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# Beyond Marital Bliss: A Redemption of Motherhood in Jane Austen

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Georgia College & State University

Beyond Marital Bliss: A Redemption of Motherhood in Jane Austen

By Destiny Cornelison

M.A. Candidate

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The College of Arts and Sciences Department of English at

Georgia College & State University

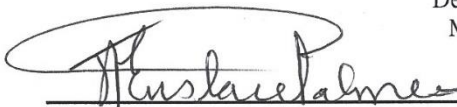
April 2019


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HAVE APPROVED THIS THESIS


**BEYOND MARITAL BLISS:  
A REDEMPTION OF MOTHERHOOD IN JANE AUSTEN**


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## Introduction

Jane Austen is hailed as one of the greatest and most accomplished writers of her time. Her mastery of tone and attention to detail are qualities that have propelled her remembrance through the centuries. For the most part, her heroines are young women on the brink of marriage. Her plots deal with romance, class issues, fortune versus love, and so on. While these heroines are admirable, feisty, intelligent, and in most cases ahead of their time in terms of female agency, another group of women exists in Austen's books that often goes unnoticed except as secondary characters to the heroines. However, the mothers of Jane Austen's novels are well-worth their own study.

Whether it is the ridiculous Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* or the cruel and controlling Mrs. Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility*, these women are often thrown into stereotypes and then forgotten. This thesis aims to delve deeper into the characters whose marriages have come and gone and to uncover what remains afterwards. Since the plot of most of Austen's novels ends with the marriage of the heroine to a financially stable man, albeit one who respects the agency of the heroine and waits for her to come to interest in the relationship via her own terms, what happens after this happy day is often ignored by readers and scholars alike.

Many of Austen's mother figures are either unlikable, or loveable but not respectable at first glance. However, this thesis sets out to show that in fact Austen did not hate mothers and the lack of likeable mother figures in her novels is actually an ingenious way to offer them redemption. To assume that an author so ahead of her contemporaries in terms of championing female agency and intellect would write off an entire class of women is irrational and would be inconsistent on the part of an otherwise steady author. I posit that the mothers of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park* are written as they are in an intentional

effort on Austen's part to condemn the society that forced them into roles of ridiculousness or stinginess. Their inconsistencies highlight the unattainable standards placed on mothers by society as a whole and their eccentricities are the result of a lack of outlet for feminine energy. Character studies of the women of these novels illustrate that they are not unlikeable by nature. Rather, by choosing to perform one duty that society has assigned them they invariably must neglect another because the multitudes of responsibilities expected of mothers are often mutually exclusive. If she is emotionally available, she neglects her children's education; if she is stringent in societal necessity, she stifles the heroine's spirit. One woman cannot be all that a mother is expected to be. Austen recognizes this and illustrates the inevitable results of women who try.

Some historical background is useful in understanding the plight of these mothers and women in general. Frank O'Gorman, in the book *Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History 1688-1832*, says that "The central unit of British society was the family. Its importance as the foundation of all social life and order cannot be overstated" (9). With this in mind, Austen's novels can be read as focusing on the core area around which everything else in England was built. This also emphasizes the proportion of responsibility weighing on a mother's shoulders.

O'Gorman points out the irony of how important family is juxtaposed with the disrespect given those who tended it: "Because women were assumed to be of inferior intellectual ability to men it followed that they were ill-suited to public life and responsibilities. Their duties lay in childbearing and in tending the family. The performance of such duties required obedience, submission and modesty" (9). To say that family is the "central unit of British society" but then to say that mothers were given charge of the domestic unit because they were presumed too

unintelligent to be a part of the public sphere already illustrates the impossible position in which these women were placed. There is a foundational discrepancy in the structure of such a society.

Marilyn Francus, in her book *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity*, admirably delves into the lives of some of the overlooked characters in Eighteenth-Century literature. She acknowledges the insanity of placing one standard of ideal motherhood on women who are different in multitudes of ways: “The conflation of codes of femininity and domesticity signals a cultural consensus about women’s position in society and unified a female population divided by age, class, region, ability, and character” (2). Motherhood was used as a standard attempting to unite women who perhaps had nothing else in common, but in reality the codes to which mothers were meant to adhere did little other than provide an impossible system of measurement.

And to be sure, such technical and standard systems did exist in the time of Jane Austen. Francus says, “Conduct manuals, educational tracts, and political tracts prescribed the image of the domestic woman, particularly as a wife and mother” (1). There were literal textbooks illustrating the ideal behavior of mothers. This leaves little room for the parents of a family to develop their own parenting priorities. Given that families are made up of individuals, taking away this space for individuality within the dynamic is inviting supposed hypocrisy and disgruntlement.

As the title of her book may suggest, Francus devotes a great deal of time to the concept of “monstrous motherhood.” Austen was not the only literary figure of the day whose works featured unlikeable mothers, but arguably her characterization of most of them is set up in such a way as to redeem them, rather than merely criticize. Francus writes, “Monstrous mothers locate the challenges and obstacles to “good” motherhood that society and culture refuse to



acknowledge: the demanding physical and psychological work of motherhood” (170). I am inclined to agree with Francus that the presence of unfavorable mothers in literature in general, and I argue specifically in Austen, is a way to highlight the unreasonable demands being placed on the mothers. Motherhood is already difficult work without society-wide, stringent standards being applied.

While Austen’s work does feature ridiculous mothers, the circumstances she gives each exemplify the awkward position each is forced into by the conditions around them. Austen by no means argues that mothers are perfect or incapable of flaw, but her handling of her characters shows a propensity to believe them to be real people. They are not molded shapes to be plucked off an assembly line at will; they are individuals with flaws and needs. However, the redeeming quality she offers them is that their flaws are no worse or more punishable than the flaws of other characters. She does the mothers the justice of treating them as individual people rather than a stereotyped role.

For the sake of this thesis, it is important to understand that motherhood is being defined according to Francus’ understanding of the term. She writes, “Motherhood is characterized by multiple discourses – biological, psychological, social, economic, and legal – but in eighteenth-century Britain the representation and assessment of motherhood was most strongly shaped by the discourse of domesticity” (1). To be a mother figure in a work of Jane Austen does not strictly mean to be the biological mother of said child. Rather, a mother can be any woman who takes an influential or authoritative role. However, it is important to note that biological mothers must always be considered. Whereas the character Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park* is judged by her overly zealous and negative interactions in the lives of the younger generation, it is her own actions that place her in a motherly role. As a woman who herself is childless, she did not

necessarily have to become a mother figure to her nieces and nephews. It is because she chooses to become invested that she opens herself up to scrutiny on the parental front. This stands in contrast to characters such as her sister, Lady Bertram, who do have biological children and therefore are analyzed as mother figures despite their level of involvement. In fact, one of the issues of *Mansfield Park* is the biological mother's lack of investment that opens her children up to the negative influence of a psychological mother.

Despite the negative mothers in Austen's works, her relationship with her own mother seems to have been healthy. John Wiltshire, in his essay "*Mansfield Park, Emma, Persuasion*," says that it "was at Chawton that Jane Austen, settled with her mother, sister, and friend, found the conditions that fostered the writing of three of her greatest novels" (58). He defines these novels to be, as one may have guessed, the ones titling his essay. It is when Jane Austen is living with her mother, albeit among others, that she is comfortable and happy enough to produce some of her best work. Given the obstacles faced by women writers at the time, it stands to reason that such impressive and extensive writing would have been difficult to produce without the encouragement of those closest around her, including her mother.

This thesis looks at *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park* in an effort to truly unveil how Austen perceived mothers. A master of tone, Austen may treat some of them with ridicule, but, arguably, never without revealing a societal necessity that conditioned said mother in a position of forced ridiculousness. She redeems these women not as perfect humans, but as humans with the right to be individual people. She shows how their flaws are the result of a society imposing impossible standards. If they are ridiculous, it is because the world around them leaves no other option.

## Chapter One

### **Ridicule or Realism: Motherhood in *Pride and Prejudice***

Behind the commonly studied marriage plot of Elizabeth Bennet and her sisters in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* lurks another narrative. The women whose weddings have come and gone fade into secondary characters. Two of the most prominent mothers in the novel, Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine, are portrayed as either ridiculous or condescending. Austen's portrayal of mothers as stereotypically negative characters shows that women are valued for their marriageability rather than personhood, and that once this stage of life passes, so too does their value in the eyes of those around them. However, Austen redeems these mothers by showing that they are, in fact, realists in a world that attempts to make their plight impossible.

From the very beginning of the novel, mothers are portrayed as single-minded and calculating. Though Mrs. Bennet's own marriage is in the past, she focuses constantly on the prospects of her daughters. During an exchange between herself and her husband discussing the handsome newcomer to the neighborhood, Mrs. Bennet immediately connects money and marriageability, thus initially giving her the appearance of shallowness. When Mr. Bennet questions his wife's exclamation that a man with "four or five thousand a year" is a "fine thing for our girls," Mrs. Bennet immediately replies "how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them" (Austen 1). The idea that Mr. Bingley is single excites Mrs. Bennet. His income is immediately associated with her daughters in her mind, indicating a societal status quo for marriage: money equates eligibility. Her use of many exclamation marks indicates enthusiasm, which shows that she does not necessarily associate money with being unhappy or unexciting. She seems to take it in stride that marriage is linked to money, and she, unlike protagonist Elizabeth, does not seem to believe that this is at the expense

of happiness. Rather, in her mind, a husband with a large income is the path to happiness. It is a “fine thing for [her] girls” not that he is kind or well-mannered, but that he has a sizeable income. The fact that he is likeable is an added bonus. From the beginning, this stance sets the mother figure at odds with the protagonist, thus tempting the reader to view the mother as an obstacle, if not villain. However, as we will see, Austen goes on to show that Mrs. Bennet has been conditioned by her environment to value financial security as a necessity. Her ridiculousness can then be read as excess worry that her daughters might be left behind and uncared for in a world that she herself has learned to be unfeeling and cruel. This fluttering energy then becomes enthusiasm for the protection of her children.

In the article “Pride, Prejudice, and Persuasion: A Comparison of Two Novels by Jane Austen,” Dominick Grace writes that “The novels are all realistic to a degree, at least in their characterization of protagonists, but they all also depend to some extent on caricatures as well as on contrived coincidences of plot” (54). While this critique appears somewhat negative, the fact that Austen uses caricatures reveals a few things about the narrator’s stance on motherhood and about the position of women in general in this society. A woman’s security is more important than her happiness or choice. For her daughters to be well provided for by a husband once out of the shadows of father or uncle is more important to Mrs. Bennet than any personal compatibility between husband and wife. This is seen later on when Mrs. Bennet tries to force Elizabeth to marry Mr. Collins despite the fact that his ridiculous nature would make him a miserable companion for Elizabeth’s wit. It is also interesting to note that though fathers are the ones to whom a fiancé traditionally applies for blessing, here Mrs. Bennet is taking the more active role in the settling of her daughters. This does shift a form of agency and power to the matriarch of the family rather than the patriarch.

Though it may at first be tempting to write Mrs. Bennet off as ridiculous and narrow-minded, a closer look at why she is forced to be so narrow-minded reveals the societal pressures on women of the time. Mrs. Bennet says her husband “*must* know” (my emphasis) that she has in mind marriage when she mentions fortune. She cannot imagine that such a real concern as her daughters’ welfare is not obvious to him. Her immediate connection between the money and marriage and her insistence of the need for such a connection to be obvious imply that she knows a woman in her class of society cannot survive without a man’s support. The lack of financial or work opportunities for women in this genteel class create this struggle. Mrs. Bennet acknowledges and bases her actions on this truth. In this way, Austen somewhat redeems Mrs. Bennet’s narrow-mindedness as forced realism. Mrs. Bennet may appear to be a ridiculous and calculating mother, but Austen reveals that she has no other choice than to become so due to the pressures around her.

Another conundrum facing mothers of the time is the double standard for vanity. When Mrs. Bennet recalls her pre-motherhood days by saying, “I certainly have had my share of beauty, but I do not pretend to be anything extraordinary now. When a woman has five grown up daughters, she ought to give over thinking of her own beauty,” her husband remarks, “In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of” (Austen 2). Mrs. Bennet sets forward a general principal of how mothers should regard their own beauty while ironically contradicting it in relation to herself. Even though she says she is not extraordinarily attractive now, she cannot mention this without claiming the quality to have been hers at some point. Being a mother puts her at odds with what once would have been her socially defining quality.

This presents a bit of a contradiction for women. When they are young, they should be gorgeous and their worth is often judged in terms of being handsome or not handsome. However,

when they become mothers, it becomes selfish to dwell on the quality by which they have been defined their entire lives. It is important to be beautiful, but it is also important to not claim to be beautiful. Others are allowed to define women by their beauty, but women are conceited if they claim that quality for themselves. Even Mr. Bennet's response, though perhaps teasing, suggests that a comment by a woman rejoicing in her own physical attractiveness cannot pass by without having some kind of negative comment to keep her vanity in check. Mrs. Bennet becomes slightly redeemed in her ridiculousness when it becomes more obvious how many socially environmental standards are restraining her. Attempting to navigate such conflicting virtues leaves an excess of constrained energy that has no outlet, making it difficult for one not to come across as energetically ridiculous. In this way, Austen shows that society is setting mothers up to appear in a negative light.

Mrs. Bennet's narrative description also comes off as negative at first glance. Austen writes that "*Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (3). This description provides a written-off view of a matronly woman. Her concerns are pushed aside as being made up in her head. To say she "fancied herself nervous," as opposed to just saying that she is nervous, implies that she is not actually suffering from a health complaint. The diction choice of "fancied" makes it seem as though Mrs. Bennet is choosing to get over-excited. Discontentedness and nervousness are in the same stroke relegated to an imaginary state. Even if she is discontent, this emotion is not valid for a mother. Some excuse is made to take away any personal and multidimensional emotion that she might be experiencing. "The business of her life [is] to get her daughters married" and her own complaints are not taken seriously by her

husband. In both of these ways, Mrs. Bennet's concerns are secondary. As a mother, her daughters must come first. Similarly to how she is not expected to take her own beauty seriously anymore, her personal emotional concerns are not taken seriously by those around her. As a mother, her gender restrains her in a different way than it does her daughters. While they are forced to seek dependency in marriage, mothers are forced to divest themselves from their own personhood.

Similarly, Mrs. Bennet is seen as claiming to put her daughters first when she says, "At our time of life, it is not so pleasant I can tell you, to be making new acquaintance every day; but for your sakes, we would do anything" (Austen 5). At first glance, this statement seems to be merely ironic. As discussed earlier, the narrator tells the reader that Mrs. Bennet's "solace was visiting and news" (3). She delights in scurrying off to her neighbors' houses to revel in their reactions whenever something exciting happens, particularly in relation to her daughters. Her claim to not enjoy making acquaintances, therefore, seems aimed to play the role of selfless mother. While in this case it is true that socializing is not the self-sacrificial act that Mrs. Bennet makes it out to be, there is a cornerstone of truth in her sentiment. She does seem willing to do anything for the sake of her daughters. She devotes most of her time and conversation from the beginning of the novel to ways in which they might be happily settled. In this way, her mind is less easy to develop. By having her go to any extreme necessary for the care of her children, Austen shows that Mrs. Bennet is actually complex in a good way. She may chatter and gossip, but she also plans and is goal-oriented, which are necessary traits in a society trying to corner women into impossible situations.

However, there is a negative aspect to her realness as well. She seems willing to do anything to see her daughters settled even at the expense of their happiness. Her practical goal

sometimes overrides the individual concerns of each child. For example, at one point in the novel Mrs. Bennet threatens to never speak to Elizabeth again if she does not marry Mr. Collins. She says to Elizabeth, “if you take it into your head to go on refusing every offer of marriage in this way, you will never get a husband at all – and I am sure I do not know who is to maintain you when your father is dead. – *I shall not be able to keep you – and so I warn you. – I have done with you from this very day*” (Austen 87). In this quote, the goal of a husband outweighs Elizabeth’s disdain of Mr. Collins. Even though Mrs. Bennet appears extreme and cruel here by trying to pressure her daughter, it can be argued that her society has pushed her into this hard-nosed realism. This provides a contrast between the idea of a mother who is supposed to be nurturing versus one who will see her children survive even if it loses her their regard. While her trying to inflict this choice of romantic partner on Elizabeth is certainly not feminist, her character is perhaps less ridiculous than at first perceived, which is a small rebellion in and of itself. As Jack Lynch says in “On Jane Austen,” “some feminists have seen in Austen not a submissive woman’s voice in perpetual retreat from conflict but a subversive protofeminist who was every bit as politically engaged as other writers of her day – though in more subtle ways” (5-6). Austen may not have created a feminist in Mrs. Bennet, but she created a strong and willful survivor who has been jaded by the realities of her world; a world she intends to have her daughters survive. The above quote from the novel is also important because it shows the lack of female agency at the time. Mrs. Bennet is not being cruel or exaggerating when she says she cannot keep Elizabeth. As a woman, she would legally not have the means. She is just as much a victim of patriarchal society as her daughters. Ironically, her role as a mother in a way forces her not to be motherly in the expected nurturing sense.



Her ability to be realistic and calculating is also seen in her reaction to Mr. Collins' interest in Jane and then Elizabeth. Austen writes that she "trusted that she might soon have two daughters married; and the man whom she could not bear to speak of the day before, was now high in her good graces" (53). Mrs. Bennet is judging Mr. Collins by his usefulness towards her goals. Her opinion of him changes even though his attitude does not. As a mother with daughters of little fortune, she cannot afford to be picky about personality. Though she might change her mind if he were actively cruel, passive faults such as dullness and awkwardness cannot outweigh the offer of a stable home and family life. The pressures that Mrs. Bennet would have faced before marriage and those she faces now as a mother force her to maintain an order of values that might otherwise have been different.

Mrs. Bennet's willingness to support any financially stable candidate for her daughters is also seen in her reaction to Mr. Bingley. After meeting him at a ball, she exclaims, "I am quite delighted with him. He is so excessively handsome! and his sisters are charming women. I never in my life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses. I dare say the lace upon Mrs. Hurst's gown – " (Austen 9). In this quote, Mrs. Bennet comments on the attractiveness of Mr. Bingley and on the delightfulness of his sisters, but it is worth noting that all of this is presupposed by the fact that he is rich. Mrs. Bennet dwells on that first and then allows herself to appreciate other aspects of Mr. Bingley and his connections as secondary concerns. They are nice benefits and pleasant things to know, but they are not cornerstones in her wish for Mr. Bingley to marry Jane.

Her mind's rootedness in financial security is circled back to when she begins discussing the elegance of the ball gowns and lace of the other ladies at the ball. While personalities are nice, the ability to obtain finery is seemingly better. While this at first seems superficial and conceited, her concerns in the minutiae of expensive clothing are perhaps somewhat forgivable

when one considers that these are physical side effects of being well-settled. The ability to buy lavish dresses implies having money to spare, which in turn implies having ample money to pay for the basic necessities of life. Again, one may be able to fault Mrs. Bennet for not fighting against the sexist hierarchies of her time, but when analyzing her within her society's boundaries, a more redeemable character emerges. She is not the proto-feminist rebel that Elizabeth embodies, but she is stronger and more focused than her husband and many readers give her credit for.

Considering the focus of this paper on motherhood, it is obviously worth looking at the relationships that make Mrs. Bennet a mother. Her viewpoint towards her children is interesting. As discussed earlier, her desire for their financial security outweighs their own preferences at times, but there is still a certain fondness towards her children that one expects to see in a mother. It is therefore somewhat surprising when she says, "Lizzy is not a bit better than the others; and I am sure she is not half so handsome as Jane, nor half so good humoured as Lydia. But you are always giving *her* the preference" (Austen 2). This quote is important for several reasons. Jane is listed first as worthy of preference because of her beauty. Lydia comes in second for being sociable. The order in which Mrs. Bennet lists her daughters indicates the value placed on each attribute by society at the time. Beautiful, good-natured, and then last and also least, witty. While Mrs. Bennet's relegation of Elizabeth to third place or later indicates the standard of acceptance within society, Austen's choice to pull Elizabeth from third place to protagonist indicates a rebellion against this order. Again, the reader sees a hint that Mrs. Bennet, underneath her rattling dialogue and sometimes inappropriate behavior, is a realist with remarkable understanding of the world around her. She is not commenting on the virtue of the order, but rather acknowledging that it is true, harsh or not. While unquestionably accepting an unfair

societal hierarchy is not exactly feminist, Mrs. Bennet's acknowledgement of the way of the world allows her to navigate it. She knows what both she and her daughters need to do to survive in an unfair society. In this light, her ridiculousness becomes cold realism.

However, it seems that she is the only one allowed to think of her children in a less than perfect light. She berates her husband for doing just that: "I am astonished, my dear...that you should be so ready to think your own children silly. If I wished to think slightly of any body's children, it should not be my own however" (Austen 21). This statement is perhaps a bit ironic. She may not think her children silly, but she shows no qualms slighting Elizabeth in comparison to Jane and Lydia. This seems to again, like in the instance of whether to consider her own beauty, be a moment where Mrs. Bennet lays down a generic motherly principle without necessarily adhering to it. Mothers, if able to bring themselves to slight children at all, should certainly not do so to their own children. Mrs. Bennet's habit of laying out these principles that she, in basically the same breath, breaks, can be read as an indicator of double standards for mothers in society. As discussed earlier, her goal as a mother to see her children settled is not necessarily compatible with the general goal of motherhood to be nurturing. Mrs. Bennet is navigating a trickier system than it might appear at first. If she succeeds in settling her children at all costs, they are taken care of, but potentially at the expense of their affection for her. If she chooses affection over practicality, she runs the risk of being scolded by society for allowing her children to fall. Given how ridiculous this double standard is, it makes sense that the one trying to navigate the system may appear ridiculous at times as well.

How Mrs. Bennet passes these somewhat contradictory values on to her children is also a complicated matter. By instilling society's values in her daughters, she is furthering its existence, yet if she does not do so, she risks her daughters falling into unsafe obscurity. One instance of

Mrs. Bennet's complicated relationship with societal expectation is when she vehemently reacts to Elizabeth suggesting to take a long walk through dirt to see a sick Jane. Austen writes, "'How can you be so silly,' cried her mother, 'as to think of such a thing, in all this dirt! You will not be fit to be seen when you get there'" (23). Though as a mother she is supposed to have given "over thinking of her own beauty" (2), her marriageable daughters are supposed to think of and protect beauty on all occasions. Even just the errand of Elizabeth wanting to see her sick sister becomes a cause for concern if she does not consider keeping up appearances. She will be present in front of eligible men, and must therefore maintain her attractiveness. This seems to imply that beauty is a tool. For the young and unmarried, it is wielded as a way to find a mate. Mothers, having attained a household through marriage and sustained it via offspring, have no need of this tool. Viewing it as a tool rather than a character trait makes the sudden shift in whether or not to dwell on it make a little more sense. If it is a tool to gain a mate, what could a mother use it for within her own domestic domain? This societal standard diminishes women's individuality and agency. In each stage of life their traits are subverted to the desires of those around them.

Lady Catherine is another prominent mother figure in *Pride and Prejudice*, but she is used to explore a different negative light into which mothers are forced. Despite differences in situation and attitude, they are comparable because they share the plight of motherhood. As Marilyn Francus says in *Monstrous Motherhood: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Ideology of Domesticity*, "the idealized image of the domestic woman served as a cultural shorthand for standards of female behavior, applicable to all women regardless of specific situation or subject position" (2). Where Mrs. Bennet is ridiculous and without power, Lady Catherine is haughty in minor power and nosy. Lady Catherine is described thus:

Lady Catherine was a tall, large woman, with strongly-marked features, which might once have been handsome. Her air was not conciliating, nor was her manner of receiving them, such as to make her visitors forget their inferior rank. She was not rendered formidable by silence; but whatever she said, was spoken in so authoritative a tone, as marked her self-importance. (Austen 125)

Lady Catherine is physically imposing, but not in a pleasant way. In a society of polite formality, she has no qualms letting her guests feel inferior. This seems to be a similar moment to earlier when Mrs. Bennet reminisces about her past beauty. Austen says that Lady Catherine's features "might once have been handsome," implying that, like Mrs. Bennet, age has inverted that defining quality in the eyes of society. What once might have been her point of pride has become a standard against which to compare her negatively now. This standard sets up women to have no choice other than to degrade as they age in the eyes of society. If the beauty of a girl under twenty is the ideal with no other type of beauty appreciated, say, such as the graceful maturity of a mother, then women have no choice other than to peak when they get married and be judged forever after. Mocked or villainized motherhood is the necessary evil that follows too heavy a focus on the marriage plot for young girls. When one goal becomes all-important, any accomplishment after that will necessarily pale in comparison.

Like Mrs. Bennet, Lady Catherine shows no qualms in attempting to manipulate the marriages of the younger generation. Austen writes that "She had even condescended to advise him [Mr. Collins] to marry as soon as he could, provided he chose with discretion" (50). Even though Lady Catherine is not Mr. Collins' mother, she seems to take on an expected motherly duty within this quote. Just as Mrs. Bennet tries to sway the opinions of her daughters towards a candidate of whom she approves financially, Lady Catherine's desire that Mr. Collins choose a

wife with “discretion” implies a personal stake in the value of the choice. Her qualities of choice seem to be respectable family and connections. Reputation is what matters most because this is exactly what she later claims Elizabeth does not possess and why she is therefore not a suitable candidate for Mr. Darcy. Because Lydia’s scandalous elopement affects the reputations of all of her sisters, Lady Catherine declares, “Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?” (Austen 273). Both Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine are taking on the expected motherly role of pursuing marriage for their “children,” but each has a different set of qualifications that make a suitable candidate. Mrs. Bennet, who will lose her estate when her husband dies, makes fortune the priority. Lady Catherine, who has access to her own wealth, looks at less physically immediate needs as qualifications, such as reputation. However, she is still a realist in the sense that she is aware of the precarious position of a society woman with her own power. As a female with agency, she is a bit of an anomaly for her time. To be decisive, therefore, in all attitudes and actions geared towards keeping that independence, is understandable. The price she must pay for her freedom is cruelty in the eyes of others, but the rareness of her situation makes it sympathetic that she would fight for it.

Like Mrs. Bennet, Lady Catherine is actively involved in the affairs of those around her. However, while Mrs. Bennet is content with staying up to date on gossip, Lady Catherine positions herself as an authority figure. Austen writes, “She enquired into Charlotte’s domestic concerns familiarly and minutely, and gave her a great deal of advice, as to the management of them all” (126). Lady Catherine, though not experiencing the insecurity of low or moderate income herself, still feels the need to be involved in that aspect of life for those around her. To say that she looked into Charlotte’s affairs “familiarly and minutely” implies two things. Firstly, that she does this often. Secondly, that she believes herself completely competent in this area.

Here we see a sort of inversion of motherly values. A woman is expected to be completely adept and run her household without flaw, but if she dares give advice to other women, she is rude or overstepping. Lady Catherine is being villainized essentially for considering herself an expert in what women are expected to be masters of. Lady Catherine's contradictory position therefore illustrates societal limitations for women. If being confident enough in something to give advice, even if that is within the area women have been relegated to, then that woman will be villainized. This quote implies that Lady Catherine is being nosy and bossy, which as a character she may be, but there is also a slight condemnation of the act of a mother being confident. Just as admitting one's own beauty when society expects one to be beautiful is a flaw, so acknowledging oneself to be a master of an area that society expects one to be a master of is folly. Again, Austen is illustrating the impossibility of navigating a set of such contradictory standards.

Similarly, the narrator mocks Lady Catherine's method of involvement. Austen writes that "whenever any of the cottagers were disposed to be quarrelsome, discontented or too poor, she [Lady Catherine] sallied forth into the village to settle their differences, silence their complaints, and scold them into harmony and plenty" (130). When a mother ventures forth from her own domestic concerns, she appears in a negative light. Austen says that Lady Catherine "scold[s] them into harmony and plenty." Lady Catherine's involvement in the affairs of other families is painted as almost laughable. To say that she goes to "settle their differences, [and] silence their complaints" at first sounds fairly formidable, but this is counterbalanced by the idea that her greatest weapon is the ability to scold. In addition, the word "sallied" seems to instill mock grandeur into Lady Catherine's plight. However, she is admirable for attaining even a semblance of agency and power in a world that attempts to remove all such opportunities for women.

Another commonality between the main mothers of the novel is that they overlook their children's individual concerns for the sake of their places in society. Mr. Collins says that Miss De Bourgh's "indifferent state of health unhappily prevents her being in town; and by that means, as I told Lady Catherine myself one day, has deprived the British court of its brightest ornament. Her ladyship seemed pleased with the idea" (Austen 51). Mr. Collins' comments are structured and overly formal, but they also bear a basic resemblance to the essence of the types of compliments women are expected to find flattering. Elizabeth and Mr. Bennet may be rolling their eyes at Mr. Collins, but his compliments are not so very different from other moments in the book when women are noticed for their beauty or accomplishments. Because "her ladyship seemed pleased," Mr. Collins assumes that these types of compliments must please all women. He also says that Miss De Bourgh's health "prevents her being in town." An unhealthy disposition is not negative because she is in danger, but because it prevents her from being social. This indicates the heavy emphasis on social position for women. Similarly to how Mrs. Bennet risks Jane getting sick in order to see Mr. Bingley, Mr. Collins considers Miss De Bourgh's health an inconsequential inconvenience in relation to her social standing. Lady Catherine is pleased with his superficial flattery. As a mother, she is more concerned with her daughter's reputation than health. However, given the uniqueness of her power, it is sympathetic that she would do what she could to maintain that independence for her daughter.

Lady Catherine also shares the tendency of Mrs. Bennet to see less fault in her own child than in the offspring of others. When listening to Elizabeth play the piano, she says, in front of other people, "Miss Bennet would not play at all amiss, if she practiced more, and could have the advantage of a London master. She has a very good notion of fingering, though her taste is not equal to Anne's. Anne would have been a delightful performer, had her health allowed her to



learn” (Austen 135). What from the beginning appears to be a backhanded compliment at best turns into a way for Lady Catherine to elevate her own daughter at the expense of Elizabeth. To say that Elizabeth “would not play at all amiss” implies that she plays fairly well now, but with mistakes. Lady Catherine says, “She has a very good notion of fingering,” which would be a compliment if left well enough alone, but she immediately follows with an unfavorable comparison to Anne’s taste. This is interesting because in the next sentence Lady Catherine reveals that Anne has not even learned to perform, but this time she makes an excuse in favor of the supposed performer. As a mother Lady Catherine is quick to downplay someone else’s child’s talent to elevate her own offspring. Similarly, she is willing to claim her own child to be the best even though she does not even play. This indicates a bias inconsistent with Lady Catherine’s supposed cold and calculating behavior. The same woman who seeks out infinitesimally small faults in others, can see no wrong in her own daughter, implying a perhaps odd affection, but preference nonetheless.

Despite their similarities, Lady Catherine is a quick critic of Mrs. Bennet. When she discovers that Mrs. Bennet raised her daughters without outside assistance, she declares, “No governess! How was that possible? Five daughters brought up at home without a governess! – I never heard of such a thing. Your mother must have been quite a slave to your education” (Austen 127). Ironically, though in society’s eyes a mother is responsible for raising her children, she cannot get her hands dirty. Lady Catherine’s exclamation of “I never heard of such a thing” implies shock. That a mother, who is responsible for her daughters, should not have given care of their education to someone else, is appalling to Lady Catherine. This perhaps delves into a judgement of class disparity. Clearly, social rank is important in the book, but it is unclear how a mother best fits into that structure. Mrs. Bennet turns her nose up at the idea of her daughters

cooking a meal, but Lady Catherine judges Mrs. Bennet for not having a governess. In this way, the social scale is measured by a mother's actions. While one might think that such a unique plight as motherhood would instill solidarity, in this case it evokes judgement. Even between mothers, there is an expected role to be played.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, all of this judgement, Mrs. Bennet is the only person other than Elizabeth that Lady Catherine notices when she visits the Bennets' house. She says, stiffly, "I hope you are well, Miss Bennet. That lady I suppose is your mother" (Austen 268). After all of the fault she found with Mrs. Bennet's method of raising her children, it could be supposed that this is an association of blame. By saying this first, she is almost implicating Mrs. Bennet in Elizabeth's perceived faults. A mother is inextricably associated with the behavior of her children. Lady Catherine associates Mrs. Bennet with her position to her children rather than as her own person. She calls Mrs. Bennet "That lady" rather than addressing her directly or introducing herself. This furthers the idea that once a woman is married, her personhood is, in a sense, lost to her children. Even though Lady Catherine fights against gendered restraints in her own way, she is still at times guilty of applying them to other women. This illustrates the pervasiveness of the expected standards for a mother. The limitations and contradictions faced by mothers are built into the foundation of the way the society interacts.

In a sense, Mrs. Bennet and Lady Catherine, despite all of their perceived differences in station and personality, are essentially two sides of the same coin. They are both trying to marry their daughters off to secure an end goal. Mrs. Bennet is happy with any decently rich man while Lady Catherine has her sights set on Darcy as a son-in-law. Both are willing to risk their daughters' health for the sake of reputation or marriage. Both are portrayed as superficially negative – one as ridiculous and one as cruel. Mrs. Bennet takes out any deviance from her plan

on her daughter while Lady Catherine takes out any deviance on the potential interferer. Mrs. Bennet is attempting to survive in a world she has seen as cruel. Lady Catherine is attempting to keep her daughter within the bubble that she has found to be safe. In this way, Lady Catherine is also somewhat redeemable in her realism. Though she does not know the uncertainty of the Bennet family financially, she cannot be blind to those around her who are. If Miss De Bourgh falls out of the security of the De Bourgh family, she risks joining the plight of the common people. In order to prevent that, Lady Catherine goes to great lengths to ensure a marriage for her daughter that will retain her in her social circle.

While these characters allow for the continued existence of patriarchal restrictions by playing into society's game, and neither can therefore be called feminist, an analysis of their plights as mothers reveals redeemable qualities in both. As mothers, they are forced into situations where rebelling against the system themselves would immediately and negatively impact the prospects of security for their children. They are in this sense forced to relinquish any deviating values they may hold in order to provide for their daughters. While this attitude does not free their daughters from the same gendered restrictions, it allows them to survive in a world where those restrictions exist. Mothers are backed into an impossible plight, but Austen reveals them to be realistic survivors instead of ridiculous or bossy.

## Chapter Two

### **To Be or Not to Be Motherly: Motherhood in *Sense and Sensibility***

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, like *Pride and Prejudice*, explores hitherto overlooked aspects of motherhood in the eighteenth century. *Sense and Sensibility*, however, does this through the inversion of the expected mother and daughter roles. By having the protagonist, Elinor, often portrayed as wiser than her elders, Austen begs the question of what actually makes one motherly. If being practical, wise, and nurturing, even at the expense of one's own comfort, are characteristics that are stereotypically synonymous with being "motherly," then the fact that these qualities are seen more strongly in Elinor than in Mrs. Dashwood forces one to consider what it means to be a mother. If nothing else, the suggestion of such a stereotype's existence is that mothers are expected to be perfectly nurturing. To have one definition or set of qualities attempting to encompass women of different tastes and backgrounds dismisses their individuality and limits the scope in which each is allowed to exist. Taking away this individuality takes away personhood and makes any slip from the single socially acceptable definition appear as a misstep rather than a personality difference. To be nurturing does not make one a mother. Austen differentiates the biological connection from its connotative qualities. This implies a rebellion against the idea that a mother must be, or even could be, an all-encompassing caretaker, nurturer, and guide.

By making the mothers in the novel ridiculous or cruel, Austen shows that for all mothers to be "motherly," as defined by the contemporary society, is an unrealistic expectation. By making the mothers the more ridiculous characters, she is forcing people to reevaluate why "motherly" is synonymous with this perfect, selfless nurturer whose entire identity is lost to her children. By making a non-mother character embody those characteristics more than any actual

mothers, she separates the qualities from the name. Austen does not do this to make mothers look bad, but to show that this one definition cannot literally and automatically cover all women who have given birth. They are individuals who each have a right to their own defining characteristics. By making mothers the slightly more absurd characters, Austen is redeeming their right to remain their own individual, imperfect selves in a society that attempts to diminish women's individual identity after they are married with kids.

The introduction to the book *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal* helps set the stage for an argument about motherhood in Austen's time. Though the book itself is a collection of essays focusing on Victorian motherhood, which is slightly after Austen's time, the undercurrents of the family dynamic overlap with the period about which Austen is writing. Claudia C. Klaver and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman argue that the "virtues of the middle-class woman and of the home over which she was to preside emanated from an image of the mother as pure, self-sacrificing, and devoted, a spiritual influence and a moral instructress" (2). The ideal mother figure presents an unrealistic standard. Even with a limited domain of power, one person cannot be expected to embody all of these traits, setting up those who try for failure and those conditioned to expect such perfection for disappointment.

Early in the novel, Austen juxtaposes the expected positions of mother and daughter through Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor. Austen writes that Elinor, "whose advice was so effectual, possessed a strength of understanding, and coolness of judgement, which qualified her, though only nineteen, to be the counsellor of her mother" (6). The list of sensible traits attributed to Elinor serves just as much to downplay traditionally "motherly" qualities in Mrs. Dashwood as it does to praise them in her daughter. Whereas the mother is expected by nature to be the more nurturing and wiser figure, Austen here paints an image of a mother being led by the hand when

she calls Elinor the “counsellor of her mother...to the advantage of them all” (6). Austen also writes that Elinor had “frequently to counteract...that eagerness of mind in Mrs. Dashwood which must generally have led to imprudence” (6). This brings to mind the image of a mother fluttering around her busy children in an effort to keep up with their clever and quick mischievousness. While Mrs. Dashwood is certainly not directly called mischievous, saying that her actions, unchecked, would lead to negative results implies that she needs to have a close eye kept on her by her daughter to keep her within socially acceptable norms. Whereas a mother is generally expected to bring her children up in the ways of society and instill manners, in this case, the daughter must take on that role.

Similarly, Elinor takes on the responsibility of guidance for her sister early on in the novel. Austen writes that “Elinor saw, with concern, the excess of her sister’s sensibility; but by Mrs. Dashwood it was valued and cherished. They encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction” (6). Mrs. Dashwood not only fails to instill positive social values in her children, but she actively encourages negative ones. “Violence” implies lack of moderation in terms of emotion, something unacceptable in the temperate and polite world of Jane Austen. If a mother’s role is to train her children to be able to survive independently of their parents in the adult world, then in this case Mrs. Dashwood is forestalling her daughter’s growth.

However, despite her flaws, it is expected for Mrs. Dashwood to be afforded a certain level of respect or deference as the matriarch of a family. This is robbed of her, however, by another mother figure early on in the novel. Austen writes that “Mrs. John Dashwood now installed herself mistress of Norland; and her mother and sisters-in-law were degraded to the condition of visitors” (7). Mrs. John Dashwood, though also a mother, is younger and showing a lack of respect for her mother-in-law by trying to establish herself in precedence. Austen writes

that Mrs. Dashwood, Elinor, and Marianne were “degraded” by Fanny (7). The domestic domain is left to the charge of women, and arguably it is the only domain where they have power.

Considering this, Fanny’s offense takes a deeper turn. She is robbing Mrs. Dashwood of one of the few places she has power or independence. However, this squabble between them illustrates that mothers are, in fact, not inseparable entities. Because they are still subject to the same personality flaws as women without children, they can still fight or disagree. If to be motherly meant only one thing, then mother figures could have nothing to disagree about. Creating conflict between mothers shows that mothers can have, and must have, differences of opinion because they are human. Austen forces the reader to realize that a fight between mothers is only more shocking than any other fight because those watching have been conditioned to expect perfection.

Mrs. Dashwood is not the only mother who is not always treated with respect. Mr. Palmer is openly critical and sarcastic towards his mother-in-law. He tells his wife, “I did not know I contradicted any body in calling your mother ill-bred” (96). Not only is he insulting her, but he is implying that everyone else feels the same way. Mr. Palmer shows no qualms in calling Mrs. Jennings “ill-bred” (96). Though she laughs it off, it is interesting to note that only a person who is considered sour and petulant by all but his wife is the one to publically make a rude comment such as this. The reader, knowing that Mrs. Jennings is loud and at times inappropriate, cannot help but agree with the sentiment that her manners are poor. However, her genuine kindness often redeems her character in the eyes of Elinor and the reader.

A study of family dynamics becomes a lot more interesting, and realistic, when everyone involved keeps their genuine personality rather than a stereotyped title. Mrs. John Dashwood and Mrs. Dashwood continue to be two mothers at odds when it comes to family support, which

would not be possible if to be a mother meant to possess a single set of personality traits. Austen writes that “Mrs. John Dashwood did not at all approve of what her husband intended to do for his sisters. To take three thousand pounds from the fortune of their dear little boy, would be impoverishing him to the most dreadful degree” (7). This is an interesting instance of being able to study the hierarchy of family obligations. John Dashwood must choose between two categories of blood relatives to help: siblings or children. His wife is shocked by the idea that he would choose his sisters, even if realistically his son would not be harmed by the sacrifice. While her greed and his stinginess are certainly components of the situation, the fact remains that matters of family inheritance through children are significant throughout the novel and often take precedence over other familial relationships. The importance of keeping children primed for inheriting the family name and estate often takes priority even over affection or the wish for a child’s happiness, as evidenced by the situation between Edward and Lucy, or, later and more genuinely, Edward and Elinor.

Marriage and inheritance link the plotlines of many of Austen’s books, with *Sense and Sensibility* being no exception. Like Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mrs. Dashwood hopes for her daughters to be well-settled, but unlike Mrs. Bennet, she does not resort to extremes or to plotting to get there. Austen writes:

Some mothers might have encouraged the intimacy from motives of interest, for Edward Ferrars was the eldest son of a man who had died very rich; and some might have repressed it from motives of prudence, for, except a trifling sum, the whole of his fortune depended on the will of his mother. But Mrs. Dashwood was alike uninfluenced by either consideration. It was enough for her that he appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality. (13)



This quote reveals qualities of several distinctive types of mothers. Mrs. Ferrars is concerned primarily with money and image. She uses her son's inheritance as a method of controlling his future and thus keeps her stake in shaping the family image. She is portrayed as stingy, overbearing, and controlling, while Mrs. Dashwood is flippant and emotional. The financial fortitude of the one is juxtaposed against the impractical pursuits of the other. For Mrs. Dashwood, it is enough "that [Edward] appeared to be amiable, that he loved her daughter, and that Elinor returned the partiality" (13). In a time when money is an enormous motivating factor in marriage, Mrs. Dashwood shows a propensity for choosing her children's happiness. While at first this may seem amiable, the novel as a whole reveals that she often takes this support to perhaps unhealthy extremes. She blindly supports Marianne's affection of Willoughby even though he has no hope of supporting her and has a questionable character beneath his amiability. This reaffirms the idea that Mrs. Dashwood has been conditioned by her environment to attempt to be a certain type of mother. However, given that her environment asks her to be both affectionate and stringent, she must fail in one pursuit by emphasizing the other. Mrs. Ferrars is the type of mother who prizes control and affluence, Mrs. Dashwood prizes affection and emotion, and a third type of mother seen in the novel revealed in this quote is the one who "might have encouraged the intimacy from motives of interest, for Edward Ferrars was the eldest son of a man who had died very rich" (13). This type of mother is reminiscent of Mrs. Bennet in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, whose standards for her daughters' marriages are based solely on financial stability. In this particular passage, this type of mother is portrayed as wheedling and scheming, despite the hard truth that marriage was often the only available option for women to maintain their financial status or security. It is interesting that these mothers are all presented as distinctive types, but none are portrayed as particularly positive. Even types that are practically

opposite of each other are still given negative qualities, rather than having one be good and one be bad. This illustrates the difficulty of being a “good” mother according to a singular societal definition.

Maaja A. Stewart, in the book *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts*, suggests two options for mother figures. Stewart writes, “These two possibilities encompass woman’s fate in the perspective of the melancholy eye. A woman, in this narrative, loses her individuality and represents either a doomed figure or a redemptive one” (80). While this is a step forward in enabling the mother figure to be something other than perfect, it still limits mothers to types rather than people. Arguably, Austen fights back against these very true and existent stereotypes in an effort to redeem that individuality that is so often lost in narratives.

Mrs. Dashwood, for example, who takes a more patient approach to her daughters’ marriage than Mrs. Bennet, still creates tension for her children by being overly eager and emotional. She overcomes one common trope but retains a fault. Austen writes, “No sooner did she perceive any symptom of love in his behaviour to Elinor, than she considered their serious attachment as certain, and looked forward to their marriage as rapidly approaching” (14). Mrs. Dashwood is portrayed as eager and completely reliant on emotion rather than as a rational caregiver. Saying that she started planning their marriage as soon as she saw any sign of mutual affection is getting leaps and bounds ahead of the young people who are actually directly involved in the situation. Even if her heart is in a well-meaning place, she comes across as purely emotionally driven, when, as a parent, she is expected to be the voice of reason that balances the emotions of a love-struck daughter. In actuality the opposite is true: Elinor is the balance of reason to her mother’s emotion.

Despite Mrs. Dashwood's genuine heart, her involvement causes problems for her daughters. Fanny, using implication rather than directness, insults her mother-in-law through insinuation. Austen writes that Fanny speaks with Mrs. Dashwood "so expressively of her brother's great expectations, of Mrs. Ferrar's resolution that both her sons should marry well and of the danger attending any young woman who attempted to draw him in; that Mrs. Dashwood could neither pretend to be unconscious, nor endeavor to be calm" (19). In this quote, Fanny falls prey to the stereotype of women who are conniving, sly, or deceitful. Instead of telling Mrs. Dashwood that she thinks Edward and Elinor are not a good match, Fanny talks "so expressively of her brother's great expectations...and of the danger attending any young woman who attempted to draw him in" (19). She is using a roundabout subject as a veiled threat to Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor rather than having a frank discussion. Mrs. Dashwood is understandably offended by the implication that her daughter would try to steal a man for his money. Fanny's use of the phrase "draw him in," as well as Austen's use of italics, emphasizes the idea that the pursuit of marriage was often much more complicated than the pursuit of love. When a woman had no means to earn money, marriage was often the solution to maintaining lifestyle. Though less harped upon, men also played the game in pursuit of fortune. For example, Willoughby chooses to marry someone other than Marianne for her money. Despite this, the reputation as seducer is more often attributed as a stereotype to women. Ironically, while Fanny insults Mrs. Dashwood by suggesting that Elinor is romancing Edward for his money, she also talks of "Mrs. Ferrar's resolution that both her sons should marry well" (19). Assuming that "marry well" is a standard satisfied by a woman of similar class status and fortune, Mrs. Ferrars and Fanny have much more calculating motives for the marriage of Edward than Mrs. Dashwood or Elinor do. Again, if to be a mother meant to have a universal set of personality qualities, fights like this

could not exist. Austen does these women the justice of allowing them to be real people, while showing that more often than not, their biggest perceived flaws only exist because of the contradictory societal expectations they are attempting to navigate.

In response to a similar implication that Mrs. Dashwood's daughters are willing to plot for marriage to Willoughby, Mrs. Dashwood responds, "I do not believe...that Mr. Willoughby will be incommoded by the attempts of either of *my* daughters towards what you call *catching him*. It is not an employment to which they have been brought up. Men are very safe with us, let them be ever so rich" (39) Austen once more italicizes a phrase associated with strategies young women might be accused of when attracting a man. Mrs. Dashwood is responding to Sir John's insinuation that Elinor and Marianne should be interested in, if not be willing to fight over, Willoughby. Interestingly enough, calling pursuit of Willoughby "catching him" employs verbiage similar to how one might describe catching a large fish or prize. While the comment turns the young ladies into hopeless and calculating romantics with no other interests than marriage, it also degrades Willoughby to little more than a prize with perceived fortune or good societal standing. The phrase "men are very safe with us, let them be ever so rich" implies that women can be seen as dangerous in the dating game (39). While Willoughby impregnates a young, unmarried girl and strips her of her honor and comfort, this statement implies that women are the dangerous party in marriage. Natural daughters, or at least supposed natural daughters, by men are blinked at as merely unpleasant topics, but women are shamed for essentially looking out for themselves financially.

In addition, Austen illustrates how the position women are put in makes it impossible to be perfect; there is no real "ideal" mother because the standards are set too high. A description of Mrs. Jennings provides a case study. She is "a good humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman, who

talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar. She was full of jokes and laughter, and before dinner was over had said many witty things on the subjects of lovers and husbands...and pretended to see them blush whether they did or not” (Austen 29). Mrs. Jennings presents a contrast to the ideal girl of marriageable age. While young girls are praised for being slender, calm, and coy in romance, Mrs. Jennings is fat, loud, and talkative on the subject of love. The difference illustrates a common theme that women do not just grow up into older women; they are first young and desirable and then they are old and undesirable. Being married and a mother are significant steps in this transition, illustrating the society’s view of mothers as negative. However, it is not necessarily the women themselves who change; rather, they enter a stage of life that has a different societal connotation and, therefore, the public’s opinion of them transitions regardless of whether or not the woman herself changes. This creates a difficult position for women. While they are expected to be mothers and may be considered biologically unsuccessful if they are not, that same station will inevitably propel them to the stereotype of the older and undesired woman. This type of woman often takes several forms. There are those like Mrs. Jennings who are loud and vulgar, and then there are those like Mrs. Ferrars who are stingy, controlling, and cruel. A third type of mother is Mrs. Dashwood, who is equally stigmatized for keeping the same emotional rashness of her daughter even as a mother.

Mrs. Jennings presents a conundrum because she does not fall into the plight of many women. She is “a widow, with an ample jointure. She had only two daughters, both of whom she had lived to see respectably married, and she had now therefore nothing to do but to marry all the rest of the world” (Austen 32). Because she has been provided with a jointure after the death of her husband, she is able to fairly independently carry on within the circle of society she has always known. This is a contrast to the situation of women such as Mrs. Bennet, who eagerly

seeks marriage for her daughters out of the fear that Mr. Collins will inherit the family house and wealth after the death of her Mr. Bennet. However, it is interesting that even without this pressure, Mrs. Jennings still finds it her business to “marry all the rest of the world” (23). While Mrs. Bennet is certainly ridiculous, her motives are understandable. Mrs. Jennings, on the other hand, is portrayed as a busybody for the pure enjoyment of it. Her kindness to Elinor and Marianne is offset by her negative quality of nosiness. However, she is arguably one of the most loyal figures in the novel. When Marianne is later ill, it is Mrs. Jennings that stays immovably by her side. If being a caretaker in sickness is the role of a physical mother and Mrs. Jennings does this well, then the fact that she is noisy and often crude perhaps loses some sway in dictating how the reader feels about her.

Mrs. Jennings, while containing several qualities disapproved of by society, also shows one of the ones that is most expected and valued: nurturing. Austen shows that it is possible for “motherly” values to exist outside of the expected set as a whole. In fact, this is the only way they can exist. While often seen as frivolous, she shows her most directly useful side when a child needs help. Austen writes that she “was a great wonderer, as every one must be who takes a very lively interest in all the comings and goings of all their acquaintance” (62). Though being imaginative is certainly not negative, Mrs. Jennings is portrayed as imaginative in a nosy and fruitless way. Though she does later in the novel prove an excellent and helpful friend to the Dashwoods when Marianne is sick, in this moment her “lively interest in all the comings and goings of all their acquaintance” takes the form of constant gossip and speculation (62). This could be read as saying that a mother without her daughters has no purpose to serve in the eyes of society. With both of her daughters married and mothers or mothers-to-be in their own right, she has nothing left to do but be idle. The idea that a mother’s usefulness is defined by her

children seems to be supported by the fact that Mrs. Jennings is the most physically useful when a child or surrogate child is in need. When Charlotte has a baby, Mrs. Jennings is suddenly employed all day. Similarly, when Marianne falls ill under her care, she takes an avid and eager interest in the restoration of her health. When young, women seem defined by their engagements or pursuit of marriage. Once a mother, they are defined in relation to their children. With hardly anything left to call an identity of their own, one can hardly wonder why women like Mrs. Jennings are not sure what to do with themselves once empty-nesters. Similarly, the idea that society forces a woman to focus her life on marriage and children perhaps explains the overinvestment of Mrs. Dashwood in Marianne. Her children are her identity and her entire world because her environment has left her little chance for other pursuits by which to define herself. Her attachment to Marianne is so strong because Marianne's emotional dependency keeps her necessary. Elinor, who is independent, does not validate her mother's identity as a mother as much as the somewhat needier Marianne. Though the goal of parenthood is arguably to raise one's children to independence, Mrs. Dashwood realizes that this is a self-defeating goal. If her children are independent, she will lose herself.

Mrs. Jennings' daughter, Mrs. Palmer, mimics her mother in many ways and they thus propel each other forward. She says that "there is a new family come to Barton cottage I hear, and mama sends me word they are very pretty, and that one of them is going to be married to Mr. Willoughby of Combe Magna" (Austen 99). Mrs. Palmer and Mrs. Jennings, both mothers at some point in the book, are profuse sources of gossip. This contributes to the stereotypes that mothers are idle or useless at one of two stages: before their child is born, or after their child has left the house. Mrs. Palmer, pregnant at the time of this conversation, is happily furthering gossip and rumors. However, after her baby is born and when Marianne falls ill, she flees to a non-

infectious area with her child, though at the expense of missing some of the most gossip-worthy moments of the book. Similarly, Mrs. Jennings, with no children at home, is portrayed as flimsy. However, when she has a new grandchild to take care of, she suddenly becomes industrious and focused.

If this can be called motherly instinct in some way, then it seems to be a quality Mrs. Ferrars lacks. She seems to relish her children being in need not because it makes her useful, but because it makes her powerful. Austen describes Mrs. Ferrars as a dictator of fate: “The old, well established grievance of duty against will, parent against child, was the cause of all. She would have been glad to know when these difficulties were to cease, this opposition was to yield, - when Mrs. Ferrars would be reformed, and her son be at liberty to be happy” (89). Calling the parent-child relationship a “well established grievance” implies a certain expectation across time for animosity to exist naturally between the parties (89). If people are environmentally conditioned to expect grievance in a relationship, then the individuals who populate that role will be hard-pressed to find anything else. Even though realistically Edward is placing his own restraints on his stay with the Dashwoods, Mrs. Dashwood and her daughters automatically attribute his unhappy schedule to his mother. This indicates a willing inclination to blame mothers for the behavior of their children.

Mrs. Dashwood seems eager to believe that Mrs. Ferrars must experience some form of motherly instinct in the form of compassion. She tells Edward, “You want nothing but patience – or give it a more fascinating name, call it hope. Your mother will secure to you, in time, that independence you are so anxious for; it is her duty, and it will, it must ere long become her happiness to prevent your whole youth from being wasted in discontentment” (Austen 90). Mrs. Dashwood uses the assumption of Mrs. Ferrars’ motherly affection to attempt to encourage



Edward that he will not be under her control for long. On an even more basic level, she expects Mrs. Ferrars' motherly affection to take the same form as her own, which only leaves room for disappointment. Mrs. Dashwood says it is Mrs. Ferrars' "duty, and it will, it must ere long become her happiness" (90). This quote is interesting for several reasons. Mrs. Dashwood first claims it to be Mrs. Ferrars' duty to make Edward independent, and then says it must be her happiness. First, this touches on the idea that a parent has a duty to a child to raise them in the ways of the world. However, it is generally assumed that affection will follow. The fact that Mrs. Dashwood corrects her statement from "it will" to "it must...become her happiness" (90) indicates a slight inversion of these expectations. It is almost as if Mrs. Dashwood is having to convince herself and Edward that his mother can find happiness in him. This indicates that Mrs. Dashwood is surprised and is having a difficult time understanding why a mother would not want what is best for her child. The fact that she uses no other argument or logic in an attempt to sway Edward indicates the strength of her belief in the motherly connection, yet her rephrasing of the sentence shows a slight falter in that belief. The idea that a mother might not want what is best for her children, or at least what Mrs. Dashwood considers best for her children, causes her to stumble slightly.

Mrs. Dashwood, whose hopes for Mrs. Ferrars' emotional side prove false, also experiences her own faults. Though she believes herself more supportive of a mother than Mrs. Ferrars, her method of support is problematic. Though less vulgar, in her own way she is just as emotionally excessive as Mrs. Jennings. Austen writes that "Mrs. Dashwood entered into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking this excessive display of them. To her it was but the natural consequence of a strong affection in a young and ardent mind" (48). Mrs. Dashwood cannot guide the feelings of her daughter because she is affected by

them just as much. She does not discuss the dangers of overt displays of affection with Marianne, even though the publicity of her relationship is what eventually leads to the very well-known breakdown of its expectations. In this way, by indulging her daughter she is hurting her. Mrs. Dashwood is acting in a way that would seem more in line with a sister or friendly confidante, not a parent whose job it is to nurture and protect her, even at the expense of affection at times. However, this disappointment of character is the result of an assumption that women have a change of personality when they become mothers, which is unrealistic and unlikely.

However, Mrs. Dashwood retains awareness of certain social boundaries, at least in regards to herself if not her daughters. Austen writes that “Mrs. Dashwood, who did not chuse to dine with them [the Middletons] oftener than they dined at the cottage, absolutely refused on her own account” (94). Though allowing her daughters to accept social invitations that she will not, Mrs. Dashwood retains a calculated social calendar. Her visits are numbers based; the amount she receives, the amount she will return. Not wanting her daughters to be stifled socially, she allows them the opportunity to visit as they please, but she maintains a certain dignity in retaining her status as potential hostess rather than perpetual guest.

She does actively attempt to keep her children involved in society, however. Austen writes that “Marianne, though always unwilling to join any of their parties, was persuaded by her mother, who could not bear to have her seclude herself from any chance of amusement, to go likewise” (120). Mrs. Dashwood attempts to have her daughters mingling in society as much as possible. However, she does not always do so in a way that is best for them. While acquaintances and connections are extraordinarily important to create and maintain in the Dashwoods’ world, Mrs. Dashwood does not necessarily encourage her daughters to intermingle in a healthy way. A mother would be expected to help her daughters enter into society in a way that maintains a

positive reputation. Mrs. Dashwood encourages Marianne in an affection for Willoughby that is inappropriately public, which leads to scandal and pain. Part of this issue likely comes from Mrs. Dashwood's motivation. She "could not bear to have her [Marianne] seclude herself from any chance of amusement" (120). This is more of a sisterly desire to have fun than a motherly desire to do well. By not stifling her daughter's spirit, she neglects her education, yet somehow, as a mother, she is expected to do both equally well.

While deciding how one's own children should behave in public is one issue, determining how to interact with another's children is a completely separate problem. Elinor can see false flattery and a desire to make herself liked in Lucy's supposed delight with Lady Middleton's children, but Lady Middleton herself remains blissfully unaware. Austen attributes this to Lady Middleton's own belief that her children are without blame. She says:

...a fond mother, though in pursuit of praise for her children, the most rapacious of human beings, is likewise the most credulous; her demands are exorbitant; but she will swallow any thing; and the excessive affection and endurance of the Miss Steeles towards her offspring, were viewed therefore by Lady Middleton without the smallest surprise or distrust. She saw with maternal complacency all the impertinent incroachments and mischievous tricks to which her cousins submitted. (103)

This moment becomes more of a generic commentary on the faulty prejudices of mothers than it is a specific reference to Lady Middleton. Austen is essentially saying all mothers are gullible when it comes to their children. Austen writes that "her demands are exorbitant; but she will swallow any thing" (103). In a way, this is both a point of pride and vulnerability. By allowing herself to be blinded by praise for her children, Lady Middleton postpones being able to see the influence Lucy is attempting to have on her family.

When Lucy senses that Elinor considers her actions false, she says, “you think the little Middletons rather too much indulged; perhaps they may be on the outside of enough; but it is so natural in Lady Middleton; and for my part, I love to see children full of life and spirits; I cannot bear them if they are tame and quiet” (105). Lucy is saying that she likes children to be “full of life and spirits,” but in reality they are obviously spoiled (105). While Lucy is trying to suck up to her connections, and many of her actions are therefore exaggerated or falsified, her comment that “it is so natural in Lady Middleton” to indulge her children seems justified by Lady Middleton’s own actions.

Lady Middleton then uses her sway over Lucy to influence her actions. She manipulates what she believes is a natural affection about her children to make Lucy feel guilty enough to avoid cards and keep working on a project for Annamaria. Lady Middleton says, “I am glad...you are not going to finish poor little Annamaria’s basket this evening; for I am sure it must hurt your eyes to work fillagree by candlelight. And we will make the dear little love some amends for her disappointment to-morrow, and then I hope she will not much mind it” (121). Lady Middleton is being indirect to make Lucy feel guilty for not finishing her daughter’s basket. This paints her as sly, if not deceitful. The stereotype that women play games, whether in dating, marriage, or general life, is supported by this instance. Instead of being direct and asking Lucy if she would mind finishing her work, Lady Middleton attempts to make Lucy feel lazy or selfish. Instead of sisterhood or solidarity, the reader sees women attacking women. Lady Middleton’s children come first in this sense. While having a mother prioritize her children sounds like it should be a good thing, in this case it is not. Lady Middleton is putting their whims first and spoiling them, but, as seen by their behavior towards Elinor and the other guests, she is not putting their societal education first. In this way, Austen is portraying Lady Middleton as

negative. However, this again shows the difficulty of attaining the expected level of affection and discipline for one's children. Though Mrs. Dashwood in a way overdoes her affection at the expense of sense, the reader still roots for her daughters as protagonists while we have little hope that the little Middletons will grow up well. This is perhaps a commentary on Austen's part on the value of affection over gifts, though there is still danger in the overabundance of either when not checked by sense.

While her companions judge Lady Middleton for her overindulgent behavior and snide remarks, she in turn judges others based on their attitudes towards her children. Austen writes that because Elinor and Marianne “neither flattered herself [Lady Middleton] nor her children, she could not believe them good-natured; and because they were fond of reading, she fancied them satirical: perhaps without exactly knowing what it was to be satirical; but that did not signify. It was censure in common use, and easily given” (207). This quote assigns several negative qualities to Lady Middleton. To begin with, she dislikes someone for not praising her children without cause. This shows a stereotype that mothers think their children are the best thing in the world, regardless of justification. However, it is important to note that this does not seem to be a sweet moment of unconditional love for her children. Rather, it seems a point of pride that others admire her children, despite multiple hints that they are rather poorly behaved. She also judges the Dashwood daughters for being satirical “without exactly knowing what it was to be satirical; but that did not signify. It was censure in common use, and easily given” (207). She accuses them of a quality without knowing what it means. It is enough to her that it is a popular insult. This seems to be a negative comment on group mentality rather than individual thought. However, her overindulgence is not all that different from that of Mrs. Dashwood

towards Marianne. Both are the result of picking one “motherly” quality over another. Having this set of qualities be incompatible with each other leaves no option other than failure.

Lady Middleton shows no indication of being willing to teach her daughter a lesson in patience. She slyly tells Lucy that “My poor little girl would be sadly disappointed, I know, if the basket was not finished to-morrow, for though I told her it certainly would not, I am sure she depends upon having it done” (Austen 121). Rather than enforce a core value for her daughter, she makes Lucy feel bad for not being willing to sacrifice her evening for someone else’s child. In addition, she is implying what she would like Lucy to do instead of being straightforward and just asking.

Lucy jumps at the opportunity of serving Lady Middleton’s stringent demands, however, because she is so desperate to make a good impression on those around her. She is even more desirous of pleasing Mrs. Ferrars, who obviously has a much more direct hold over Edward’s future. She confides in an unwilling Elinor: “If we could be certain that it would be only for a while! But Mrs. Ferrars is a very headstrong proud woman, and in her first fit of anger upon hearing it, would very likely secure every thing to Robert” (Austen 125). Even though Lucy is hardly a likeable character, her assumption that Mrs. Ferrars would allow her pride to ruin the chances of one her own children is correct. To say Mrs. Ferrars would be guided by a “fit of anger” suggests the stereotype that women are irrational and guided by whims. Through characters such as Mrs. Ferrars and Marianne, it seems Austen believes these women exist, but that she does not support the behavior as worthy of a protagonist. Rather, her protagonist either disapproves of or attempts to change such behavior in those around her. This indicates that Austen at least hopes to disassemble the general belief that women exist in this stereotype naturally and without awareness. Rather, by the character of her protagonist she shows that

women, too, judge the idea of being completely guided by emotional whim. It is not inherently a trait in all females and can thus not be used as an excuse to write women off. In addition, women remain individual women after motherhood, regardless of whether those qualities are positive or negative. Austen shows that women are people with their own whims who themselves do not change but who are suddenly judged more forcefully after becoming mothers.

Lucy is correct in her fear that Mrs. Ferrars will make her and Edward's path difficult. While John Dashwood seems to genuinely champion Mrs. Ferrars as acting from kindness, the reader is inclined to disagree with his assessment. He says, "A thousand a-year is a great deal for a mother to give away, to make over forever; but Mrs. Ferrars has a noble spirit" (Austen 190). Austen seems to be using a tone of irony here. To say that Mrs. Ferrars "has a noble spirit" because she is able to make the sacrifice of sustaining her children shows that she really places the value of money over the value of her family. However, given the forceful focus of the marriage plot on money, it can be argued that her society conditioned her to have an all-encompassing focus on financial control and stability. After fearfully instilling what a lack of money could mean for so many heroines, society is then equally judgmental that this fear is not blissfully and automatically dropped after marriage. Mrs. Ferrars and the women of her class are forced to place all of their focus on retaining social status and then are condemned for maintaining those fears and concerns by the same audience that put them in place.

In a way, Mrs. Ferrars has even more stereotypes placed on her than all the rest because she is a mother-in-law rather than just a mother. Austen writes, "The important Tuesday came that was to introduce the two young ladies to this formidable mother-in-law" (196). "Formidable" is hardly a flattering term. It paints the stereotype of a mother-in-law as even worse than a mother. Because this is an introduction taking place rather than a continuation of

acquaintance, it is implied that Mrs. Ferrars has a less than pleasant reputation. It is assumed from the beginning that the meeting will be a negative experience, which makes it difficult to be anything but.

Though Mrs. Ferrars does have even more of a wicked stepmother stereotype to overcome, she does have one or two redeeming qualities: “Mrs. Ferrars was a little, thin woman, upright, even to formality, in her figure, and serious, even to sourness, in her aspect....She was not a woman of many words: for, unlike people in general, she proportioned them to the number of her ideas” (196). Though the last bit of this quote is an insult in the sense that it implies Mrs. Ferrars says few words because she has few ideas, there is also a sense of approbation that she, unlike other mothers in the book, does not talk just for the sake of talking. Though it makes her formidable and inhospitable, this quality also protects her from some of the negative comments aimed at silly and gossiping Mrs. Jennings.

However, what could have been a positive rebelling against a silliness stereotype is forestalled by her meanness. Elinor comes out of her meeting with Mrs. Ferrars with no positive feelings: “Elinor’s curiosity to see Mrs. Ferrars was satisfied. – She had found in her every thing that could tend to make a farther connection between the families, undesirable. – She has seen enough of her pride, her meanness, and her determined prejudice against herself, to comprehend all the difficulties that must have perplexed the engagement” (Austen 201). Contrary to what one would expect of a mother hoping for the happiness of her child, Elinor suspects that Mrs. Ferrars would actively work against her son’s happiness if it suited her own needs. This picture of motherhood stands in stark contrast to that embodied by Mrs. Dashwood, who is so overzealously supportive of her daughters’ emotional desires that she actually hinders their wellbeing. Mrs. Ferrars chooses stability and Mrs. Dashwood chooses emotion. They each



embody a single “motherly” trait and their discord symbolizes the impossibility of all “motherly” traits existing in cohesion.

When John Dashwood continues to stand up for Mrs. Ferrars despite her cruelty and spite, an otherwise fairly calm Elinor finally breaks through her polite demeanor to point out the ridiculousness of the situation:

Though it is not to be supposed that Mrs. Ferrars can have the smallest satisfaction in knowing that her son has money enough to live upon, - for that must be quite out of the question; - yet why, after her late behaviour, is she supposed to feel at all? – she has done with her son, she has cast him off for ever, and has made all those over whom she had any influence, cast him off likewise. Surely, after doing so, she cannot be imagined liable to any impression of sorrow or of joy on his account – she cannot be interested in anything that befalls him. – She would not be so weak as to throw away the comfort of a child, and yet retain the anxiety of a parent!” (Austen 250)

Though John Dashwood calls Mrs. Ferrars “one of the most affectionate mothers in the world,” he says that “every circumstance that may accelerate that dreadful event, must be concealed from her as much as possible” (251). That “dreadful event” is the supposedly love-induced marriage and happiness for her son. Elinor slickly points out that surely Mrs. Ferrars “would not be so weak as to throw away the comfort of a child, and yet retain the anxiety of a parent” (250). This moment of hidden chastisement flies over John Dashwood’s head, but the audience applauds Elinor’s brutal honesty. Whereas many characters defer to Mrs. Ferrars out of fear, Elinor is not afraid to voice hypocrisy as she sees it. Elinor says, “Surely...she cannot be imagined liable to any impression of sorrow or of joy on his account – she cannot be interested in anything that

befalls him” (250). Her use of the word “surely” shows that she thinks it extremity beyond reason that Mrs. Ferrars could be so flippant and selfish in her attitude toward her son.

Mrs. Ferrars is so uninclined to be seen as kind that she actually considers it a weakness to be seen as affectionate towards one’s children. When discussing the eventual reunion between Edward and his mother, Austen writes, “After a proper resistance on the part of Mrs. Ferrars, just so violent and so steady as to preserve her from that reproach which she always seemed fearful of incurring, the reproach of being too amiable, Edward was admitted to her presence, and pronounced to be again her son” (317). Mrs. Ferrars’ greatest fear is being considered too amiable, which stands in contrast with the expectation of nurturing motherhood, but stands in accordance with the motherly expectation of societal discipline. Austen says that though Elinor and Edward are eventually cordially allowed into Mrs. Ferrars’ presence, “they were never insulted by her real favour or preference. – That was due to the folly of Robert, and the cunning of his wife” (319). One must either be foolish or play games to win her favor, which Austen seems to be condemning as a lack of sincerity that is undesirable.

This brings the reader back to Mrs. Jennings, who, though chatty, is anything but insincere. When Marianne first begins to show signs of severe disquietude, “Mrs. Jennings came immediately to their room on her return, and without waiting to have her request of admittance answered, opened the door and walked in with a look of real concern” (Austen 162). The fact that Austen specifies that Mrs. Jennings entered the room “with a look of real concern” indicates a slight tone of surprise compared to Mrs. Jennings’ general silliness. Despite her love of gossip and teasing, when Marianne is actually ill, Mrs. Jennings finds a sense of seriousness to help her. This is reminiscent of her sudden switch from frivolity to seriousness when Charlotte gave birth.

These admirable actions make the reader love her even though she lacks other expected “motherly” qualities such as chastisement and discipline.

Mrs. Jennings again rises to the occasion when she learns that Willoughby’s inconstancy is to blame for Marianne’s pain. She rages that “he has used a young lady of my acquaintance abominably ill, and I wish with all my soul his wife may plague his heart out....if ever I meet him again, I will give him such a dressing as he has not had this many a day” (Austen 162). Though one could lump this lashing of Mrs. Jennings’ into the category of scolding and therefore make it seem negative, the place of genuine concern from which it stems is redeeming. Mrs. Jennings hopes that Mr. Willoughby’s wife will “plague his heart out” in addition to threatening retribution from herself. She is giving off a “mama bear” sort of protection. Though she is kind and silly most of the time, when someone that she cares for as a daughter is emotionally or physically hurt, she rears up in vengeance. As a mother figure, she is a protector. The question remains why such an admirably advocating quality is mixed with such a character of ridiculousness. Austen is saying that it is impossible for a mother, even a good one, to not have a character flaw. The fact that all of the mothers in her books are flawed is meant to point out the impossibility of attaining the standards of perfection that society would demand a mother possess.

Even with Mrs. Jennings’ sweet nature and generosity, Elinor still finds her amusing as if she were dealing with a sweet-tempered child. Austen writes, “Had not Elinor, in the sad countenance of her sister, seen a check to all mirth, she could have been entertained by Mrs. Jennings’ endeavours to cure a disappointment in love, by a variety of sweetmeats and olives, and a good fire” (163). Elinor almost sees Mrs. Jennings’ efforts towards Marianne as quaint, rather than likely to be effective. Elinor is the one who experiences a “check to all mirth” in “the

sad countenance of her sister” and who finds Mrs. Jennings’ “endeavours to cure a disappointment in love, by a variety of sweetmeats and olives, and a good fire” as entertaining (163). The setup of this scene again makes Elinor feel like the older and wiser figure. It is like she is a mother watching a young child attempt to comfort another with transitory, but well-meaning, offers.

It is interesting, however, that even though Mrs. Jennings shows this much interest or care towards children who are not her own she feels little concern at all for the child she believes is illegitimately born of Colonel Brandon. She tallies the child up along with the list of pros or cons about Colonel Brandon’s situation and eligibility for marriage: “Two thousand a year without debt or drawback – except the little love-child, indeed; aye, I had forgot her; but she may be ’prenticed out at small cost, and then what does it signify?” (Austen 166). This is an interesting moment in terms of motherhood because an otherwise fairly caring mother seems willing to pretend a child does not exist. Though it is not her child in question, it is still interesting that as a mother she is willing to ignore the parent-child relationship. Rather than be an advocate for the child, she says that “she may be ’prenticed out at a small cost, and then what does it signify?” (166). Mrs. Jennings is casually discussing how a child may be dismissed from the view of society without completely abandoning her. She addresses this casually as if putting a child to work if he or she is not legitimate is a matter of no concern. Her motherly instincts seem to only extend to legitimate children or those she has taken under her own wing in friendship. To say, “then what does it signify?” implies that she is saying having a child under the radar is a mere inconvenience that does not need to be a matter of too much concern as long as he or she is kept out of the way.

Despite Mrs. Jennings' lack of concern for the inclusiveness of an illegitimate child, her concern for the Dashwood daughters has always seemed genuine. When Marianne says, "All that she wants is gossip, and she only likes me now because I supply it," the reader feels that this harsh critique is ignoring all of the care that Mrs. Jennings has shown her while she has been under her wing (170). Though Mrs. Jennings is certainly far from perfect, and often far from respectability as a decision-maker, the reader feels the injustice of Marianne's accusation of lack of sincerity. Indeed, if there is one thing Mrs. Jennings certainly does not lack, it is sincerity of emotion.

Mrs. Jennings' kindness extends beyond immediate children to grandchildren. Austen writes that "This event [the birth of her grandson], [is] highly important to Mrs. Jennings's happiness" (207). Her nurturing side extends beyond her own children into the next generation. It is interesting that Austen refers to the birth of a child as an event. This makes it seem more calculated than emotional, perhaps hinting at the idea that society bases mothers' identities on their posterity. By this logic, the more future generations, the more prestige for the matron of the family.

John Dashwood attempts to turn Mrs. Jennings' kindness to material gain. Insisting that her inheritance should rightfully go to his sisters, he says, "Her daughters are both exceedingly well married, and therefore I cannot perceive the necessity of her remembering them farther" (191). By implying that a mother has no responsibility to her daughters after they are married, John Dashwood shows a lack of understanding of familial connection, which is not surprising given the way he talked himself out of aiding his sisters after their father died.

Elinor ignores her brother's hypocrisy and appreciates Mrs. Jennings for her eccentric and sincere self. She and Mrs. Dashwood are similar in that they are both able to gain a certain

seriousness about them when the situation becomes grim. Austen writes that “Mrs. Dashwood could be calm, could be even prudent, when the life of a child was at stake” (284). When the situation becomes dire, Mrs. Dashwood is able to draw on whatever instinct leads her to physically nurture rather than emotionally spoil. This is an important shift in Mrs. Dashwood’s character that is so strong even Marianne feels it. Austen writes that “mortifying and humiliating must be the origin of those regrets, which she [Mrs. Dashwood] could wish her not to indulge” (180). This is a bit of a harsh judgement of Mrs. Dashwood’s decision-making abilities. Elinor is saying that if even her mother could not indulge Marianne’s emotional despair that “mortifying and humiliating must be the origin of those regrets” (180). If anything less drastic than “mortifying and humiliating” is encouraged by Mrs. Dashwood, then Elinor is saying that her mother has a loose reign on emotional indulgences.

However, regardless of her emotional overtures at times, she remains a comforting figure in her daughters’ lives. When Marianne is depressed, her number one desire is to see her mother. Austen writes that “All her impatience to be home again now returned; her mother was dearer to her than ever; dearer through the very excess of her mistaken confidence in Willoughby” (171). Mrs. Dashwood is somewhat of a safety net to Marianne, making her a figure of constancy. Her sense may not be constant, but her reliability as a figure in her children’s lives does not change. However, Marianne’s belief that the “only possible alleviation of her wretchedness, the personal sympathy of her mother” puts a severe amount of pressure on Mrs. Dashwood (180). Obviously, one person cannot possibly be an all-encompassing solution to the issues of those around them. Therefore, Austen is pointing out the unattainable expectations being placed on a mother.

Ultimately, Mrs. Dashwood ends up sharing her maternal responsibility with Elinor. Austen writes that “Mrs. Dashwood, however, conforming, as she trusted, to the wishes of that

daughter, by whom she then meant in the warmth of her heart, to be guided in everything...” (303-304). She acknowledges that familial responsibility is a group dynamic rather than an individual responsibility. By sharing that load with other members of her family, a more comprehensive education is attained.

To be motherly is not necessarily the same as being a mother. To encompass every trait that is required in a well-rounded upbringing is impossible of one person. While the mothers of *Sense and Sensibility* as individuals are ridiculous, indulgent, cruel, or emotional, and thus imperfect, they are, in fact, individuals. By making these mothers flawed, Austen is actually advocating the idea that they are humans rather than perfect, unattainable entities.

### Chapter Three

#### Moral Motherhood in *Mansfield Park*

*Mansfield Park* holds a special place in the Austen canon. A proclaimed favorite by Austen herself, it warrants a little extra attention. While the novel's protagonist Fanny Price has often been a subject of critical debate as one of the less inviting characters of Austen's works, she is not the only character worth studying. Those in authority around her actively shape her story and its outcome. A study of mother figures, or women who have an authoritative role in Fanny's life rather than just a biological connection, include Mrs. Price, Lady Bertram, and, of course, Mrs. Norris. The three sisters each have different faults in their parenting styles that allow for Austen to provide an uncharacteristically strict evaluation of motherhood and the education of the next generation.

Each of the women in this set of sisters is differentiated personality-wise from the others early in the novel. They are set up to represent different symbolic statuses and values. Miss Maria Ward, who ultimately becomes Lady Bertram, was said to have made a lucky match in marriage. Austen writes, "All Huntingdon exclaimed on the greatness of the match, and her uncle, the lawyer, himself, allowed her to be at least three thousand pounds short of any equitable claim to it" (5). This quote reveals several things about the society in which Maria Ward lives. First, marriages are rather public affairs. The entire local area is invested in discussing the match. Second, what makes a marriage "great" according to this quote is not love or happiness, but fiscal advantage. To say that she is "at least three thousand pounds short" of deserving the marriage is to base compatibility on money, not character. There is a weighing system to determine eligibility and only a few things, such as beauty, can alter the scales.



One of Lady Bertram's sisters, Miss Ward, is "at the end of half a dozen years...obliged to be attached to the Rev. Mr. Norris, a friend of her brother-in-law, with scarcely any private fortune" (Austen 5). To say she is "obliged" illustrates the dependence of status on money and, for women, marriage. It also indicates that Mr. and Mrs. Norris' marriage is not based on love, but on necessity. As is often the case in Austen's novels, the introduction of a marriageable male is followed by his fortune. Unlike Mr. Bingley or Mr. Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*, who fare favorably from this system, Mr. Norris has "scarcely any private fortune," making him someone to be settled for in the eyes of the Wards.

However, Mr. Norris at least has the benefit of respectability, unlike Miss Frances Ward's husband of choice. Miss Frances, later Mrs. Price, marries "to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly" (Austen 5). While this passage does not directly state that Mrs. Price chose to give up these niceties of life for love, it seems plausible as at least a partial motive. However, her choice is still treated with disdain by those around her. From this point on throughout the novel, Mrs. Price is seen as the most chaotic and unrefined of the sisters. Though Austen's novels often place the importance of love over money, as seen with Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* and Elinor Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, the fact that the sister who married, potentially, for love is portrayed in the most negative light is most likely a commentary on the importance of loyalty to family rather than a commentary of money in marriage.

All of these sisters somehow play a motherly role for the protagonist, Fanny. Mrs. Price is her biological mother, Lady Bertram is the woman in whose household she lives, and Mrs. Norris attempts to dictate her life. None of them are ideal mothers, and Mrs. Norris is actively cruel. However, as this thesis has sought to make clear, it is impossible to be an ideal mother in

the eyes of the contemporary society because the expectations surrounding women are impossibly high. Ironically, it is Mrs. Norris that instigates the actions that bring Fanny to Mansfield Park, which ultimately works out in Fanny's favor.

Fanny begins her stay at Mansfield Park because her mother and father cannot financially support the eight children they have in conjunction with the ninth on the way. Austen writes, "By the end of eleven years, however, Mrs. Price could no longer afford to cherish pride or resentment, or to lose one connection that might possibly assist her" (6). While a large family is not necessarily a negative thing, Austen's tone towards the Price family suggests a disapproval of knowingly living outside of one's means. In the same paragraph, she says that the Prices have "a superfluity of children, and such a want of almost every thing else" (6). There is an edge in the juxtaposition of these clauses. Austen had a large family, but the order in which she discusses the Prices' troubles suggests she thinks their money woes were at least in part preventable. To marry someone in an attempt to "disoblige her family" (5) and then to continue to have children in spite of the fact that her husband is "disabled for active service" with "a very small income" is a slippery slope that has led Mrs. Price to a place of "bemoaning the circumstance" of another child (Austen 6). Again, this suggests that Austen's disapproval is aimed at the handling of circumstances rather than the children themselves. This attitude on the part of the author seems even more supported by the protagonist of the book whose greatest attribute is her ability to, somewhat stodgily, bear up under difficult circumstances. In addition, Austen's novels often advocate the idea of marrying for love over money. It is therefore implied that it is not Mrs. Price's decision to marry for love that is an issue, but rather the lack of joint parental sense to stay within the family's means. This fault, however, falls on both mother and father. Whereas Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris exclusively blame their sister for her situation, Austen

acknowledges that the responsibility for a family's well-being cannot fall on the shoulders of just one person when two are involved.

According to Mona Scheuermann in her book *Reading Jane Austen*, the act of one's children being brought up by one's relatives was not necessarily a bad thing nor did it indicate carelessness on the part of the parents. Scheuermann refers to the practice of relatives raising children as a "commonplace social reorganization" (14). In relation to *Mansfield Park* specifically, she says, "It should be remembered that it was not unusual for young male children to be boarded at schools some distance from home. Thus in the novel *Mansfield Park* a young girl plucked from the poor side of the family to be raised by the well-off branch of that family simply is a reflection of reality" (14-5). Therefore, Fanny's displacement from her parents is in line with common practice. This type of joint parenthood is a perfect backdrop for the study of non-biological motherhood. Mrs. Price, Mrs. Norris, and Lady Bertram are all part of the parent structure in Fanny's life.

Mrs. Norris presents an apparently kind front at first, but she is quickly revealed to be a hypocrite. When she is attempting to persuade Sir Thomas of the benefits of taking Fanny in, she says, "Give a girl an education, and introduce her properly into the world, and ten to one but she has the means of settling well, without farther expense to any body" (Austen 7). Even during the course of this single quote, Mrs. Norris' focus on money is made clear. Her first thought to "give a girl an education" seems progressive and promising, but by the end she clarifies that she only means to give advantage for the purpose of keeping Fanny from being of "farther expense." Her façade of generosity slips to reveal her true stinginess. However, given that she had to settle for a husband of little fortune after six years of waiting for a match, one would not be surprised that she feels a level of desperation towards money. In a world that conditioned her to have marrying

well with money be her sole goal, it is hypocritical of society to judge her for being unable to rid herself of the trait for which it laid the groundwork.

Mrs. Norris' character as a guardian is further revealed when she says, "Whatever I can do, as you well know, I am always ready enough to do for the good of those I love; and, though I could never feel for this little girl the hundredth part of the regard I bear your own dear children,...I should hate myself if I were capable of neglecting her" (Austen 8). Mrs. Norris is, in fact, never ready to do anything for anyone. She suggests actions to others, but rarely takes on any responsibility herself. In addition, she may not "neglect" Fanny in the sense of ignoring her presence, but she certainly neglects her emotional needs and growth. She tells Sir Thomas that she could never love Fanny as much as his biological children, and she continuously attempts to prove this to be true throughout the novel by reminding Fanny that she is lesser. For example, when the Bertram sisters find Fanny dull for her lack of formal education, Mrs. Norris agrees with them:

To be sure, my dear, that is very stupid indeed, and shows a great want of genius and emulation. But, all things considered, I do not know whether it is not as well that it should be so, for, though you know (owing to me) your papa and mamma are so good as to bring her up with you, it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are; on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference.

(Austen 16)

Instead of encouraging compromise or empathy, she kindles dislike and snobbery. Mrs. Norris is the instigator of many of the ill feelings in the novel. If she does not introduce the negativity herself, she likely finds kindling to keep it alive. Even though she is the one who suggests to Sir Thomas, as quoted earlier, that one of the benefits of Fanny living with them is that she would be

able to receive an education that could help better her station in life, she tells Maria and Julia that it is a desirable thing that Fanny be less educated than they are. Rather than help teach them to be giving, she encourages them to be condescending. However, she is passing on traits that she was forced to learn herself. As a woman, and one who was not rich at that, society did nothing to aid her but continued to expect much of her. Being slightly cynical and extremely calculating may not make her likeable, but these traits allowed her to survive. She is therefore passing on technical tips for survival to the next generation.

Because of her active influence, Mrs. Norris is a mother figure not only to Fanny, but to Maria and Julia as well. In regards to the above, Austen writes, “Such were the counsels by which Mrs. Norris assisted to form her nieces’ minds; and it is not very wonderful that with all their promising talents and early information, they should be entirely deficient in the less common acquirements of self-knowledge, generosity, and humility” (16). Austen makes it clear that Maria and Julia by their own dispositions are prone to snobbery, but Mrs. Norris encourages, rather than discourages, this attribute. As an authoritative female figure in their lives, she has power over their upbringing. But again, it is almost impossible to instill loving kindness and hard-nosed realism, yet both traits are expected to be passed down by mother figures. Though her efforts eventually result in Maria’s downfall, her efforts are more understandable than they seem at first glance. She is attempting to give her nieces a fighting chance in a world that she knows will do nothing to help them.

Mrs. Norris is the first member of Mansfield Park to see Fanny, and she does little to make her transition a smooth one. Of their ride to the new home, Austen writes, “Mrs. Norris had been talking to her the whole way from Northampton of her wonderful good fortune, and the extraordinary degree of gratitude and good behaviour which it out to produce, and her [Fanny’s]

consciousness of misery was therefore increased by the idea of its being a wicked thing for her not to be happy” (12). Mrs. Norris’ offer to attend Fanny on her trip is obviously not to ease the burden or to be a friendly face, but rather to put on a show of importance. This illustrates the danger of an authority figure, particularly a parental one, being focused more on oneself than the object of his or her education. Austen writes that “Fanny crept about in constant terror” during her first few days at Mansfield Park (13). This seems to be largely Mrs. Norris’ fault; she sets the tone for Fanny’s acceptance at the new house. Though the other members of the household may not be as actively cruel or degrading, Mrs. Norris keeps her judgement ever-present, making it difficult for Fanny to escape.

However, even though this attitude is ill-judged, Fanny does eventually gain the ability to resist unfair judgement and expectations. Though not kind, Mrs. Norris does in a way help instill this ability that is necessary for a woman at the time. Austen is not advocating Mrs. Norris’ methods, but she is showing how her circumstances led her to feel that survival is the most important trait to pass on. Again, cruelty is never acceptable, but by showing how Mrs. Norris was conditioned by the environment around her to value the wrong things, Austen illustrates that there is a faulty and unfair structure underlying women’s roles in society that can lead them to desperation. While she does not advocate Mrs. Norris as an authority figure, she reveals that greater issues are at work as well that make her personality slightly more understandable, but not likeable.

Mrs. Norris once more proves herself more capable of word than action when the suggestion is remembered that Fanny eventually live with her rather than Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram. Austen records her response to the renewal of the conversation: “‘Well, Lady Bertram,’ said Mrs. Norris, moving to go, ‘I can only say that my sole desire is to be of use to your family

– and so if Sir Thomas should ever speak again of my taking Fanny, you will be able to say, that my health and spirits put it quite out of the question” (23-4). The direction included in the dialogue tag of this quote is interesting because Mrs. Norris is physically moving to avoid the responsibility of taking Fanny. Her hypocrisy is once more revealed in the juxtaposition of clauses of the same sentence. While saying that she wants nothing more than to be of service, she refuses to provide any service. She makes her distaste for being useful even more blatantly clear when she follows up this explanation to Lady Bertram with “besides that, I really should not have a bed to give her, for I must always keep a spare room for a friend” (Austen 24). Her refusal to take care of a child, and at that a child that is only present at her request, is predicated on the necessity of keeping a bed empty in case anyone should need it. The sheer volume of her dialogue seems to dissuade Lady Bertram, who rarely exerts effort and therefore has no desire to untangle an extensive web of words, from seeing or caring about the hypocrisy.

Even Sir Thomas is surprised by her refusal to take Fanny: “He could not but wonder at her refusing to do any thing for a niece, whom she had been so forward to adopt” (Austen 24). However, he does not dwell long on the thought, and Fanny remains at Mansfield Park proper. It is interesting that no one seems interested in attempting to put a check on the obviously pernicious influence Mrs. Norris has on those around her, particularly the children, but as mentioned before, Lady Bertram seems content to have her parental duties alleviated at any cost and Sir Thomas is subject to being blinded by Mrs. Norris’ many lies.

As the children turn into young adults, Mrs. Norris’ influence does not lessen. She is the instigator of much of the major drama in the novel. If she does not start it on purpose for her own amusement, her desire to thrust herself into prominence or security often starts a poorly thought out path that has serious consequences. One of the most obvious instances of the latter is her

involvement in Maria's marriage to Mr. Rushworth. Though practically everyone involved can see that it is a match lacking compatibility, she insists on furthering the relationship. Maria's interest in him begins because of his large fortune. Austen writes, "Mrs. Norris was most zealous in promoting the match, by every suggestion and contrivance, likely to enhance its desirableness to either party; and, among other means, by seeking an intimacy with the gentleman's mother, who at present lived with him, and to whom she even forced Lady Bertram...to pay a morning visit" (29). This quote is interesting for several reasons. One is that it is odd that the aunt, rather than the young people involved, is the most enthusiastic promoter of the situation. She does not stop to consider whether or not it is a match in which Maria will be happy. Rather, the fact that it would put Maria in a place of prominence and rich society is enough motivation for her to be keenly involved. Though this match ultimately turns out poorly, she is certainly not the only mother in Austen's novels to advocate a practical, rather than loving, match. The fact that she acts as many mothers but with poorer results shows that Austen feels that the need for practical marriage because of lack of female agency is itself the culprit. Mrs. Norris is not acting all that differently from Mrs. Bennet in this area, and both are propelled by a need-driven society. It is also worth noting that Mrs. Norris is the one forcing Lady Bertram, the actual mother in this dynamic, to be involved. This speaks to the mothering abilities of Lady Bertram as well as Mrs. Norris and suggests something lacking on the part of the former. "Contrivance" seems an appropriate word to describe Mrs. Norris' actions because it suggests conniving and deceptive motives and methods. However, based on her own difficulty attaining a marriage that kept her securely within her social class, it is not surprising that she would go to any means to attain that even more quickly for her nieces.



Those more or less under the direction of her household are not the only young people Mrs. Norris attempts to influence. When Mr. Rushworth is deliberating the price of improvement to his house, Sotherton, she chips in about the price. The man Mr. Rushworth is considering hiring in conjunction with the improvement plans charges “five guineas a day” (Austen 39). Mrs. Norris quickly exclaims in response to this information, “Well, and if they were *ten*...I am sure *you* need not regard it. The expense need not be any impediment. If I were you, I should not think of the expense” (39). She talks of money as if it were nothing – as long as it is someone else’s money. Earlier in the novel she speaks of living practically and saving money, not for the purpose of using it to help anyone, but for the practice of having some left over at the end of each year just for the sake of it. Lady Bertram’s response to this is “You always do [manage to put some aside], don’t you?” (Austen 23). There is an edge of slight sarcasm in Lady Bertram’s voice, if the reader can believe for a moment that she would exert herself to sarcasm, implying that Mrs. Norris always saves money. There is a stinginess associated with her methodology. She does not help anyone. She saves just to prove that she can. However, given the focus that the society around her places on being affluent, it becomes slightly more understandable that she would attempt to keep financial control where she can. In this light, her suggestion that Mr. Rushworth be unquestionably liberal with his money is extremely hypocritical. She seeks to be influential, not helpful.

Even in minor moments, Mrs. Norris finds a way to be unnecessarily involved. When Fanny is admiring some stars, she pops up: “Fanny sighed alone at the window till scolded away by Mrs. Norris’s threats of catching cold” (Austen 81). Mrs. Norris has by this point in the novel shown every sign in the world of not caring about Fanny. It can then be assumed that she scolds Fanny just for the sake of exercising authority. It is also worth noting the words “scolded” and

“threats” in the above quote. Neither of these are loving. They are a way to be cruel and in control at the same time, which seems to be a balance Mrs. Norris desperately and constantly seeks. Again, this cruelty is not acceptable at any time, but Austen shows that Mrs. Norris’ own search for marriage and security was a long enough wait to likely have caused desperation. She has kept a trait that sprang into existence because she was not attaining something society told her she needed at the pace the same society told her was normal.

In larger matters, too, Mrs. Norris takes an active and adverse role. In terms of the play that causes so much of the negative action of the novel, she urges Fanny to take part in something she knows Sir Thomas could not approve of. As many of the involved actors are urging Fanny to participate against her inclination, “Mrs. Norris completed the whole, by thus addressing her in a whisper at once angry and audible: ‘What a piece of work here is about nothing, - I am quite ashamed of you, Fanny...Take the part with good grace, and let us hear no more of the matter, I entreat’” (Austen 103). It is Fanny’s ultimate refusal to participate in the play that makes her an integral part in the system of values at Mansfield Park in the eyes of Sir Thomas. By urging her to participate in the play, therefore, Mrs. Norris is attempting to urge her to transgress against the values of the house. As the only active adult in the situation while the play was being formed, Mrs. Norris has a responsibility to stop it, but instead fails in this role of authority by encouraging it.

Mrs. Norris also takes it upon herself to attempt to keep the already shy Fanny humble. When a butler enters the room to request a meeting on behalf of Sir Thomas and Fanny starts to stand up, Mrs. Norris says, “Stay, stay, Fanny! What are you about? – where are you going? – don’t be in such a hurry. Depend upon it, it is not you that are wanted....What would Sir Thomas want you for?” (Austen 220). Not only does this quote illustrate her belief, or her desperation to

believe, in her own self-importance, but it shows that she willingly belittles Fanny. Instead of encouraging the youth that she has influence over, she degrades it. Not only does she say that Fanny is not the one whose presence is requested, but she says so with a note of incredulity that indicates her belief in Fanny's worthlessness – and her hope that Fanny is aware of this belief. The reader cannot help but support the butler when he responds to Mrs. Norris that she is not the one wanted with a smug “half smile” (220).

It says a great deal about Mrs. Norris' character that her society is considered ultimate punishment. After Maria's scandal and disgrace, she is sent to live with Mrs. Norris because her father, though not wishing her to be homeless, will not accept her at home. The aunt and niece have a home set up for them “in another country – remote and private, where, shut up together with little society, on one side no affection, on the other, no judgement, it may be reasonably supposed that their tempers became their mutual punishment” (Austen 315). To live with Mrs. Norris is penance to Maria, but one without end. Despite being a favorite to her, Maria returns no affection to her aunt. Mrs. Norris' attitude has left none with affection, even those on whom she attempted to bestow it herself. In a paradoxical way, Julia ultimately fares better than Maria because of her lack of involvement with the same aunt. Austen writes, “That Julia escaped better than Maria was owing, in some measure, to a favourable difference of disposition and circumstance, but in a greater to her having been less the darling of that very aunt, less flattered, and less spoiled” (316). This is not only a personal insult to Mrs. Norris, but also a commentary on her “parenting” style. Because her methods of parenthood are not applied as strongly to Julia, Julia turns out better than her sister. Generally, the goal of parenthood is to benefit said child, but society asks for contradictory qualities in a mother that make it difficult to know which is more important to focus on.

Lady Bertram, though less actively a negative character, is still involved in the course of events because it is her lack of participation that allows Mrs. Norris to step in. Marilyn Francus, in her article “The Monstrous Mothers of *Mansfield Park*,” writes, “Lady Bertram’s failure to mother leaves a vacuum that her sister, Mrs. Norris, attempts to fill. At first glance, these sisters could not be more different: Lady Bertram is fertile, passive, and deferential, while Mrs. Norris is childless, active, and aggressive. But both are selfish...” (6). Lady Bertram cares little about the activities of her household so long as they do not adversely affect her. Her attitude about what happens around her can be seen early in the novel. Austen writes, “Lady Bertram did not at all like to have her husband leave her; but she was not disturbed by any alarm for his safety, or solicitude for his comfort, being one of those persons who think nothing can be dangerous or difficult, or fatiguing to any body but themselves” (25). Despite the fact that her husband is travelling a long journey to another country, Lady Bertram is not concerned for her husband’s safety. This leaves one to assume that the reason she does not like his departure is because it interferes with her own routine and comfort. However, it is once more important for the reader to remember that society instilled a focus on beauty and dismissiveness as the most significant qualities for a woman seeking marriage while also advocating the idea that a life of luxury and leisure was the ultimate prize. If Lady Bertram attained these things, she would have every reason to believe she was a success in the eyes of society because she achieved the life that her world expected a young woman to desire. While this does not make her laziness excusable in the eyes of Austen, it does show how she was conditioned to turn out the way she does.

When considering the huge responsibility of adopting a child for the sole sake of improving her circumstances, Lady Bertram cannot be bothered. In fact, her biggest concern is her dog. She says, “I hope she will not tease my poor pug...I have but just got Julia to leave it

alone” (Austen 10). This comment is barely related to the surrounding discussion and is not even addressed by those nearby, which gives Lady Bertram a floating, dream-like quality. She sits apart from others, and maintains a passive stance. She just cannot bring herself to be involved in anything so the world slips by around her. She is more concerned with her dog than her daughters. The focus of the above quotes is not teaching Julia manners or proper respect towards animals, but rather treats the pug as the beloved and the daughter as the slight pest. However, Lady Bertram’s lack of activity is somewhat more understandable when one acknowledges that she has reached the only goal society set for her: to be married with children. When her identity as a woman is so intertwined with her involvement in others, it is understandable that she might not be sure where to go once that goal has been attained. Society has left her no room to have concerns and cares of her own.

Austen paints an extensive portrait of Lady Bertram’s style of motherhood, and it is neither involved nor particularly positive:

To the education of her daughters, Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of needle-work, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to the latter, when it did not put herself to inconvenience, guided in every thing important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister. Had she possessed greater leisure for the service of her girls, she would probably have supposed it unnecessary, for they were under the care of a governess. (16)

Here it is directly stated that Lady Bertram does not care about the upbringing of her daughters, which in large part contributes to their later failed decisions as adults. Austen follows up the statement that Lady Bertram does not have time to care for her daughters with the image of her

lounging on the couch all day, making it perfectly clear that she does have time, and instead just chooses not to invest it. She shows no interest in or affection for her daughters. She puts herself fourth in line for the responsibility of raising them behind Sir Thomas, Mrs. Norris, and the governess. However, according to Francus, “Mothers and governesses are expected to raise daughters properly,” implying that governesses are a regular and expected part of the education system for female children (1). It is also significant that women are expected to be mothers without necessarily having any helpful training from society on how to be good ones. Rather, with such contradictory expectations placed on being a woman or mother, it becomes something of a guessing game whether or not one chooses the attitude that happens to be most socially acceptable in that moment.

Lady Bertram seems oblivious to the events of the novel except as they pertain directly towards herself. In the last scene of the book, Austen writes, “Selfishly dear as she [Fanny] had long been to Lady Bertram, she could not be parted with willingly by *her*. No happiness of son or niece could make her wish the marriage. But it was possible to part with her, because Susan remained to supply her place” (320). Despite everything that has occurred throughout the novel, the adoption of a niece, the scandal of a daughter, the upheaval of the Mansfield Park values followed by their restoration, Lady Bertram’s biggest concern is that she will no longer have a sewing partner to assist in removing any actual effort from the few hobbies to which she occasionally applies herself. She goes so far as to resent a marriage that would make two people dear to her quite happy, which is arguably the most active she is in the entire book. There is also no indication of growth. She does not learn to do without Fanny and survive on her own. Rather, she must find a replacement to keep her pattern of life exactly the same. While she is nowhere near as actively destructive as Mrs. Norris, Austen illustrates that her lack of participation and

love also cause problems for her children. However, it is her passiveness that protects her from some of the hurts experienced by the other characters. Society's cruelty produced different protective responses from the sisters. Mrs. Norris survives by being conniving, while Lady Bertram survives by refusing to be affected by anything.

Mrs. Price is featured the least prominently in the novel in terms of time, but she still plays an important role. When Fanny returns for a visit to Portsmouth, she is met with "looks of true kindness" by her mother (Austen 256). However, Fanny is ultimately shocked by the lack of propriety in her former home. Fanny witnesses an argument between two of her sisters and her mother, and Austen says, "Fanny was quite shocked. Every feeling of duty, honour, and tenderness was wounded by her sister's speech and her mother's reply" (262). Mrs. Price is almost the opposite of her sister Lady Bertram in terms of level of activity. While one does nothing but sit still, the other is always in chaotic motion.

The maternal hope that Fanny wishes to find in her mother amounts to nothing. Austen writes:

Every flattering scheme of being of consequence to her soon fell to the ground. Mrs. Price was not unkind – but, instead of gaining on her affection and confidence, and becoming more and more dear, her daughter never met with greater kindness from her, than on the first day of her arrival. The instinct of nature was soon satisfied, and Mrs. Price's attachment had no other source....Her daughters never had been much to her.  
(264)

Mrs. Price is not unkind, but Austen implies that she is stretched beyond her means in terms of both money and affection and faults her for it. As discussed earlier, the use of a governess in Austen's time was common, and therefore not taking hands-on responsibility for one's children

in every way would have been acceptable, but Austen draws a limit at this extreme. Mrs. Price neither cares for her children herself nor effectively delegates it to someone else, leaving them in a limbo of no education.

Austen calls Mrs. Price “a partial, ill-judging parent, a dawdle, a slattern, who neither taught nor restrained her children” (265). This seems like harsh judgement coming from the generally serene Austen. From an author whose disapproval usually comes through subtle irony, this direct bashing is somewhat striking. This could indicate a belief on the part of Austen that this situation was somewhat voluntary. A theme from many of Austen’s novels, including *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park* is that it is not worth it to marry for money over love. Given that this attitude is supported by so many examples, the reader must wonder if Mrs. Price was influenced by a desire to rebel in addition to affection. *Mansfield Park* has a stringent focus on the upkeep of moral values and obligations, arguably more so than any of Austen’s other novels. Therefore, it stands to reason that Austen could be condemning Mrs. Price’s choice of impropriety over attention to family, rather than her choice of love over money.

In addition, Austen seems to suggest that complete neglect on the part of a parent is a strong crime. Maaja A. Stewart, in the book *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions: Jane Austen's Novels in Eighteenth-Century Contexts*, writes, “Austen also uses absenteeism to underscore the patriarch’s moral failure” (115). Based on Austen’s attitude towards Mrs. Price and Lady Bertram, it stands to reason that this encompasses the matriarchy as well, if not more. Lady Bertram is emotionally absent and Mrs. Price is both emotionally and physically absent. Again, the practice of wealthy relatives raising children was not necessarily unheard of, but the lack of correspondence on the part of Mrs. Price in the intervening years and the lack of concern for Fanny during her visit add up to an ultimate lack of investment.



In *Mansfield Park*, there is no ideal mother. Mrs. Norris is actively destructive while her sisters are faulted for their passiveness. Unlike the ridiculous mothers embodied by characters of Mrs. Bennet or Mrs. Jennings, the mothers in this novel are subject to seemingly more serious critique. This is perhaps not surprising, however, given that *Mansfield Park* is arguably Austen's most serious moral novel. When taken as such, the book provides a commentary on the importance of mothers either directly or indirectly being involved in their children's education. However, while these mothers are faulted for their cruelty or passiveness rather than ridiculousness, Austen still goes to great lengths to show that society's stringent and impossible standards for women play a role in producing these attitudes.

## Conclusion

Through her novels of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Mansfield Park*, Jane Austen illustrates the difficulty and value of motherhood. She does not hold mothers to be saints, but rather genuine people, faults and all. Reality can be nothing but disappointing if one expects perfection, and Austen therefore attempts to create a more plausible look at reality and the influence of environment on motherhood. Mothers are not perfect, but this realization is no more disappointing than realizing other people in one's life are not perfect if a realistic standard is set forth.

Austen's collection of letters provides the reader with a unique insight into the author's life. Her correspondence with sisters and friends, particularly Cassandra, gives a modern reader an understanding of the author's background that seems to corroborate the view of mothers that she creates in fiction. In a letter to her sister Cassandra, Austen writes, "If Miss Pearson should return with me, pray be careful not to expect too much beauty. I will not pretend to say that on a first view she quite answered the opinion I had formed of her. My mother, I am sure, will be disappointed if she does not take great care" (Letter V). The idea that an acquaintance is coming to visit may seem inconsequential at first, but it does subtly highlight some of her mother's priorities. To say that her mother would be disappointed at a potential acquaintance not being beautiful indicates an attention to, and respect for, beauty if nothing else. This is reminiscent of Mrs. Bennet's focus on beauty in *Pride and Prejudice*. When describing the ball that introduces Mr. Bingley to local society to the reluctant Mr. Bennet, Mrs. Bennet says, "Mr. Bingley thought her [Jane] quite beautiful....First of all, he asked Miss Lucas. I was so vexed to see him stand up with her; but, however, he did not admire her at all: indeed, nobody can, you know" (Austen 8). Mrs. Bennet raves about her own daughter's beauty and judges Charlotte by her lack of the same.

If Austen's own mother does the same, then Austen's redemption of Mrs. Bennet as a realistic woman made ridiculous by the stringent demands of society could be applied to her own mother as well. However, given that Austen's letters show no indication that her mother attempted to force her into marriage as Mrs. Bennet fiercely did with Elizabeth Bennet, the similarities seem limited to minor character traits rather than parental strategies.

Austen also writes in a letter that her "mother has not been down at all to-day; the laudanum made her sleep a good deal, and upon the whole I think she is better. My father and I dined by ourselves. How strange!" (Letter VII). Though from this statement alone it is not overtly clear what ailment her mother suffers from, the reader discovers that she takes a form of opium, which explains some of the lethargy described throughout the letters. Despite whatever illness necessitates a prescription, Austen's mother outlives Austen herself.

Though Austen sometimes seems frustrated at care for her mother, she equally or more so seems joyfully concerned in her good days. She writes, "My mother made her entrée into the dressing-room through crowds of admiring spectators yesterday afternoon, and we all drank tea together for the first time these five weeks. She has had a tolerable night, and bids fair for a continuance in the same brilliant course of action to-day" (Letter VIII). Even though Austen may be toying with tone a little as she says her mother walked through "crowds of admiring spectators," she does seem genuinely glad that her mother is having a decent day of health. Similarly, though to call the ability to drink tea together a "brilliant course of action" may be hyperbolic, the sentiment that they enjoy being healthful enough to spend time together as a family remains.

At times Austen seems to respect her mother's spunk. She writes that the doctor "wants my mother to look yellow and to throw out a rash, but she will do neither" (Letter VIII). There is

a certain approval of defiance in the tone of this sentence. One can imagine a smirk on Austen's face as she recounts her mother's refusal to give in to the doctor's prognosis. As Jane Austen herself, alongside many of her characters, is spunky and defiant, while remaining charming, it stands to reason that her mother shares certain of these willful qualities.

Austen's mother also seems to share a character trait, though, again, not the same character overall, with Mrs. Norris in *Mansfield Park*. Austen writes, "My mother is afraid I have not been explicit enough on the subject of her wealth" (Letter XXII). She then proceeds to break down exact numbers and purchases for her reader. Mrs. Norris, too, is always the economist, and broadcasts the inner workings of this fact to those around her. An example of this is her nosiness into the habits of the newly-arrived Grants. When she discovers that Dr. Grant likes food, she is shocked that his wife, "instead of contriving to gratify him at little expense, gave her cook as high wages as they did at Mansfield Park...*Her* store-room she thought might have been good enough for Mrs. Grant to go into. Enquire where she would, she could not find out that Mrs. Grant had ever had more than five thousand pounds" (Austen 24). While both Austen's mother and Mrs. Norris show a propensity for, and an interest in, finances, there are a few key differences that separate the two. Austen's mother is discussing matters between relatives. She may be discussing details minutely, but she is not attempting to broadcast them publically. Mrs. Norris, on the other hand, is nosily attempting to discover the salary and fortune of another family. In addition, there is no indication that the Grants are living beyond their means. Rather, the sin in Mrs. Norris' eyes is that they do not live as meagerly as possible. As discussed in a prior chapter, however, the focus placed on wealth by society played an important role in Mrs. Norris' obsession with it. Austen's mother is proud of being economical, but without the implication of being stingy.

The fact that Austen seems to have borrowed characteristics from her own mother without directly basing a single novel character on her seems reasonable given Austen's immersion in her own family sphere. Her specialty was daily life, and she thus borrowed from those around her. Austen does not seem to idolize her mother nor paint her as perfect, but neither does she villainize her. The implication of this is that Austen had already mastered the lesson that she attempted to teach about motherhood through her novels. Mothers are people, and are therefore not perfect. They are subject to sickness, selfishness, and the pressures of society just like every other person around them. Therefore, it is ridiculous to hold them to a higher standard than others. While *Mansfield Park* does illustrate Austen's belief that if one takes on the responsibility of a child, then one should take it seriously and attempt to do his or her best, it does not indicate that a mother should be held to a standard of perfection. Parents are certainly accountable for their actions, but within reason and with the understanding that they, too, are human.

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