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Intersections and Implications of Feminist and Marxist Critical Theory in Jane Austen: *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park*

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Shannon

Intersections and Implications of Feminist and Marxist Critical Theory in Jane Austen:

Persuasion, Pride and Prejudice, and Mansfield Park

Life in 18th century England, and throughout much of the Western world, held a much different view for women than it would today. More often than not, women found themselves separated from the centers of activity and ideology that provided the lifeblood of society, observers rather than participants in the very societal structures that governed and contained them. Jane Austen wrote at a time when the separate spheres model of living enjoyed particular prevalence in society, drawing profound distinctions between what it meant to be male or female—ultimately privileging men as the dominant gender free to form and shape the world around them. Women, meanwhile, found themselves forced to settle into the small space reserved for them within private, domestic life—their duties already laid out for them if they stayed within the home, or opportunities severely limited should they venture beyond the protection and more acceptable boundaries of hearth and threshold. Capitalist leanings had taken firm root in the economic structures of England by this time, giving way to class tensions and prejudices that often compounded conflict particularly in the lives of women. Occupying a position subjugated to that of men in society, women inherently felt the effects of all negative forces with greater impact than male members of society, for they were more subject to circumstances of uncertainties in social status and security.

Austen highlighted the precarious nature of life for women existing upon the edge of class and wealth boundaries, attempting to balance the nearly impossible relationship between propriety of appearances and circumvention of insufferable, relative poverty for the less affluent landed gentry. *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park* each feature female protagonists in unique, difficult situations resulting from a compounding of gender and economic issues, among other societal conflicts; as Austen's protagonists struggle to navigate this world of patriarchal capitalism that challenges them from every angle, the novels both reinforce and erode the ideologies so prevalent in society that worked to oppress women in all forms and walks of life. All three novels finish with a classic happy ending—love and marriage—but with the introduction of literary critical theory, the reader may take apart and explore the components of that ending and better understand how the protagonists arrive at each agreeable conclusion, bringing closer to the surface the underlying conflicts in society to which Austen subtly alludes. In each of her novels, Austen has constructed the female protagonists in contrast to the limitations of their surroundings and the shortcomings of the typical societal expectations that threaten their happiness, should the women be forced to succumb to them. In effect, Austen highlights the impractical nature of the oppressive social structures that had sprung up as obstacles to the freedom and growth of women in nineteenth century England; as her heroines triumph over seemingly impossible odds, Austen subtly encourages a restructuring of society in which the limitations of patriarchal capitalist ideologies are abolished in favor greater freedoms of expression. In Austen's suggested form of a more modern social structure, economics and matrimony are not mutually dependent in the creation of a woman's purely pragmatic existence under male dominion, and although men

must retain the greater authority in society, so long as that boundary remains women have a greater freedom in directing their individual growth and desires to fruition.

The Role of Feminist and Marxist Critical Theory

Born towards the end of the eighteenth century, Austen began writing during a time when society was largely constructed, maintained, and dominated by men. The only proper occupation of women, especially those who belonged to the middle and upper classes such as Austen, lay within the maintenance and improvement of the household, as an overseer of domestic life. Women could not actively participate in the patriarchal society that had been built by men, for men; by definition, such a system “privileges men by promotion traditional gender roles...cast[ing] men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive...[and] women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson 85). With men rising into the resoundingly dominant, controlling gender with the power to shape and change the society they had built, women unavoidably fell into the position of a subaltern class. Rather than forming a strong, individual presence within society, women eventually evolved into a subset, functioning to complement men rather than existing independently of them. A male counterpart was essential; women required the presence of a man in order to validate her own position within society. For women living in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, marriage was the ultimate destination—it is no coincidence that *Persuasion*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Mansfield Park* each end with the promise of marriage, if not the commencement of the marriage itself. Perhaps an inevitable result of the pervasiveness of such beliefs, by Austen’s time society had already begun to

perceive itself as split into two spheres: a public, or civic, sphere and a private, domestic sphere.

While men may move freely between the two spheres, women found themselves constrained within the smaller and more isolated private sphere—attempts to move beyond those boundaries were both rare and socially unacceptable, severely depleting a woman's value in the eyes of society as a whole. Marriage thus symbolized the ultimate goal of a woman's ambitions; to connect oneself inextricably to a man was the highest position to which a woman could hope to rise, it was the end of the line. Even after Austen's death, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the presence of delineations between the roles of men and women in America created by the bifurcation of society (Davidson and Hatcher 9). The separate spheres system was broad, and flawed, for it attributed general characteristics to both genders, necessarily excluding any variation between the pre-set lines. The domestic sphere functioned "as a calm, intimate, loving, nearly sacred female space removed from the bustle of consumer capitalism" (Davidson and Hatcher 12). In this way, women found their chief occupation in life expected to consist solely in perfecting the peace and tranquility of the domestic sphere, in effect creating an oasis to which men could escape from the demands of the public sphere. Charged with such a subservient purpose, the private sphere ultimately becomes a place devoted to the will of the men who dominated the women oppressed therein. The separate spheres model stands as an example of the many forms of societal oppression men constructed in order to control and contain women; in truth, "the relegation of women to the domestic sphere subordinated and devalued them" (Davidson and Hatcher 10). Touted as a safe haven for the flighty, more delicate tendencies of the female population, in truth the private sphere formed a

prison of domesticity that imposed limitations of women's ability to grow and explore the formation of their personal identities.

In order for a woman to be considered a proper lady in the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she had first to submit to an obligatory abdication from certain basic human rights and emotions. In particular, women were systematically denied the natural instincts of desire, whether sexual or simply emotional, so long as they remained beyond the bonds of marriage. As Poovey notes, the general societal opinion of the time held that “[d]esire, in effect, centers on and returns to a woman; it does not originate in her emotions, her imagination, or her body” (4). Any affection women might feel towards others must be constrained by the need for total propriety on her part, until such time as she finds a husband upon whom her affections may focus and flourish. The oppression of basic human emotions and desires is not a simple or a straightforward task; it required a systematic construction of environment and pervasive ideology in order to foster a careful, reliable production line of such “proper ladies”. Essentially, the entire concept of the proper lady and the identity therein was pre-formed according to the will of others, and subsequently handed to the women of new generations with the expectation that this carefully formulated product would not thoughtlessly be dropped or forgotten. While the earlier men and women that held this ideal of womanhood with high hopes for the arrangement of future generations had some doubts concerning the likelihood of their success, by the time Thomas Gisborne had taken the time to consider and discourse on the subject at the end of the eighteenth century, he attributed quite confidently to women “a remarkable tendency to conform” (Poovey 3). This evolution of opinion regarding the tractability of women appears to indicate a gradually growing strength of presence for the

ideal of the proper lady—angel of the household. Eventually, the oppression and denials of female identity initially thought necessary may be assumed after a time to occur naturally.

The widespread denial of women as beings capable of mastering and deploying their own desire, oppressed in their ability to love freely and for themselves, began to set them apart from men in a very strong distinction between the two sexes. If men were able to choose whom they loved, or to initiate desire for both himself and his wife, then women must need men in order to achieve the fruition of true feelings and desires. Men are sexual beings, so women must necessarily become models of modesty. This polarization of the sexes took root throughout society, creating a binary understanding of what it meant to be a woman or a man; it opposed women to men, male to female, masculine to feminine. Whatever attribute one might possess must then necessarily be denied to the other—a system of viewing the world that fell “[w]ithin the rigid logic of the separate spheres” (Davidson and Hatcher 20). With such a system now at their fingertips, men—holding the dominant position in society—might attribute any undesirable quality to women, thus negating the possibility of possessing such qualities themselves. The subjugation of women allowed men to feel freer; their lack of resources gave men power. As Poovey describes, “Because sexual desire momentarily undermines self-control, women are voracious; because the future is uncertain, they are inconstant; because life is full of contradictions, women are irrational” (5). This binary view functioned in favor of the oppression of women as well as the bolstering of masculine identity. Thus cast in opposition to the dominant sex, women found themselves neatly tucked away in a sphere carefully separated from the public domain of men where they could be guarded and looked after, unable to spoil themselves through the active self-exploration of their own identities and personal

desires. In protecting women, men also protected themselves; with women representing the potential for conflict, fear, and uncertainty to invade society, they must naturally be contained. The oppression of women, in light of such ideas, became inevitable.

Despite the insistence upon the containment and necessary repression in women of mind, body, and soul, Austen's characters heedlessly pursue love and passion. This strong emotion, thought uncomely in the proper ladies of the time, plays a central role in the happiness of each protagonist; marriages commence and continue happily because the woman loved the man first—quite the opposite of the ideas gaining strength concerning women's desire and sexuality. Anne Elliot loved Captain Wentworth, just as Fanny Price loved Edmund and Elizabeth Bennet grew to love Mr. Darcy. True, their desires and emotions never fully flourish until after a reciprocation from the men, but nonetheless love began long before a man encouraged it. Clearly, according to Austen, in order for marriage to be both a joy and a success, love and affection must come first for both men and women. Perhaps this assertion may also function to refute the general idea that women should shape themselves in order to match their husbands, and to shake off the yolk of conforming identity being pressed upon women at that time.

Presuming to love, especially in the insistent and even forceful manner that Austen's protagonists often do, comprises a very individual action on the part of the woman, initiating the course of action she wishes her life to take. That path will most likely cause considerable pain, and conflict and complication necessarily occur in every novel before the final resolution reveals itself; after all, a woman choosing to marry based on a love she has felt freely and independently does not fit well with the current societal systems governing love, marriage, and happiness. After all, "self-effacement, if not natural, is at

least proper for women, and all three therefore think that women's behavior must significantly differ from that of men, who express their own wishes, make their own choices, and imprint their images on the receptive glass" (Poovey 4). This ideal state of feminine identity and self-awareness is anything but realistic, however, and Austen undertakes to demonstrate to her readers that following a different path will ultimately result in greater rewards. After all, her protagonists must struggle first, but eventually attain all that they desire and more while other more "proper" characters often lose out on the achievement of equal bliss. In effect, the female protagonists in Austen's novels reveal characters more representative of a realistic view of female identity at the time. They do not fit so neatly into the stark divisions of a binary society and thus allow readers to distinguish between the ideal lady and the real woman, choosing for themselves between the two. Austen highlights the impractical nature of propriety, allowing her heroines the very natural ability to initiate their own emotions and desires and thus raising into question whether or not it would be better for women to live a little improperly.

The limitations imposed upon women by the separate spheres society no doubt contributed in large part to the predetermined courses of the lives they could expect to lead. One may easily assume that the binary nature of such a society would inevitably form the most significant elements of female identity. As Davidson and Hatcher note, however, "In separate spheres discourse, *woman* is distinct from and even opposite to *man*; nothing else counts. By this logic, *woman* is the one universal or stable category, and other attributes are transient or irrelevant" (11). While it may be easy to attempt to examine female presences in nineteenth century literature focusing only on these parameters, the reader would lose sight of other factors important to constructing the societal

environments and identities of individuals both historical and fictional. Of particular concern for Austen's protagonists, in addition to the issues of gender inequality and socially mandated female oppression, is the strain of difficult and uncertain economic circumstances. In the severely weakened position of nineteenth century women, second-class citizens of a patriarchal society, survival without the support and protection of a husband, father, or other male relative was extremely difficult—if not impossible altogether. As Frost noted concerning the issue, "An unmarried woman like Mary Wollstonecraft—hard-pressed to find a measure of economic independence—often had to settle for menial, low-paying work that satisfied neither her economic requirements nor her need for self-respect" (263). The largest measure possible for a woman to take in order to protect her financial future, and the most powerful economic gesture she could hope to make—especially as a member of the more vulnerable middle or lower classes—was a prudent, lucrative, and successful marriage. As Eagleton observes, literary works "are forms of perception, particular ways of seeing the world; and as such they have a relation to that dominant way of seeing the world which is the 'social mentality' or ideology of an age" (6). Through her novels, Austen communicates to the reader her own analysis of society, and promotes her own views of the changes necessary to its improvement. Austen's characters typically belong to families with little to no economic means, sometimes even suffering under the weight of debt; as a result, money is a persistent issue in their lives, and the pressure to obtain a financially secure future is never quite out of sight in Austen's world. Taking into account that economic pressures constantly threaten the families of these young nineteenth century women and often drive the actions of

various characters within the Austen's novels, an understanding of the role of Marxist critical theory applied to Austen's work becomes imperative.

Unquestionably, men comprised the dominant economic power throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—a societal condition set before Austen's birth that continued well after her death. Many would argue that socially endorsed male dominance continues in the economic world of today, although not as clearly as in the past. Via the utilization of systematic economic and social oppression of both men and women belonging to the lower classes as well as that of women in possession of equal class rank, the wealthier men belonging to the higher classes of nineteenth century England had established a comfortable world that generally catered to their needs and desires. According to Eagleton, over time the economic structure of a society such as that of England during Austen's time will evolve to a "'superstructure'—certain forms of law and politics, a certain kind of state, whose essential function is to legitimate the power of the social class which owns the means of economic productions," carrying the ideologies dominant in society that cement the power of the ruling class (5). The removal of women as economic players had served men well—the consequential establishment of a mainstay of domestic bliss in the private sphere possibly even more so. This state of affairs could only be achieved through the exploitation and manipulation of women, effectively casting them as elements within the lives of men, more like objects to be collected, rearranged, displayed, and enjoyed than individual, equal beings. With the pursuit and achievement of marriage the principle economic gesture in a woman's life, the commodification of women became an inevitable measure in this process. As Tyson explains, "For Marxism, a commodity's value lies not in what it can do (*use value*) but in the money or other

commodities for which it can be traded (*exchange value*) or in the social status it confers on its owner (*sign-exchange value*)” (62). Just as commodities often evolve to signify more than their original function, nineteenth century women were evaluated in far more areas than their ability to bear children or create a comfortable home for their husbands. As active players in the marriage market, women attained for themselves both exchange and sign-exchange value, seeking to obtain the promise of future wealth and protection from their husbands in exchange for the conference of the benefit of her own feminine charms and accomplishments. With the business-like, economically minded approach to marriage typical in Austen’s society, women effectively became objects that could be adorned, bartered, and traded.

Within the work of Austen, the reader witnesses an intersection of feminist and Marxist issues lying beneath the surface of the text as the author works to evaluate society’s workings from the inside out. Especially in the case of the three novels that form the primary source focus of this investigation, the two separate theories seem inseparable at times when evaluating the text. In reality, relegated to the private sphere and expected to fulfill the role of domestic maintenance, women have become “employed” by the society in which they live. Spivak describes an ethical movement general to Europe during the nineteenth century, which maintained that “In all creation every thing one chooses and over which one has any power, may be used *merely as means*; man alone, and with him every rational creature, is an *end in himself*” (248). Despite their clear equal status as human beings (and rational creatures), women in nineteenth century England often became the means by which men could achieve their desired ends, for they were an entity over which men had power. In a capitalist, patriarchal society, the dominant male

population will generally desire ends involving superiority both socially and economically; the men of Austen's England have also demonstrated in her novels a desire for a supporting wife and peaceful domestic abode. Women inevitably fall second place to these desires men, and as a result of the systematic oppression utilized by society in order to maintain their position as nonthreatening, subservient guardians of house and home women become the means by which men achieve their desired ends. Acting in this way was one of the most forceful manners in which women could effectively participate in their society. Entailment often eliminated the possibility of inheriting the family estate even in the absence of a brother heir, and acceptable positions of employment did not extend beyond those of governess, nurse, or nun. Women could not take charge of economic matters of any kind, only filling roles meant to serve the needs and desires of others; as such, their labor was instructed and predetermined, and their compensation their lifestyles and homes.

Such compensation for their acquiescence to oppressive societal structures was not considered lightly. Just as Tong observes of the relationship between bourgeois employers and the proletariat, "Grateful for the benefits their employers give them, workers minimize their own hardships and suffering...The more benefits employers give their workers, the less likely their workers will form a class capable of recognizing their true needs as human beings" (100). The creation and societal insistence upon the legitimacy and necessity of the separate spheres created an illusion that it represented the natural order of things between the genders, but the oppressive system truly only functioned based on the standardized exploitation of women as weaker, vulnerable beings. As Frost quotes Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The girl must marry: else how to live? The prospective husband prefers the girl to know nothing. He is the market, the demand. She is the supply" (263). In the context of

intense competition in the marriage market to come out ahead of other girls, in possession of a more advantageous match, what Austen considers the proper domain of love, affection, and desire has become that of another capitalist enterprise. This competition, born of the desperate race to the altar, causes a fragmentation of a sense of community and “sisterhood” among women, denying them the benefit of drawing together into a unified front—one of the few manners in which they might gain the power of voice within society. As Tong describes the plight of workers in the lower classes, “workers are alienated from *other human beings* because the structure of the capitalist economy encourages and even forces workers to see each other as competitors for jobs and promotions” (101). Missing that sense of community that could have grown between fellow oppressed women, the competition to succeed in the marriage market ultimately creates an atmosphere of isolation for many women. Austen’s protagonists tend to avoid this fate, seeing through the superficiality of the marriage enterprise, but many other characters exhibit this aloofness. The isolating nature of the situation of the nineteenth century woman ultimately damages her ability to know others as well as herself, for the main female mind was meant to focus on obtaining the attentions and providing for the pleasure of men. Thus, the interests of patriarchal and capitalist society of Austen’s England converge in order to complete the oppression of women—a system Austen worked to expose and evaluate from the inside out in the context of her novels.

Persuasion

Austen’s final novel, *Persuasion*, opens with Sir Walter Elliot glowingly perusing the baronetage of England, reinforcing his own sense of the Elliot family’s importance in

society. Despite the destitute state of the family's financial affairs, Sir Walter and his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, maintain a severe pride in their class and a rather limiting attitude of self-importance—unwilling to sacrifice the accoutrements of wealth and social status in the interest of fiscal responsibility or meaningful relationships. Just as the family refuses to settle for a depletion in the appearance of their wealth and import, marriage for the Elliot daughters must provide some form of improvement or worth to their social position. As Handler and Segal observe, "to 'marry off' children is to 'dispose' of them, and to do so means using one of a limited number of opportunities to make a match advantageous to the social status of one's family: a card played cannot be played again, and much can be gained by properly marrying a child" (694). Thus, the women of the Elliot family become useful by way of a good marriage only; they have no other way to establish themselves within society, and thus ascertain the respectability of their family. Denied access to the world beyond the limited domestic realm, women have been weakened as independent, participatory members of society, and are thus subject to the will of their family. For this reason, their most powerful asset becomes that of their family—their ability to marry. The youngest Elliot daughter, Mary, had been married before the novel began, and thus "had acquired a little artificial importance, by becoming Mrs. Charles Musgrove" (P 5). While her marriage was by no means improper or disadvantageous, it was not a triumph for the family either. As the youngest daughter, however, Sir Walter had not placed great hope in Mary's marriage for upholding the future good name of the Elliot family; that task lay in the marriage of his eldest daughter, Elizabeth Elliot. Elizabeth is the Elliot sister who appears the most aloof from the other two, Sir Walter's clear favorite. Despite her father's constant emphasis on her predominance as far as other women are concerned, Elizabeth still feels

the pressure of finding a husband after remaining single for so long. Perhaps it is the combination of these attitudes with the sense of competition in the marriage market that has pushed her away from forming relationships with other women. Superior in beauty and more alike in attitude to his unbending pride, the perception of Elizabeth's exchange value to Sir Walter greatly surpasses that of his other two daughters. "All equality of alliance must rest with Elizabeth; for Mary had merely connected herself with an old country family of respectability and large fortune, and had therefore *given* all the honor, and received none: Elizabeth would, one day or other, marry suitably" (P 5). All the greatest hopes of Sir Walter rested with Elizabeth, having no son that could take charge of the Kellynch Hall estate after his death.

The middle daughter of the Elliot family, and the protagonist of *Persuasion*, Anne did little to excite the hopes of her father for a marriage advantageous to the family. She is, however, the most beloved daughter to close family friend Lady Russell, to whom "she was a most dear and highly valued goddaughter, favourite, and friend" (P 5). When in her youth, Anne had fallen in love with a then-penniless naval recruit, Frederick Wentworth, Lady Russell vehemently protested the match and soon obtained the support of Sir Walter's objections to the match as well. To ally a daughter with such a man, "who had nothing but himself to recommend him, and no hopes of attaining affluence, but in the chances of a most uncertain profession, and no connexions to secure even his farther rise in that profession; would be, indeed, a throwing away" (P 19). To leave the youngest daughter to commence a marriage that would maintain wealth, albeit without a chance at improvement in honorable social standing, was acceptable; but to abandon a second daughter to a marriage that stood to lose the family both wealth and honor was impossible. In thinking of

nineteenth century England as a patriarchal capitalist society, Tong notes that this system of power relations creates “a society in which every kind of transactional relation is fundamentally exploitative” (98). Such transactions would include the institution of marriage. With an uncertain future, Wentworth could not be depended upon to live up to the honor of receiving Anne in marriage, especially since Anne’s ultimate place within society will depend entirely upon that of her husband. This convergence of economic conflict with the socially dependent position of women completely eliminates all opportunity for Anne to choose her own husband without the ready approval of her father. Anne’s life as a woman places her directly under the authority of the men in her life, and cannot thus be depended upon to make her own way in the world; as such, the task of choosing a husband becomes exponentially more important, and it is impossible for the family to trust such a decision solely to the young woman in question.

Formed as the weaker gender in nineteenth century English society and relegated to the private sphere, every respectable woman needed a man to represent her in all matters extending beyond the domestic domain. In order to control legal affairs, or participate in the management of finances, a woman needed a man to act for her. Anne’s friend Mrs. Smith, recently widowed, found herself trapped by this very limitation on the power of a woman to act on her own behalf. Without her husband to arrange their legal matters, Mrs. Smith “had no natural connexions to assist her even with their counsel, and she could not afford to purchase the assistance of the law” (P 140). Mrs. Smith had been abandoned to her lowly position in society by the inattention of Mr. Elliot, to whom the guardianship of her affairs should have been an expected burden. Mrs. Smith’s helplessness to overcome her circumstances, victim to the irresponsibility of her husband’s spending and the

unwillingness of another man to represent her in the public sphere, reflects just how dependent women were upon men in the nineteenth century. Sir Walter immediately dismisses Mrs. Smith when Anne first mentions the acquaintance to him. "A widow Mrs. Smith,—and who was her husband? One of the five thousand Mr. Smiths whose names are to be met with every where" (P 104). In matrimony, a woman's worth naturally must be measured in accordance with that of her husband—as Mrs. Smith's husband had no special distinctions of his own, to Sir Walter his wife becomes equally worthless. A prudent, advantageous marriage is a woman's only chance to establish for herself an improved position within society; after committing to one husband, her entire future depends on his.

As the submissive counterpart to the patriarchal authority of her husband, a woman must adapt wholly to the situation of her marriage; the lifestyle of her husband becomes her own as well. As Poovey notes, women were viewed as "consumers rather than contributors to the household economy" (5). Supported by either fathers or husbands, women fell under the authority of the dominant men in their lives in constructing the family's wealth as well as social rank. Mrs. Croft acquiesced to a life at sea upon the commencement of her marriage, in order to be a good wife to her husband. "She had...altogether an agreeable face; though her reddened and weather-beaten complexion, the consequence of her having been almost as much at sea as her husband, made her seem to have lived some years longer" (P 33). A life spent moving from one ship to the next certainly would not have been the future a young Mrs. Croft might have expected, but upon marrying the admiral it became her only future. In becoming the wife of a sailor, Mrs. Croft has submitted to a life that even Wentworth addresses as not entirely suited to a lady. Despite her assertions that "nothing can exceed the accommodations of a man of war," he

proclaims he would not have women on his ship “from feeling how impossible it is, with all one’s efforts, and all one’s sacrifices, to make the accommodations on board, such as women ought to have” (P 47, 46). The suitability of a life at sea to a man, thus considered insufficient for the comfort of women, echoes the assumption that women as the weaker gender require greater protection from the outside world. Residing in a ship that travels the world, Mrs. Croft does not have nearly the equal amount of separation from the public sphere offered by a quiet, isolated country estate. No doubt Sir Walter and Lady Russell’s objections arose from the belief that the life of a naval officer’s wife was not the proper life of a lady, and Anne would nonetheless have to submit to the embracement of it. Indeed, the adaptations required of a wife were great, sometimes even extending beyond the more superficial elements of lifestyle to her opinions and interests. Upon learning that Louisa Musgrove is engaged to marry Captain Benwick, Anne observes that they will be happy because she will no doubt develop tastes suited to those of her husband. “The idea of Louisa Musgrove turned into a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection, was amusing, but she had no doubt of its being so” (P 111). Interestingly, the inevitable conforming of a wife to her husband often marked an opportunity for improvement of character, rather than a limitation therein. With the opportunity of improvement not only in wealth and social status, but also in personal character, simply as the result of a proper marriage, a family has much at stake in choosing the appropriate husband for a daughter.

With these issues to consider, it isn’t surprising that neither Lady Russell nor Sir Walter considered Wentworth a suitable match for Anne. After their initial engagement, Wentworth’s uncertain future held the possibility of a life full of labor and lacking in glory and wealth. Their objection to his alliance with their family reflects a continuing conflict of

class tensions within nineteenth century England. Despite Admiral Croft's impressive military record and superior financial situation, Sir Walter still views him as an inferior barely worthy of residing in Kellynch Hall, remarking that it must be taken for granted "that his face is about as orange as the cuffs and capes of my livery" (P 16). Even though Admiral Croft has fought to defend the English way of life, in effect protecting the very lifestyle Kellynch Hall offers, Sir Walter still considers him as only a component of the rest of society with social value inferior to his own—thus buoying his own sense of importance as a baronet. By the nineteenth century, the professional class had begun to rise in wealth and respectability, slowly moving towards the position held by the landed gentry class to which the Elliot and Russell family belong. Indeed, throughout *Persuasion* Austen appears to construct the naval officers as admirable characters. "Austen highlights the nobility of the military by contrasting Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth with the gentry, who have not been good caretakers of the land and as a consequence are losing social prestige and authority" (Drum 16). Even in the face of Sir Walter's vain insistence upon the superiority of the lower working classes, the naval officers of *Persuasion* easily win the hearts of both its readers and its heroines. As men of power, consequence, and wealth due to their successes in the war against Napoleon, characters such as Admiral Croft and Captain Wentworth have been able to effect their own vertical rise through society. They have the whole of the public sphere at their fingertips, and so long as a man may work diligently to improve his position in society he does not find himself permanently fixed anywhere.

After years of success at sea, Wentworth eventually returns to the attentions of the Elliot family and soon wins the acceptance of both Sir Walter and Lady Russell. The

renewed engagement between Wentworth and Anne meets with no opposition. “Captain Wentworth, with five-and-twenty thousand pounds, and as high in his profession as merit and activity could place him, was no longer nobody” (P 165). Wentworth’s financial success and relative improvement in social standing as a respected naval officer are deemed acceptable qualities to exchange for the superficial nobility of a connection with the Elliot family. Austen reveals that, in truth, Wentworth conversely gains little from the marriage beyond happiness in finally marrying the woman he loves. “Anne...had no other alloy to the happiness of her prospects than what arose from the consciousness of having no relations to bestow on him which a man of sense could value” (P 167). The view of marriage as an institution of material exchanges is a system that has not functioned correctly, in Austen’s estimation, for some time. True nobility does not always exist where it is titled, and wealth does not always fall where it appears. All the same, women remain prisoner to this system of converging economics and matrimony; although they may not feel affection for their chosen husbands, marriage remains the most powerful action in which they may achieve some form of mobility within society.

The change of opinion regarding Wentworth appears to have everything to do with his increased social respectability, and little to do with Anne’s personal feelings regarding her future husband. While Lady Russell no longer vehemently objects to the match for the ostensible reason of preserving Anne’s happiness, the affirmation of Anne’s affections played no factor in her rejection of the young people’s engagement in the past. Anne is still little more to Sir Walter than a social opportunity—more commodity than daughter. With Wentworth now a respectable man of fortune and accomplishment, Anne’s marriage to him encompasses an advantageous development. The blending together of the Elliot family’s

noble name with that of Wentworth's indicates a blurring of class distinctions that would continue throughout the nineteenth century. In becoming the wife of a naval officer, Anne joined the ranks of women supporting the men that defended the nation. "She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance" (P 168). While she has gained happiness in a romantically motivated marriage, as well as material comfort and an established, respected role within society, she is still defined by her position as a wife. Her most important role is the support of her husband, the creation of a blissful home life where he may escape and regain strength. Women's most valuable participation in society is that of matrimony, and her husband the most distinguishing attribute a woman could attain.

Pride and Prejudice

From the opening line of the story, *Pride and Prejudice* is a novel that continually focuses on the difficulty and undeniable importance of marriage in the life of a young woman and her family, especially in the circumstances of economic strain and necessity. The fact that marriage takes on such a central theme in the novel is not a surprising one; after all, marriage was the primary focus of women in the Bennets' position at that time in English society. With a family of daughters, Mrs. Bennet never for a moment turns from persisting in fulfilling her socially mandated obligation to obtain for her daughters the future of security and happiness that only a prudent marriage could provide. Interestingly, she is the only parent who appears to do so, and must push Mr. Bennet to follow suit. She encourages him to visit Mr. Bingley immediately: "But it is very likely that he *may* fall in

love with one of them [the Bennet daughters], and therefore you must visit him as soon as he comes," to which he simply replies, "I see no occasion for that" (PP 3). Of course, in this instance Mr. Bennet is merely teasing his wife and does in fact initiate the desire acquaintance, but the distinction of personal investment in the practice remains apparent. With the unbalanced devotion of the two parents in regard to their daughters' marital status, Austen lays the groundwork for the contentious nature of the issue of matrimony in society for young women. While "the decorous Jane Austen appears on the surface almost complicitous with social norms in her endorsement in *Pride and Prejudice*...of Elizabeth's romantic and economically pragmatic marriage," she also gives a harsh perspective on the limitations of those norms with the contrasts between her irrepressible heroines and the difficulty with which they survive in a surprisingly hostile social environment (Frost 261). It is worth noting that Elizabeth does not jump at the first opportunity to wed; instead, she maintains her own sense of personal integrity, and insists upon finding a match that is right for her both socially and romantically.

The resistance Elizabeth, and Austen, show to purely pragmatic matrimony becomes particularly pronounced in light of the difficult economic situation facing the Bennet family. The inheritance of Longbourn, the family estate, follows the practice of entailment, and with no male heirs among the five Bennet daughters, this complication represents perhaps the greatest source of conflict for them throughout the novel. "Mrs. Bennet, rendered powerless by marriage and standing to lose her husband's estate, which was entailed to Mr. Collins, seeks but one thing for her daughters: an economically propitious marriage" (Frost 263). A successful marriage, from which any good measure of economic gain could be expected, represented the sole means by which any Bennet daughter could hope to

possibly provide for either her own or her family's future. Denied access to an active role in society beyond the private sphere, they have no power beyond the realm of domesticity and family affairs. The looming inevitability of the entailment introduces greater constraint to the process of finding a husband, as it both impresses a deadline to be met before the death of Mr. Bennet as well as the obligation to consider Mr. Collins as a possible husband in order to maintain Longbourn for the Bennet family. This sense of obligation exists on both sides of the entailment, evidenced by Mr. Collins's initial intention to marrying any one of the Bennet daughters. "This was his plan of amends—of atonement—for inheriting their father's estate; and he thought it an excellent one, full of eligibility and suitableness, and excessively generous and disinterested on his own part" (PP 45). The only true motivation for such a marriage, on Mr. Collins's or the Bennets' part, lies grounded in economic duty or necessity. After all, Mr. Collins does not seek to marry based solely on personal affection; after all, upon learning that Jane—his original focus of interest—might soon be engaged, he "had only to change from Jane to Elizabeth—and it was soon done—done while Mrs. Bennet was stirring the fire" (PP 45). The relevancy of economic issues in marriage takes a central role in the novel, as the women find themselves constantly threatened with the necessity to choose between happiness and survival. The case of Mr. Collins and the entailment gave Austen opportunity to turn a critical eye towards the absence of romantic motivation in a society that structured marriage as a pragmatic exchange.

As a character set in opposition to that of the Bennet daughters, Mr. Collins represents a rather exaggerated view of the blatant incompatibility of personality as well as total absence of affection or attraction that often characterized marriages formed with only

economic interests in mind. Elizabeth is no ordinary woman; as Poovey remarks, she “was Jane Austen’s special favorite” and the author considered her “as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print” (194). Her own father sets her above her other sisters, commenting, “they are all silly and ignorant like other girls; but Lizzy has something more of quickness than her sisters” (PP 4). The reader can hardly help but sympathize with Elizabeth and wish her all the happiness she desires for herself—happiness that will not come about by way of a pragmatic marriage devoid of personal attachment. Within very little time after his introduction, Mr. Collins leaves no doubt that he is not the man for Elizabeth. In truth, he does not seem to be a character constructed for romantic connection with any individual, but rather as a man made for the more business-like approach to marriage. She points out the reality of their incompatibility to him in refusing his proposal. “You could not make *me* happy, and I am convinced that I am the last woman in the world who would make you so” (PP 73). Mr. Collins, however, does not seem to understand her objection, because according to the logic with which his proposal was made any refusal would be not only unreasonable, but impossible. Mr. Darcy makes this mistake later on as well. “Elizabeth’s refusal of proposals from Mr. Collins and Mr. Darcy stuns the offerers, not because Collins and Darcy believe Elizabeth loves them, but because they calculate their proposals to be economically unrefusable” (Frost 263). After all, in a patriarchal society where a woman has no power to change the system, and hardly any freedom to adapt her situation to her own desires, a prudent and economically sensible marriage proposal—no matter the suitor—ought to seem like a gift. In Austen’s version of society, this limiting view of women’s place in the world does not hold true. The fact that Elizabeth is breaking with the expected code of conduct is clear, and not many other women in her position

would have done so. As Tong points out, “All too often...a woman’s sense of self is entirely dependent on her families’ and friends’ appreciation of her” (102). Mrs. Bennet is furious with Elizabeth, and no doubt others in the community would look disapprovingly upon her insistent refusal of the proposal. However, Austen legitimizes Elizabeth’s decision with the added agreement of her father and the impossibility of the marriage is quickly settled. Despite the looming threat of the entailment to her and her family’s future security, Austen cannot let Elizabeth submit to a man like Mr. Collins.

While Elizabeth may have been saved from a future joined with that of Mr. Collins, the necessity of securing a marriage remains. In effect, the life of the Bennet household has come to be structured around finding a husband for every daughter. Without a doubt, marriage is a necessity for the girls if they wish to continue to survive in English society without a loss in class, social status, or wealth. Mrs. Bennet works so persistently to help them achieve this goal because it is the only way in which “her daughters will enjoy the support, protection, and status of their husbands and will be insulated from the harsh realities awaiting a woman outside of marriage” (Frost 263). Of course, all other mothers feel this same pressure as Mrs. Bennet to “protect” their daughters’ futures. Every mother is in competition with each other, just as every girl is competing in society with the others in the race to find the right husband, the perfect situation. Mrs. Bennet does not believe, for instance, that Mrs. Long would introduce Mr. Bingley to the Bennet daughters because “[s]he has two nieces of her own” and each family must scramble to rise first in his opinion (PP 5). In this spirit of rivalry the marriage market forms, where young women slowly lose individuality in the interest of becoming an appealing product. Through this process of commodification, women alienate themselves from each other as they become devoted to

the improvement of their individual marriageability. Without the ability to assert themselves beyond the sphere of domesticity, success in the marriage market becomes the only form of economic assertion in which women can participate and represents one of the most powerful actions she can make within the current structure of society. In such an environment, the commodification of women is inevitable. Everything from class and talent to age contribute to the perceived “value” of a woman seeking marriage.

In reality, women make themselves formidable competitors in the marriage market by increasing their sign-exchange value either naturally or through their own effort, and even their exchange value in the instance of a sizeable dowry. The basic means of increasing a woman’s sign-exchange value in nineteenth century English society rests in the pursuit of “accomplishment.” Mr. Darcy attests to knowing only a few women that he might describe as accomplished, and Caroline Bingley agrees with him. “A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved” (PP 27). As evidenced by Lady Catherine’s shock at Elizabeth’s lack of instruction in many of these areas, accomplishment was a distinguishing trait more easily attainable by women of the upper classes with greater resources of wealth and society. Indeed, simply by virtue of their wealth and social status upper class women have more to offer as potential wives than their less wealthy, less socially connected counterparts. The lack of these basic accomplishments and adornments of social value that Mr. Darcy perceives in Elizabeth’s character represent his main reasons in resisting the affection he feels for her, all of which he describes in his first proposal. “His sense of her inferiority—of

its being a degradation—of the family obstacles which judgment had always opposed to inclination, were dwelt on with a warmth which seemed due to the consequence he was wounding, but was very unlikely to recommend his suit” (PP 125). When marriage is viewed as a complicated exchange, such as Mr. Darcy continues to perceive it in his initial proposal to Elizabeth, no romantic attachment may form.

The competitive nature of searching for a husband for nineteenth century women is an alienating experience for all parties involved. While women might otherwise be able to form meaningful relationships with their peers—such as the close relationship between Elizabeth and Jane—they tend to instead focus more energy in overcoming them as competitors. This sense of competition makes the private sphere to which women have been relegated a hostile atmosphere in addition to a limiting one. Caroline presents an antagonistic figure to both Elizabeth and Jane, an attitude Elizabeth believed “had originated in jealousy” (PP 173). Girls and mothers alike compete with each other in order to attain the final prize of profitable matrimony. Lady Catherine notes the oddity that all the Bennet daughters are out in society, actively seeking marriage, at once. Elizabeth, however, recognizes the ill effects that denying her younger sisters equal opportunities could produce. ““But really, Ma’am, I think it would be very hard upon younger sisters, that they should not have their share of society and amusement because the elder may not have the means or inclination to marry early...And to be kept back on *such* a motive!—I think it would not be very likely to promote sisterly affection or delicacy of mind”” (PP 110). Austen maintains Elizabeth as a friendly, open presence in this atmosphere of ruthless competition. As Poovey notes, “Beside the arrogant Miss Bingley, parading around the drawing room in hopes of catching Darcy’s eye...Elizabeth’s impulsiveness, outspokenness,

and generosity seem admirable and necessary correctives" (195). With Elizabeth standing in friendly contrast to the aloof nature of other women such as Caroline, the reader discovers the harmful impact of social competition on the relationships among women—especially those yet to marry. Tong describes the alienating nature of capitalist practices among the proletariat: "When the source of workers' community...becomes instead the source of their isolation (other workers experienced as competitors, enemies, people to avoid), workers become disidentified with each other, losing an opportunity to add joy and meaning to their lives" (101). Similarly, women in constant competition with each other in the marriage market inevitably isolate themselves as sisters and friends become potential enemies.

Ultimately, the entire process has a deadening effect on those involved with its perpetuation, as women are forced to produce themselves as marriageable products and mothers are forced to promote and eventually lose their daughters. After Lydia left Longbourn to begin married life with Mr. Wickham, "[t]he loss of her daughter made Mrs. Bennet very dull for several days" (PP 214). Her purpose fulfilled, no doubt Mrs. Bennet felt a loss in sense of identity as well as usefulness in addition to sadness at the necessary separation from her daughter. Hitherto, the mother-daughter relationship has been defined as that between a producer and product; as the mother aids in the increase of her daughter's sign-exchange value, she also improves the chances of gaining an advantageous son-in-law in exchange for the daughter's hand in marriage. With the product thus taken away, the mother must find a new way to relate to her daughter. After her marriage, a rift grows between Lydia and her sisters as well—an inevitable fragmentation between the married and unmarried woman. In nineteenth century English society, the two

represented very different beings; the married woman had successfully taken her place within the social structure, the unmarried woman had yet to do so. Lydia takes great joy in pointing out her newly raised status above that of her unmarried sisters, first exclaiming, “Ah! Jane, I take your place now, and you must go lower, because I am a married woman,” and later observing that “married women have never much time for writing. My sisters may write to *me*. They will have nothing else to do” (PP 205, 214). The Lucas family, likewise, rejoices in the success of at last having secured a husband for Charlotte. “The younger girls formed hopes of coming out a year or two sooner than they might otherwise have done; and the boys were relieved from their apprehension of Charlotte’s dying an old maid” (PP 83). Once a woman marries, she instantly achieves a greater status of respectability within society; she is a creature affirmed and accepted, rather than one waiting still to take her proper place.

Marriage may not always be the desired future women have in mind, but in the nineteenth century matrimony was the mandatory goal destination for every eligible young woman. Austen’s subtly subversive view of the limited lives of women reveals the joyless nature of the marriage enterprise. Charlotte’s opinions represent the generally accepted view of marriage for women at the time. “Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservative from want” (PP 83). Just as Mr. Collins approached marriage as the logical next step in his life, Charlotte maintained a purely pragmatic view of the institution. With the limitations of the private sphere pressing heavily upon women, society slowly developed a strict system that combined the realm of economics and

domesticity for women and thus made marriage the business of their lives. Austen builds up the character of Elizabeth as a counterpoint to the economic, purely pragmatic approach to marriage characteristic of the early nineteenth century. Elizabeth dares to refuse not one, but two economically profitable marriages on the grounds of romantic incompatibility. In the end, however, even Elizabeth must marry and thus find happiness—albeit of a more profound sort than that which awaits the Charlottes and Carolines of England. “In fact, Elizabeth’s triumph signals the achievement of the balance that characterizes Austen’s mature novels, for it is the result, on the one hand, of the gradual transformation of social and psychological realism into romance and, on the other, of a redefinition of romance” (Poovey 194). Elizabeth’s uncommon independence and confident pursuit of passion in her life sets her apart from those who continue to follow the pre-established societal norms and expectations which Austen refutes as worthy of living. Together, Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy have overcome the seemingly inextricable complication of the presence of economics in marriage, and replaced logic with love in forming their match. With great mutual affection as the motivation for their marriage, after Elizabeth’s acceptance of Mr. Darcy, “The happiness which this reply produced, was such as he had probably never felt before” (PP 239). While economics may have been successfully extracted from the realm of marriage, however, Austen remains firmly rooted in a patriarchal society and the woman must ultimately become subject to the man. Elizabeth’s father initially rejects the idea of the marriage. “I know that you could be neither happy nor respectable, unless you truly esteemed your husband; unless you looked up to him as a superior” (PP 246). In the end, Mr. Darcy’s loving acceptance of Elizabeth as a woman who refuses to submit to the economic oppressions of the domestic sphere and the marriage market validates her

rebellious nature and her submission to a husband raises her irreproachably as a respectable member of society.

Mansfield Park

Jane Austen gives perhaps the broadest view of the many different levels and components of society in telling the tale of Fanny Price and *Mansfield Park*. Arguably, *Mansfield Park* contains the strongest allusion to the colonization and slavery-based economies that characterized eighteenth and nineteenth century English imperialism. Sir Thomas Bertram has a large investment in a West Indies Estate, which begins to cause him trouble soon after the abolition of the slave trade (MP 19). Even the title of the novel, *Mansfield Park*, may have been a conscious allusion on Austen's part to Lord Mansfield, "the man who as Lord Chief Justice presided over some of the most famous slavery cases to come before the English Courts" (Kelly 1). With a titular connection to the man who ruled against the legal consideration of a man's body as "property," *Mansfield Park* appears immediately to take on a critical approach to issues of imperial enslavement. Sir Thomas represents a strong patriarchal figure of imperialism, having to attend to both his holdings in the West Indies as well as his responsibilities as the head of his own household. Early in the novel his dual roles conflict, and he is forced to leave his family behind for at least a year. Sir Thomas recognizes the undesirable nature of the situation, in particular finding it necessary to reconcile "the effort of quitting the rest of his family, and of leaving his daughters to the direction of others at their present most interesting time of life" (MP 25). In a society preoccupied with the pursuits of imperialism, the attitude of the colonizer could also be seen to extend to the home. The patriarchal structure of society delineates a

clear relationship of inequality between the genders, placing men in the dominant role while women must remain submissive and secondary. A man like Sir Thomas, thus acting as the leader and guardian of his family, is portrayed as a necessary presence in order to guide the female members in the proper attitudes, morals, beliefs, and manners that will earn them their proper place within society.

Sir Thomas's absence in the household soon becomes a recipe for disaster, witnessed by both Edmund and Fanny—neither of whom have the power to reign in the household from the wanton impropriety of their actions—and affirming the view of Austen's society that a strong male authority is a mandatory presence in the maintenance of proper values. Despite the fact that their father has left on a perilous and long journey, neither Maria nor Julia is saddened by his departure. "They were relieved by it from all restraint; and without aiming at one gratification that would probably have been forbidden by Sir Thomas, they felt themselves immediately at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach" (MP 25). The two daughters soon prove to Edmund, Fanny, and the reader that the newfound freedom they cherish is a responsibility they cannot handle. Having gone through their entire lives guided through every action and behavior by a strict father, neither Maria nor Julia possesses the common sense to act properly on her own. Edmund expresses concerns regarding Maria in particular, and the questionable propriety of an engaged woman acting so freely. Indeed, having never been able to develop scruples of her own, Maria seems to justify "the persistent fear of female sexuality" common in society at that time (Poovey 5). Including Tom and his friend Mr. Yates in the scheme and with the approval of both Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, the young people decide to put on a play by themselves. Edmund attempts in vain to put a halt to the play's

proceedings, because he believed “It would be taking liberties with my father’s house in his absence which could not be justified,” especially for an endeavor of which Sir Thomas would not approve (MP 90). The play allows several instances of improper behavior among the actors, including promiscuity on the part of the soon-to-be-married Maria. Only the authority of the family’s patriarch can bring the house to order once more; despite Edmund’s unsuccessful attempts to prevent the play, “[w]hen Sir Thomas returns, the frivolities of the young people stop at once” (Handler and Segal 693). Just as Sir Thomas’s presence was required in the West Indies to restore order to the efforts of his colonial estate, he provides necessary guidance to uphold the respectability of the household. Hampered in maturity by the constant oppression of male dominance, young women can no longer be left alone to act for themselves; constant guidance is required.

In a way then, Austen’s domestic sphere may be seen as a realm colonized by men, where women fulfill a subservient role and labor to gratify the man’s comfort and pleasure. When Sir Thomas returns to Mansfield Park from his business in Antigua, he is delighted to be home once again. “He had the best right to be the talker; and the delight of his sensations in being again in his own house, in the centre of his family...made him communicative and chatty in a very unusual degree” (MP 123). Sir Thomas has at last returned to the realm where he is unquestioned master, and according soon commands his home back into a state of affairs more suitable to his liking. The play is abolished and never to be spoken of again, as well as unsatisfactory guests dispatched. A common argument for the containment of women within the private sphere insisted that they were weak, delicate beings in need of male guidance in order to lead truly meaningful lives. Lady Bertram does seem to fit this description on many counts. While her husband is away from home, she

does not engage in any activity beyond the most basic daily household duties; she constantly looks to the men in her life to direct her actions and even her opinions. “Lady Bertram soon found herself in the critical situation of being applied to for her own choice between the games, and being required either to draw a card for Whist or not. She hesitated. Luckily Sir Thomas was at hand. ‘What shall I do, Sir Thomas?—Whist and Speculation; which will amuse me most?’” (MP 164). Lady Bertram exhibits total deference to the authority of Sir Thomas in every aspect of life, and appears little more than an extension of his own will. After allowing Sir Thomas to choose her preferred game, she ultimately neither learns nor plays the game herself, but leaves the task to Henry Crawford. “A very odd game. I do not know what it is all about. I am never to see my cards; and Mr. Crawford does all the rest” (MP 165). Not only does the socially accepted view of women as the secondary, inferior gender lead to the attitude of oppression, but it seems that the limitations of the private sphere lend to the necessity of male dominance. In the scenes Austen has constructed, there can be no doubt as to the necessity of male authority in the current societal model of proper domesticity. This view, however, does not appear to coincide with Austen’s opinion set forth through the novel. Lady Bertram is a character that fairly fades into the background so much so that one almost forgets she is there. Constantly falling asleep, unable to even complete her stitching, Lady Bertram is not exactly a model of feminine vivacity. The oppression of male dominance in England’s patriarchal society has caused women to languish, in both character and attitude.

In this context of imperialist attitudes and colonizing tendencies, the decision of the Bertram and Norris families to take in Fanny as a ward offers some very interesting domestic parallels with the situation of Sir Thomas’s relationship with the West Indies.

From the moment the families propose the idea, Fanny is established as their inferior by virtue of her being the daughter of an outcast sister married to a man of lower class. The reasoning for the gesture they expressed espoused nothing but goodwill as motivation. “What if they were among them to undertake the care of her eldest daughter, a girl now nine years old, of an age to require more attention than her poor mother could possibly give? The trouble and expense of it to them would be nothing compared with the benevolence of the action” (MP 7). Even the idea that they would inherently raise the child in a better manner than her mother indicates a differentiation between the value of class and social standing. Despite the offer of total equality to Fanny, being raised with all the advantages of Mansfield Park at her disposal, distinctions between her and the Bertram daughters are prompt in appearance. Mrs. Norris sees no issue in denying Fanny the same level of education from which Maria and Julia benefit, “for, though you know...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” (MP 16). In the practice of colonization, in order to maintain superiority and profit from the endeavor of improvement, the colonizer must necessarily differentiate between themselves and those they choose to “help.”

Worthy of note is the difference between the Bertrams’ high opinion of her brother, William Price, and the relative lack of admiration for Fanny by comparison. The Bertram social circle receives William with open arms and readily accepts his authority as a self-made man of the navy. Sir Thomas eagerly encourages William to join and lead the conversation, observing in his discourse “the proof of good principles, professional knowledge, energy, courage, and cheerfulness--every thing that could deserve or promise

well" (MP 162). Because of his naval profession, William has already seen much of the world and begun to improve his status from that of the rest of the Price family living in Portsmouth. Even though William has received aid from the Bertrams in a similar way that Fanny has, he has been able to rise in esteem independently and of his own effort. Compared with the more limiting domestic realms from which Fanny may never venture, William is blessed with the freedom of social and economic mobility. William's visit to Mansfield Park even results in an improvement in the Bertram and Crawfords' opinion of Fanny, as her close relationship with her brother effects a reflection of admirations that consequentially raises her in esteem equal to that bestowed upon William. Fanny's situation in the Bertram household reflects the greater scale of a woman's position within nineteenth century English society. In her consideration of imperialism's presence in nineteenth century British literature, Spivak describes the Ariel/Caliban dichotomy. While the magician Prospero enslaves both, Ariel is the being privileged as intellectual, while Caliban is the inferior, dispossessed being (Spivak 245). In considering women as a colonized sex, a subset of the patriarchal imperial mission, women take on the role of the more privileged and respected servant Ariel, while the male Prospero heedlessly exploits the even weaker position of the foreign colonized populations—characterized in Caliban. Robin Morgan affirms the position of women as a colonized people, asserting that in order to break free "[s]elf-and-sister education is a first step, since all that fostered ignorance and self-contempt dissolve before the intellectual and emotional knowledge that our female bodies are constructed with beauty, craft, cleanliness, yes, holiness" (77). While men may treat women with seeming kindness and construct illusions of equality, women remain enslaved to the patriarchal ideologies that shape the society in which they live. Freedom is

hinted at, but not quite a reality. So long as the patriarchal system remains the ruling power, women cannot achieve the goal of freedom and thus continue to find themselves inevitably at odds with one another in the interest of individually gaining the admirations of their master.

In Fanny's situation, social superiority for the Bertram girls is at stake, and she thus finds herself inevitably at odds with the other two. As Handler and Segal note, "social superiority can only be demonstrated in opposition to subordination. A superior, by nature, must be above someone else. In the most 'vulgar' of instances, status-conscious characters provide patronage to servile protégés who attest, in turn to their patron's superiority" (696). As beings already in a vulnerable position within society simply as a result of their gender, women inevitably find themselves in competition to gain superiority over others. The pressures of the marriage market only increase this atmosphere of competition, and complete the alienation between Fanny and her cousins. Indeed, Fanny never develops a meaningful relationship with either woman, and often appears in a position juxtaposed to theirs. She often proves herself the worthier of the two sides of comparison, however, and stands as an example that class or birth does not inherently endow moral superiority. Despite the fact that Fanny stands apart from Maria and Julia in strength of character, she remains largely adrift in the world of Mansfield Park. Designated as inferior to the social value of her cousins, Fanny has no place in the society of her more wealthy surrogate family either. As an unmarried young woman, Fanny has trouble finding a place in the structure of Mansfield Park. Her greatest sense of belonging comes from her sense of usefulness to the Bertram family. She labors as a companion to Lady Bertram and Mrs. Norris, attempting to provide them with amusement in company or aid in the

completion of tasks. “Lady Bertram, sunk back in one corner of the sofa, the picture of health, wealth, ease, and tranquility, was just falling into a gentle doze, while Fanny was getting through the few difficulties of her work for her” (MP 89). While Mrs. Norris and Lady Bertram dote on the caprices of their daughters, Fanny must in turn work to please her aunts in order to win their favor. The dividing issue of class places Fanny at a disadvantage in social value to that of her more affluent cousins and aunts, and without the bolstering of a husband’s influence she can do little to change her circumstances.

In the end, Fanny’s situation as a ward of the Bertram family at Mansfield Park does not differ so much from the eventual fate of all women in nineteenth century English society. Marriage is the ultimate goal for the respectable young lady, and while it may seem a move towards independence, in reality marriage signifies the commencement of submission to a new patriarch—the husband. Maria marries Mr. Rushworth in the hopes of escaping “the restraint which her father imposed.” Independence did not await Maria after her nuptials, however. “Maria Bertram’s marriage gave her independence from her father, but only by placing her in a position of dependence on her husband” (Handler and Segal 694). For a woman trapped in the private sphere of British society, there can be no real freedom—the constraints mandated by society upon their gender do not allow the independence of a woman without the custody of a man. Maria attempts to circumvent the oppressive system to which she has found herself subject; she leaves Mr. Rushworth in order to run away with Henry—the man she truly loves, and hopes to marry. After his rejection, and the inevitable refusal of Mr. Rushworth to allow the return of his disgraced wife, Maria has nowhere to go. Both Maria and Elizabeth Bennet sought to fulfill their heart’s true desires in choosing a husband. The difference between them lies in the proper

enacting of that pursuit. While Elizabeth chose to follow her affections in the choosing of a husband, Maria chose to follow them in spite of the husband she had already married. A woman lacking the validation of marriage, especially one who has flouted the authority of her husband, has no place in Austen's society. Maria is cast out from Mansfield Park, sent away with Mrs. Norris to be forgotten. While the disregard Maria shows for the husband's authority earns her exile from her family's society and good opinion, Fanny's receipt of a marriage proposal from Henry Crawford raises her in the opinion of Sir Thomas. Her subsequent refusal, however, receives severe verbal retribution. He sternly observes, "you have disappointed every expectation I had formed, and proved yourself of a character the very reverse of what I had supposed" (MP 216). To receive the attentions of a well-established man was the greatest honor for a woman of Fanny's position, but to ignore them was the worst sort of behavior that could be expected of a woman. A woman's deference to male affirmation of her character remained the surest method in which she could hope to attain the approval of those around her, and a comfortable position in the society of which she is meant to become a part.

Marriage is another experience in submission for women, and the ultimate model of socially expected female subjugation to male authority. In a respectable marriage, the wife must bend to accommodate and support the man they marry. Morgan notes the similarity of this circumstance to the conditions faced by colonized peoples, and like the workers who "are forced (by a system of punishment and reward) to adopt the oppressor's standards, values, and identification" so must women learn to accept the complete authority of their husbands in order to maintain societal acceptance (76). Fanny triumphs over Mary Crawford in the bid for Edmund's affection by virtue of her unquestioning submission to

Edmund as the leading male figure in her life. Mary remains unmarried, and thus must continue her search to secure her own place within society. She could not succeed in beginning a life with Edmund because she could not accept him as her superior; romantic interest alone is not enough to validate a marriage when the wife will not look to the husband as principal guardian of their life within society. Mary constantly questioned the validity of Edmund's conviction to pursue the life of a clergyman, and did not respect his authority in the guidance of his own life—let alone in the life they would have led together. “They had talked—and they had been silent—he had reasoned—she had ridiculed—and they had parted at last with mutual vexation” (MP 191). Ultimately, the relationship fails before marriage is proposed because Edmund believes that Mary has not been brought up correctly, and must be forgotten because he is unable to change her.

Fanny, conversely, shows her love for Edmund in her constant devotion to his happiness, and belief in the near-infallibility of his opinions and intentions. She never disagrees with him, and in truth her unquestioning admiration of his character, actions, and opinions form the basis of her romantic attachment. “Having formed her mind and gained her affections, he had a good chance of her thinking like him” (MP 47). In fact, Fanny's introduction to the world of romance was based on her willing submission and subsequent admiration for a male authority—Edmund. Ultimately, Fanny's submission to Edmund's will as her patriarchal authority in married life permanently raises her from the socially and economically vulnerable presence as a ward of Mansfield Park to that of a distinguished, respectably married woman. The combination of submission and deep fondness in the marriage of Fanny Edmund paints their future as one of great joy and

happiness in Austen's view of society, for only when duty coincides with affection may the structures of society be rightfully affirmed.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite the fact that Austen wrote over a century ago, many of the issues presented in her work remain relevant to the society of modern day. Gender and economic conflicts have evolved in shape and appearance, but remain rooted in many of the same basic issues present in Austen's time. When considered from the perspectives of feminist and Marxist critical theory, these texts work as an effective lens for evaluating society, in all its failings and potential triumphs, extending from the past to the many echoes thereof still abundant today. Even as more and more women enter the work force, holding positions as diverse and powerful as those of business C.E.O.s, military officers, and government officials, the spherical structure of Austen's nineteenth century England can still be seen in the shadows of today's society. Studies show that "even though women are just as physically and psychologically qualified for high-paying, prestigious jobs as men are, employers continued to confine women to low-paying, low-status jobs" (Tong 112). The public world—the world of work, economic gains, and personal autonomy—is still a world hostile to the presence of women. Women still attempt to set themselves apart from each other in the hopes of having better success in finding a husband, and the commodification of women remains a prominent issue in today's cultures around the world. "To the degree that women work on their bodies—shaving their underarms...painting their nails and coloring their hair—they may start to experience their bodies as objects or commodities" (Tong 113). Perhaps even more disturbing, emphasis seems to have shifted from the overall

accomplishment of a woman—in Austen’s society women often sought to achieve superiority in many areas, such as music, language, and art—to the narrower focus of her physical appearance.

In her work, Austen sought to subvert a society that subjected women to a merciless compounded of economic and patriarchal oppression that rendered women virtually helpless in their own regression from free-thinking individuals to servants of institutions that systematically robbed them of their humanity. Her female protagonists, unique in their refusal to abandon their own personal convictions and desires, were able to circumvent the greater evils of loveless, pragmatic marriage and the inherent voluntary concession to a joyless future; they could only do so, however, in remaining submissive to the patriarchal structure of society as a whole. The oppressive nature of this form of society has caused great damage to the female community, placing competing women in opposition to each other with men in the privileged role of choosing the superior individual. The societal insistence on domesticity as the natural realm of feminine duty has created an unbalanced system in which women must shoulder the responsibility of their family’s happiness, often leaving little opportunity to focus on their own wellbeing. When investigating the state of affairs in Austen’s society with the aid of feminist and Marxist critical theory, many issues and conflicts become apparent within that society that can still be witnessed today. In comparing the evolution of Austen’s society to that which encompasses the culture of present day in the Western world, the inequality of male and female relations in patriarchal capitalist society becomes abundantly clear; while the appearance of the machines that keep society in motion may have changed over time, the hidden gears powering that motion remain much the same.

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