is fascinating and essential.

Both Elizabeth and Darcy, however, are subject to a re-examination of their own minds before they can understand each other and join together in the pursuit of happiness and justice. Austen does not dramatize Darcy's change of heart and mind in anything like the detail she lavishes on Elizabeth, but she nevertheless makes it evident that he has had to undergo a similar kind of reassessment and reevaluation of his earlier ethical standpoint. That Elizabeth and Darcy together come to understand justice through the educative power of love is central to the brilliance of this novel. *Pride and Prejudice* is, therefore, Jane Austen's greatest achievement. In this dissertation I have attempted to explicate some of the ways in which Austen and her heroines engage with the classical

and theological traditions of the virtues in order to show that the world of Austen's novels is grounded on this unified tradition of ethical thought from Aristotle to Aquinas. I have also suggested that Austen participates in the analysis of that tradition—as Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare have—in a creative, flexible way. Although a number of writers since Austen's time, from Elizabeth Gaskell to Evelyn Waugh to J.K. Rowling, have explored aspects of the classical and theological traditions of the virtues, and although great writers such as George Eliot, Henry James, and Edith Wharton have investigated in their novels how to live the ethical life, I do not think it likely that further study of these writers will reveal that one of them matches or surpasses Austen's dramatic representation of the classical and theological virtues. To modify Alasdair MacIntyre's formulation of Austen's relation to this tradition, then, I conclude that Jane Austen is the most recent effective, imaginative, and great writer who engages with the whole range of classical and theological virtues in her novels. That she will not be the last, we can but hope.

## **Bibliography**

Primary Texts

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. J.A.K. Thomson. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1955.
- . *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. W.D. Ross. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Ed. Richard McKeon. New York: Random, 1941. 935-1112.
- Arnold, Matthew. "Dover Beach." 1867. *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*. Ed. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1999. 722-23.
- Astell, Mary. "Some Reflections on Marriage." *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies for the Advancement of their True and Greatest Interest*. 1694. *The Longman Anthology of British Literature* Vol. 1. Ed. David Damrosch et al. New York: Longman, 1999. 2280-89.
- Augustine, St. *The City of God*. 426. Trans. Marcus Dods. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- Austen, Jane. *Emma*. 1816. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. 6. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford UP, 1933-69.
- . *Jane Austen: Minor Works*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. London: Oxford UP, 1954.
- . *Jane Austen's Letters*. Ed. R.W. Chapman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979.
- . *Mansfield Park*. 1814. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. 3.
- . *Northanger Abbey*. 1818. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. 5.
- . *Persuasion*. 1818. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. 5.
- . *Pride and Prejudice*. 1813. *The Novels of Jane Austen* Vol. 2.
- . *Sense and Sensibility*. 1811. *The Novels of Jane Austen*. Vol. 1.
- Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, According to the Use of the Church of England: Together with the Psalter, or Psalms of David. Pointed as they are to be sung or said in Churches*. London: Printed by Thomas Baskett, Printer to the King's most Excellent Majesty; and by Assigns of Robert Baskett, 1758.
- Bunyan, John. *The Pilgrim's Progress*. 1684. Ed. Roger Sharrock. London: Penguin, 1987.

- Burney, Frances. *Evelina, or, A Young Lady's Entrance into the World*. 1778. Ed. Susan Kubica Howard. Peterborough: Broadview, 2000.
- Butler, Bishop Joseph. *Dissertation: Of the Nature of Virtue*. Appendix to *Jane Austen and Education*. By D.D. Devlin. London: Macmillan, 1975. 127-35.
- Carlyle, Thomas. *Sartor Resartus and On Heroes and Hero Worship*. London: Dent, 1973.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales. The Riverside Chaucer*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton, 1987.
- Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method*. 1637. Trans. Donald A. Cress. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998.
- Dickens, Charles. *Bleak House*. 1852-53. Ed. Nicola Bradbury. London: Penguin, 1997.
- . *Dombey and Son*. 1846-48. Ed. Alan Horsman. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982.
- Eliot, George. *Adam Bede*. 1859. Ed. Stephen Gill. London: Penguin, 1980.
- . *Middlemarch*. 1871-72. Ed. Bert G. Hornback. New York: Norton, 1977.
- . *The Mill on the Floss*. 1860. Ed. Carol T. Christ. New York: Norton, 1994.
- . *Silas Marner*. 1861. Ed. Q.D. Leavis. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.
- Fielding, Henry. *Tom Jones*. 1749. Ed. Sheridan Baker. New York: Norton, 1995.
- Fenwick, Eliza. *Secresy; or, The Ruin on the Rock*. 1795. Ed. Isobel Grundy. Peterborough: Broadview, 1994.
- Holy Bible: The New King James Version. Containing the Old and New Testaments*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, n.d.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography*. 1793. Ed. Leonard W. Labaree *et al.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1964.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. "Habit of Perfection." *Selected Poetry*. Ed. Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Hume, David. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*. 1751. Ed. J.B. Schneewind. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.

---. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1739-40. Ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge and P.H. Nidditch. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1978.

Inchbald, Elizabeth. *A Simple Story*. 1791. London: Pandora, 1987.

James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. 1903. Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth, 1992.

---. *The Golden Bowl*. 1904. Ed. Gore Vidal and Patricia Crick. London: Penguin, 1987.

---. *The Portrait of a Lady*. 1881. New York: Airmont, 1966.

Johnson, Samuel. *The Major Works*. Ed. Donald Greene. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.

Jonson, Ben. "Explorata: or Discoveries." *Ben Jonson: The Complete Poems*. Ed. George Parfitt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975.

Kant, Immanuel. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*. 1785. *Philosophical Writings*. Ed. Ernst Behler. The German Library. New York: Continuum, 1990. 55-125.

Kipling, Rudyard. "The Janeites." *Debits and Credits*. 1926. Ed. Sandra Kemp. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987. 119-40.

Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. 1689. Ed. Kenneth P. Winkler. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.

Milton, John. *Areopagitica*. 1644. *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*. Ed. Merritt Y. Hughes. New York: Odyssey, 1957. 716-49.

Pater, Walter. Preface and Conclusion to *The Renaissance*. 1873. *The Broadview Anthology of Poetry and Poetic Theory*. 1349-54.

Plato. *The Collected Dialogues*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1961.

Radcliffe, Ann. *The Romance of the Forest*. 1791. Ed. Chloe Chard. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986.

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*. 1740. Ed. T.C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel. Boston: Houghton, 1971.

Rossetti, Christina. "In An Artist's Studio." 1896. *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*. 870.

Spenser, Edmund. *The Faerie Queene*. 1596. *Edmund Spenser's Poetry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Hugh Maclean. New York: Norton, 1982.

Thomas À Kempis. *The Imitation of Christ*. London: Dent, 1960.

Thomas Aquinas, St. *Selected Writings*. Ed. and trans. Ralph McInerny. London: Penguin, 1998.

---. *The Virtues (In General)*. Trans. John Patrick Reid. Providence, RI: Providence College P, 1951.

Thomson, James. "The Seasons." 1746. *Jane Austen: Poems and Favourite Poems*. Ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies. London: Everyman, 1998. 87-89.

Waugh, Evelyn. *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1945.

Wharton, Edith. *The Age of Innocence*. 1920. *Edith Wharton: Novels*. Ed. R.W.B. Lewis. New York: Library of America, 1985. 1015-1302.

---. *The Custom of the Country*. 1913. *Edith Wharton: Novels*. 621-1014.

---. *The Glimpses of the Moon*. 1922. New York: Scribner, 1996.

---. "High Pasture." bMS Am 1081 (2281), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis*. 1897. *The Soul of Man and Prison Writings*. Ed. Isobel Murray. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999. 38-158.

Wollstonecraft, Mary. *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. 1792. Ed. Miriam Brody. London: Penguin, 1992.



## Secondary Texts

- Adams, James Eli. "Gyp's Tale: On Sympathy, Silence, and Realism in *Adam Bede*." *Dickens Studies Annual* 20 (1991): 227-42.
- Adamson, Jane. "Against Tidiness: Literature and/versus Moral Philosophy." *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*. 84-110.
- , Richard Freadman, and David Parker, eds. *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Alderman, William E. "Shaftesbury and the Doctrine of Moral Sense in the Eighteenth Century." *PMLA* 46 (1931): 1087-94.
- Amis, Kingsley. *What Became of Jane Austen? and Other Questions*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1970.
- Annas, Julia. *The Morality of Happiness*. New York: Oxford UP, 1993.
- Anscombe, G.E.M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1-19.
- apRoberts, Ruth. "Lady Susan." *The Jane Austen Companion*. 256-60.
- . "Sense and Sensibility, or Growing Up Dichotomous." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 30 (1975): 351-65.
- Armstrong, Isobel. Introduction to *Pride and Prejudice*. By Jane Austen. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990. vii-xxx.
- Auerbach, Nina. "Jane Austen's Dangerous Charm." *Jane Austen: New Perspectives. Women and Literature* Vol. 3, n.s. Ed. Janet Todd. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983. 203-23.
- . "O Brave New World: Evolution and Revolution in *Persuasion*." *ELH* 39 (1972): 112-28.
- Ayling, Janet. "The Rigours of Celebration." Review of *Jane Austen's Achievement: Papers Delivered at the Jane Austen Bicentennial Conference at the University of Alberta*. Ed. Juliet McMaster. Macmillan, 1976. *The Compass* 1 (1977): 89-98.
- Baier, Annette. "Ethics in Many Different Voices." *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*. 247-68.
- Bander, Elaine. "Emma: The Pique of Perfection." *Persuasions* 21 (1999): 155-62.

- Barton, John. "Virtue in the Bible." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12.1 (1999): 1-11.
- Bell, Michael. *Sentimentalism, Ethics, and the Culture of Feeling*. Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave, 2000.
- Bilger, Audrey. *Laughing Feminism: Subversive Comedy in Frances Burney, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998.
- Bloom, Allan. *Love and Friendship*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993.
- Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. New York: Harcourt, 1994.
- Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- . *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961.
- Bowen, Elizabeth. "Persuasion." *London Magazine* 4 (1957): 47-51. Rpt. as "A Masterpiece of Delicate Strength" in *Jane Austen: Northanger Abbey and Persuasion: A Casebook*. Ed. B.C. Southam. London: Macmillan, 1976. 165-70.
- Bradbrook, Frank. *Jane Austen and Her Predecessors*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1967.
- Braun, Eva. "Whose Sense? Whose Sensibility? Jane Austen's Subtlest Novel." *Persuasions* 12 (1990): 131-33.
- Brissenden, R.F. "The Task of Telling Lies: Candor and Deception in *Sense and Sensibility*." *Greene Centennial Studies: Essays Presented to Donald Greene in the Centennial Year of the University of Southern California*. Ed. Paul Korshin and Robert R. Allen. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1984. 442-57.
- . *Virtue in Distress: Studies in the Novel of Sentiment from Richardson to Sade*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974.
- Brodey, Inger Sigrun. "Adventures of a Female Werther: Jane Austen's Revision of Sensibility." *Philosophy and Literature* 23.1 (1999): 110-26.
- . "When Vanity Leads to Virtue: Self-Regard in Adam Smith and Jane Austen." *Nature, Woman, and the Art of Politics*. Ed. Eduardo Velásquez. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000. 245-63.
- Brown, Julia Prewitt. "The Feminist Depreciation of Jane Austen: A Polemical Reading." *Novel* 23.3 (1990): 303-13.

- . *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979.
- . "Public and Private in *Persuasion*." *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Art*. Ed. Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996; New York: St. Martin's, 1996. 168-77.
- Brown, Lloyd W. "Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 28 (1973): 333-35.
- Brownstein, Rachel M. "England's *Emma*." *Persuasions* 21 (1999): 224-41.
- . "Irony and Authority." *Women's Studies* 15 (1988): 57-69. Rpt. in *Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice: Contemporary Critical Essays*. Ed. Robert Clark. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1994. 180-92.
- Bruns, Gerald L. "Literature and the Limits of Moral Philosophy: Reflections on Alasdair MacIntyre's Project." *Commitments in Reflection: Essays in Literature and Moral Philosophy*. Ed. Leona Toker. New York: Garland, 1994.
- Buell, Lawrence. "What We Talk About When We Talk About Ethics." *The Turn to Ethics*. Ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. New York: Routledge, 2000. 1-13.
- Butler, Marilyn. *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975; rpt. with a new introduction 1987.
- . "History, Politics, and Religion." *The Jane Austen Companion*. Ed. J. David Grey. New York: Macmillan, 1986. 190-208.
- . Introduction to *Northanger Abbey*. By Jane Austen. London: Penguin, 1995. xi-xlviii.
- Cahill, Lisa Sowle. "Gender and Christian Ethics." *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*. Ed. Robin Gill. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001. 112-24.
- Clark, Lorrie. "Austen and Cultural Relativism." Rev. of *Jane Austen and the Fiction of Culture: An Essay on the Narration of Social Realities*. By Richard Handler and Daniel Segal. (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999.) *JASNA News* 16.3 (2000): 28.
- . "Transfiguring the Romantic Sublime in *Persuasion*." *Jane Austen's Business*. 30-41.
- Clausen, Christopher. "Jane Austen Changes Her Mind." *American Scholar* 68.2 (1999): 89-99.

- Cohen, Paula Marantz. *The Daughter's Dilemma: Family Process and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1991.
- Collins, Irene. *Jane Austen and the Clergy*. London: Hambledon, 1994.
- Copeland, Edward, and Juliet McMaster, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Jane Austen*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Crick, Brian. "Jane Austen on the 'Relative Situation': What Became of Mrs. Norris's 'Morally Impossible' in *Mansfield Park*." *Critical Review* 39 (1999): 77-106.
- Dabando, Laura, ed. *Jane Austen and Mary Shelley, and their Sisters*. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 2000.
- DeForest, Mary. "Eighteenth-Century Women and the Languages of Power." *Classical and Modern Literature* 12 (1992): 191-207.
- . "Jane Austen and the Anti-Heroic Tradition." *Persuasions* 10 (1988): 11-21.
- . "Jane Austen: Closet Classicist." *Persuasions* 22 (2000): 98-104.
- DeRose, Peter L. *Jane Austen and Samuel Johnson*. Washington: UP of America, 1980.
- Derry, Stephen. "An Allusion to Bunyan in *Mansfield Park*." *Notes and Queries* n.s. 40.4 (1993): 466-67.
- . "*Mansfield Park*, Sterne's Starling, and Bunyan's Man of Despair." *Notes and Queries* n.s. 44.3 (1997): 322-23.
- Devlin, D.D. *Jane Austen and Education*. London: MacMillan, 1975.
- Doody, Margaret. "Jane Austen's Reading." *The Jane Austen Companion*. Ed. David Grey. New York: Macmillan, 1986. 347-63.
- Duckworth, Alistair M. *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1971; rpt. with a new introduction 1994.
- . *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*. Women and Literature Vol. 3, N.S.. Ed. Janet Todd. New York: Holmes, 1983.
- Dunn, Allen. "The Ethics of *Mansfield Park*: MacIntyre, Said, and Social Context." *Soundings* 78.3-4 (1995): 483-500.
- Emsley, Sarah. "'I cannot love, to be an emperess': Women and Honour in *Tamburlaine*." *The Dalhousie Review* 80.2 (2000): 169-86.

- . "Radical Marriage." *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 11.4 (1999): 477-98.
- . Rev. of *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 2000). *The Dalhousie Review* 80.1 (2000): 138-40.
- Ermarth, Elizabeth Deeds. "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40.1 (1985): 23-42.
- Evans, Mary. *Jane Austen and the State*. London: Tavistock, 1987.
- Fergus, Jan. *Jane Austen: A Literary Life*. New York: St. Martin's, 1991.
- Fleishman, Avrom. *A Reading of Mansfield Park: An Essay in Critical Synthesis*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1967.
- Foot, Philippa. *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1978.
- Fott, David. "Prudence and Persuasion: Jane Austen on Virtue in Democratizing Eras." *Lamar Journal of the Humanities* 24.1 (1999): 17-32.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Care of the Self. The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 3. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- Fraiman, Susan. *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993.
- Gallop, David. "Jane Austen and the Aristotelian Ethic." *Philosophy and Literature* 23.1 (1999): 96-109.
- Gamble, David E. "Pragmatic Sympathy in Austen and Eliot." *CLA Journal* 32.3 (1989): 348-60.
- Garber, Marjorie, Beatrice Hanssen, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds. *The Turn to Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Gard, Roger. *Jane Austen and the Art of Clarity*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1994.
- . *Jane Austen: Emma and Persuasion*. London: Penguin, 1985.
- Garrod, H.W. "Jane Austen: A Depreciation." *Essays by Divers Hands: Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature* 8 (1928): 21-40. Rpt. in William W. Heath, ed. *Discussions of Jane Austen*. Boston: Heath, 1961. 32-40.
- Geach, Peter. *The Virtues*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977.

- Gibson, Andrew. *Postmodernity, Ethics and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*. Routledge, 1999.
- Giffin, Michael. "Jane Austen and the Economy of Salvation: Renewing the Drifting Church in *Mansfield Park*." *Literature and Theology* 14.1 (2000): 17.
- Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1979; rpt. with a new introduction 2000.
- Gill, Robin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Gillooly, Eileen. *Smile of Discontent: Humour, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Goldberg, S.L. *Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Graham, Kenneth. *Indirections of the Novel: James, Conrad, Forster*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Racial Memory and Literary History." *PMLA* 116.1 (2001): 48-63.
- Grey, J. David. *The Jane Austen Handbook*. New York: Macmillan, 1986.
- Grundy, Isobel. "Persuasion: or, The Triumph of Cheerfulness." *Jane Austen's Business*. 3-16.
- Guest, Harriet. "Eighteenth-Century Femininity: 'A supposed sexual character.'" *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800*. 46-68.
- Hagberg, G.L. *Meaning and Interpretation: Wittgenstein, Henry James, and Literary Knowledge*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Halperin, John. *The Life of Jane Austen*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984; rpt. 1996.
- Haines, Simon. "Deepening the Self: The Language of Ethics and the Language of Literature." *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, Theory*. 21-38.
- Harding, D.W. "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen." *Scrutiny* 8.4 (1940): 346-62; rpt. in *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*. 5-26.

- . *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*. Ed. Monica Lawlor. London: Athlone, 1998.
- . "The Social Habitat in Jane Austen: Distant and Nearer Contexts." *Regulated Hatred and Other Essays on Jane Austen*. 48-68.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *Shadows of Ethics: Criticism and the Just Society*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Harris, Jocelyn. *Jane Austen's Art of Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Heydt-Stevenson, Jill. "'Slipping into the Ha-Ha': Bawdy Humor and Body Politics in Jane Austen's Novels." *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 55.3 (2000): 309-39.
- Hofkosh, Sonia. *Sexual Politics and the Romantic Author*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Honan, Park. *Jane Austen: Her Life*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987.
- Horwitz, Barbara J. *Jane Austen and the Question of Women's Education*. New York: Peter Lang, 1991.
- Hursthouse, Rosalind. *On Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.
- Jacobus, Mary. "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*." *Writing and Sexual Difference*. Ed. Elizabeth Abel. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982. 37-52.
- Jarvis, William. *Jane Austen and Religion*. Whitney, Oxon.: Stonesfield, 1996.
- Johnson, Claudia L. *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1988.
- Jones, Vivien, ed. *Women and Literature in Britain 1700-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Kiely, Robert. *Reverse Tradition: Postmodern Fictions and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Koppel, Gene. *The Religious Dimension of Jane Austen's Novels*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research P, 1988.
- Larmore, Charles. *The Morals of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Lascelles, Mary. *Jane Austen and Her Art*. 1939. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1968.

- Lawrence, D.H. "A Propos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*." Rpt. in *Sex, Literature, and Censorship*. 1953. Ed. Harry T. Moore. Rpt. New York: Viking, 1959.
- Leavis, F.R. *The Great Tradition: George Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad*. 1960. New York: New York UP, 1973.
- Leavis, Q.D. "Henry James's Heiress: The Importance of Edith Wharton." *Scrutiny* 7 (1938): 261-76. Rpt. in *Collected Essays*. Vol. 2. Ed. G. Singh. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985. 194-208.
- Lee, Hermione. "'Taste' and 'Tenderness' as Moral Values in the Novels of Jane Austen." *Literature of the Romantic Period, 1750-1850*. Ed. R.T. Davies and Bernard G. Beatty. English Texts and Studies. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1976. 82-95.
- Lerner, Lawrence. *The Truth-tellers*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1967.
- Lewis, C.S. "A Note on Jane Austen." *Essays in Criticism* 4 (1954): 359-71. Rpt. in Ian Watt, ed. *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.
- Litz, A. Walton. "'A Development of Self': Character and Personality in Jane Austen's Fiction." *Jane Austen's Achievement*. 64-78.
- . *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development*. London: Chatto, 1965.
- Lynch, Deidre. *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000.
- MacIntyre, Alasdair. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 1981. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Notre Dame, IN: U of Notre Dame P, 1984.
- Maitzen, Rohan. "The Moral Life of *Middlemarch*: Martha Nussbaum and George Eliot's Philosophical Fiction." 2001.
- Mansell, Darrel. *The Novels of Jane Austen: An Interpretation*. London: Macmillan, 1973.
- Maskell, Duke, and Ian Robinson. *The New Idea of a University*. London: Haven, 2001.
- Massey, Irving. *Find You the Virtue: Ethics, Image and Desire in Literature*. University Publishing Associates, 1987.
- McDermott, Timothy. "Beginnings and Ends: Some Thoughts on Thomas Aquinas, Virtue and Emotions." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12.1 (1999): 35-47.



- McKinnon, Christine. *Character, Virtue Theories, and the Vices*. Peterborough: Broadview, 1999.
- McMaster, Juliet. "Clothing the Thought in the Word: The Speakers of *Northanger Abbey*." *Persuasions* 20 (1998): 207-21.
- . "The Continuity of Jane Austen's Novels." *SEL* 10 (1970): 723-39.
- . *Jane Austen on Love*. English Literary Studies. Victoria: U of Victoria P, 1978.
- , ed. *Jane Austen's Achievement: Papers Delivered at the Jane Austen Bicentennial Conference at the University of Alberta*. New York: MacMillan, 1976.
- , and Bruce Stovel, eds. *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Art*. Houndmills: Macmillan, 1996; New York: St. Martin's, 1996.
- . "Love and Marriage." *The Jane Austen Companion*. 286-96.
- . "Talking About Talk in *Pride and Prejudice*." *Jane Austen's Business*. 81-94.
- Myers, F.W.H. *Essays—Modern*. 1883. Qtd. in Basil Willey, "George Eliot" (*Nineteenth-Century Studies*, London: Chatto, 1949). Rpt. in Gordon S. Haight, ed. *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*. (London: Methuen, 1965) 259-69.
- Rev. of *Middlemarch*. *British Quarterly Review* 57 (1873): 407-29.
- Millgate, Jane. "Prudential Lovers and Lost Heirs: *Persuasion* and the Presence of Scott." *Jane Austen's Business*. 109-23.
- Moler, Kenneth L. *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1968.
- Monaghan, David. "Mansfield Park and Evangelicalism: A Reassessment." *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 33 (1978): 215-30.
- . *Jane Austen: Structure and Social Vision*. Totowa, 1980.
- Morgan, Susan. *In the Meantime: Character and Perception in Jane Austen's Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- . *Sisters in Time: Imagining Gender in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989.
- . "Why There's No Sex in Jane Austen's Fiction." *Studies in the Novel* 19 (1987): 346-56. Rpt. in *Sisters in Time*. 23-55.

- Morris, Ivor. "Jane Austen and Her Men." *Persuasions On-Line* 4 (2001). 7 January 2002  
<http://www.jasna.org/PolOP4/morris.html>.
- Morse, David. *The Age of Virtue: British Culture from the Restoration to Romanticism*.  
 Houndmills: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 2000.
- Mudrick, Marvin. *Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery*. Princeton: Princeton UP,  
 1952.
- Nardin, Jane. *Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen's Novels*.  
 Albany: State U of New York P, 1973.
- Neill, Edward. *The Politics of Jane Austen*. New York: St. Martin's, 1999.
- Newton, Judith Lowder. *Women, Power, and Subversion: Social Strategies in British  
 Fiction, 1778-1860*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1981.
- Nokes, David. *Jane Austen: A Life*. New York: Farrar, 1997.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New  
 York: Oxford, 1990.
- Odmark, John. *An Understanding of Jane Austen's Novels: Character, Value, and Ironic  
 Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1981.
- Oliphant, Margaret. "Miss Austen and Miss Mitford." *Blackwood's* 107 (1870): 294-  
 305. Rpt. in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. Vol. 1. 215-25.
- Pearl-poet. *Pearl and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Ed. A.C. Cawley. London:  
 Dent, 1962.
- . *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Trans. Marie Boroff. 1967. *The Norton  
 Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 1. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Ed. M.H. Abrams. New York:  
 Norton, 1986. 231-88.
- Parker, David. "Introduction: The Turn to Ethics in the 1990s." *Renegotiating Ethics in  
 Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*.
- Parkin-Gounelas, Ruth. *Fictions of the Female Self: Charlotte Brontë, Olive Schreiner,  
 Katherine Mansfield*. London: Macmillan, 1991.
- Perkins, Moreland. *Reshaping the Sexes in Sense and Sensibility*. Charlottesville, VA:  
 UP of Virginia, 1998.
- Perkins, Pam. "A Subdued Gaiety: The Comedy of *Mansfield Park*." *Nineteenth-  
 Century Literature* 48 (1993): 1-25.

- Pinch, Adela. *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Pippin, Robert B. *Henry James and Modern Moral Life*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Polhemus, Robert M. *Comic Faith: The Great Tradition from Austen to Joyce*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980.
- Poovey, Mary. *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1984.
- Pope, Stephen J. "Natural Law and Christian Ethics." *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*. 77-95.
- Porter, Jean. "Virtue Ethics." *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*. 96-111.
- . "What the Wise Person Knows: Natural Law and Virtue in Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 12.1 (1999).
- Price, Leah. *The Anthology and the Rise of the Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Qualls, Barry V. *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982.
- Rist, John M. *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Rivers, Isabel. *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment: A Study of the Language of Religion and Ethics in England, 1660-1780. Vol. 2: Shaftesbury to Hume*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Roberts, Warren. *Jane Austen and the French Revolution*. New York: St. Martin's: 1979.
- Robertson, Neil. "Kant and the French Enlightenment." NEASECS/AtSECS Conference: "Eighteenth-Century Speculations." Halifax, November 2001.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Rowell, John Graham. "Virtue and Moral Authority in Jane Austen's Fiction." Diss. U of Alberta, 1987.
- Ruderman, Anne. "Moral Education in Jane Austen's *Emma*." *Poets, Princes, and Private Citizens: Literary Alternatives to Postmodern Politics*. Ed. Joseph N.

- Knippenberg and Peter Augustine Lawler. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996. 271-87.
- . *The Pleasures of Virtue: Political Thought in the Novels of Jane Austen*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995.
- Ryle, Gilbert. "Jane Austen and the Moralists." *Critical Essays on Jane Austen*. Ed. B.C. Southam. London: Routledge, 1968.
- Sales, Roger. *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England*. London: Routledge, 1994; rev. ed. 1996.
- Sayers, Dorothy. Introduction to *Hell*. By Dante Alighieri. Harmondsworth: Middlesex: Penguin, 1949. 9-66.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1999.
- Seeber, Barbara K. *General Consent in Jane Austen: A Study of Dialogism*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2000.
- Shields, Carol. *Jane Austen*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2001.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Retrenchments." *Jane Austen's Business*. 181-91.
- Simpson, Richard. Rev. of Austen-Leigh's *Memoir*. *North British Review* 52 (1870): 129-52. Rpt. in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. Vol. 1. 241-65.
- Southam, B.C., ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. Vol. 1. London: Routledge, 1968.
- , ed. *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. Vol. 2. London: Routledge, 1987.
- , ed. *Jane Austen: Northanger Abbey and Persuasion: A Casebook*. London: Macmillan, 1976.
- Spacks, Patricia M. "Sisters." *Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists, 1670-1815*. Ed. Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski. Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1986. 136-51.
- Stewart, Maaja A. *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1993.
- Stovel, Bruce. "'A Nation Improving in Religion': Jane Austen's Prayers and Their Place in Her Life and Art." *Persuasions* 16 (1994): 185-95.

---. "‘The Sentient Target of Death’: Jane Austen’s Prayers." *Jane Austen’s Business*. 192-205.

Tanner, Tony. *Jane Austen*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986.

Tarrant, Harold. Introduction to Plato’s *Phaedo*. *The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo*. Trans. Hugh Tredennick and Harold Tarrant. London: Penguin, 1993.

Tave, Stuart M. *Some Words of Jane Austen*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1973.

Taylor, Charles. *The Malaise of Modernity*. Toronto: Anansi, 1991.

Terry, Judith. "The Slow Process of *Persuasion*." *Jane Austen’s Business*. 124-35.

Thomsen, Inger Sigrun. "‘*Persuasion* and Persuadability: When Vanity is a Virtue.’" *Persuasions* (1993): 235-44.

---. "Words ‘Half-Dethroned’: Jane Austen’s Art of the Unspoken." *Jane Austen’s Business*. 95-106.

Troost, Linda, and Sayre Greenfield, eds. *Jane Austen in Hollywood*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 1998.

Tuite, Clara. "Decadent Entails: Forster, James, Firbank, and the ‘Queer Taste’ of *Sanditon* (comp. 1817; publ. 1925)." *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*. 115-39.

Turner, Martha A. "The Aristotelian Logic of Settlement in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*." *Mechanism and the Novel: Science in the Narrative Process*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. 43-62.

Van Ghent, Dorothy. *The English Novel: Form and Function*. New York: Rinehart, 1953.

Watt, Ian, ed. *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

---. "On *Sense and Sensibility*." Introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*. 1961. Rpt. in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*.

Weldon, Fay. *Letters to Alice on First Reading Jane Austen*. New York: Carroll and Graf, 1984.

Whalley, George. "Jane Austen: Poet." *Jane Austen’s Achievement*. 106-33.

Whately, Richard. Rev. of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*. *Quarterly Review* 24 (1821): 352-76. Rpt. in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*. Vol. 1. 87-105.

Willey, Basil. *The English Moralists*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1965.

Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. London: Fontana/Collins, 1985.

---. *Morality*. New York: Harper, 1972.

Williams, Rowan. "Making Moral Decisions." *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*. 3-15.

Willis, Lesley. "Religion in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*." *ESC* 13.1 (1987): 65-78.

Wiltshire, John. *Jane Austen and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992.

Wolfe, Jesse. "Jane Austen and the Sin of Pride." *Renascence* 51.2 (1999): 111-31.

Wolfson, Susan J. "Our Puny Boundaries: Why the Craving for Carving Up the Nineteenth Century?" *PMLA* 116.5 (2001): 1432-41.

Woolf, Virginia. "Jane Austen at Sixty." *Athemaemum*, 15 December 1923. Rpt. as "Jane Austen" in *The Common Reader*. London: Hogarth, 1925.

Wright, Andrew. *Jane Austen's Novels: A Study in Structure*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1953.