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Religion, politics, and sex: Matters of decorum in Jane Austen

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Middle Tennessee State University, 1988

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Religion, Politics, and Sex: Matters of Decorum
in Jane Austen

Patricia Thomas Taylor


A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
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for the degree Doctor of Arts

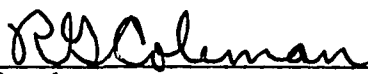
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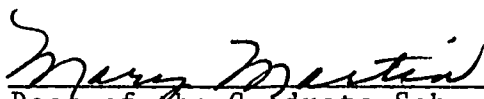
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Abstract

Religion, Politics, and Sex: Matters of Decorum in Jane Austen

by Patricia Thomas Taylor

Jane Austen (1775-1817) lived in and wrote about a world much different than the world we know today. In Austen's tiny middle-class universe, many actions were considered decorous or indecorous. It was an age of deportment, and one's manners were seen to reflect one's morals. Like the early eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson, Austen was concerned with how people ought to behave; her mind and her art clung to the tradition of didacticism.

Anyone familiar with the novels of Austen knows that her treatment of such subjects as religion, politics, and sex is unlike that of some contemporary and most successive novelists. She avoids religious debate and the particulars of Christian doctrine; she gives no representation of sexual passion at its feverish height; and she conspicuously avoids political controversy.

Critics sometimes condemn Austen's omissions of explicit discussions of religion, politics, and sex,

Patricia Thomas Taylor

blaming these omissions on ignorance of or distaste for the themes. The requirements of art are different from the requirements of life, and writers frequently write about what they are good at writing about, given their choice of genre and mode, and not necessarily about what they are most interested in. If Austen's talent or literary disposition was suited to didacticism, she finds clever and efficient ways to display her art. Austen, through narrative technique, inwardness of the action, and witty use of irony and implication creates effects that require no explicit discussion of religion, politics, and sex.

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Table of Contents

Chapter	Page
Introduction	1
1. How Does Austen Believe Well-Bred Young Ladies Should Behave?	6
2. Austen's Notions of Decorum	40
3. Religion, Politics, and Sex in Austen's Novels	51
Works Cited	110

Introduction

Jane Austen was born in 1775 and died in 1817, but all six of her novels, "her children" as she often called them, were published after 1800. Her literary productions belong to the era of such Romantic writers as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, who published in the early 1800's. However, as Irvin Ehrenpreis in Acts of Implication suggests, while Austen may have deeply admired the poems of the early Romantics, "her mind and art clung to the habits of an earlier period stretching from Dryden to Johnson" (112). Perhaps not by birth but by affinity, Austen is attached to a period of literature of the eighteenth century known as the Age of Decorum.

One of the illustrations of usage in the Oxford English Dictionary's entry for "decorum" is from Austen's Mansfield Park. Edmund Bertram is arguing with his brother Tom about their sisters', Maria and Julia, acting in the play Lovers' Vows: "father . . . would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict" (127). Decorum, as defined in the OED's entry contemporary with Austen's literary productions (1814), is "Propriety of behaviour; what is in accordance with the standard of good breeding; the avoidance of anything unseemly or offensive in manner." Whether grown-up daughters

should or should not act in plays may seem insignificant in our world today; however, in Austen's tiny universe of middle-class people, many such actions were considered decorous or indecorous. Austen is able to take seemingly inconsequential actions of young ladies and young gentlemen and turn them into delightful sketches using "the men and women to whom she was accustomed, the habits and manners of her class, and the England with which she was familiar," says G. E. Mitton in Jane Austen and Her Times (2).

Austen lived during the reign of George III, and as John Halperin observes in The Life of Jane Austen, her world was a world much different than we understand today:

In genteel households [like that of the Austens] small matters of etiquette were of greater importance than they are today, largely because the eighteenth-century gentry belonged to a society more formal than anything we know. There was more outward courtesy and ceremony of manner. It was an age of deportment: the way one moved was a badge of one's social class; to walk clumsily or make an awkward bow could be embarrassing. Manners were seen as a reflection of morals: one's outward decorum was likely to be carefully scrutinised. So the manners of the time were elaborate and had to be learned. How to enter a room, how to go in to dinner, how to sit a horse, how to dance, how to draw or paint--these were things

'accomplished' Georgians were supposed to do effortlessly. (12)

Jane Austen not only lived in this age, she writes of this age. Like the early eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson, she was at all times concerned with how people ought to behave. Austen not only believed young women (especially young women looking for husbands) ought to behave in such and such a fashion; she believed that novelists should write books in which such lessons are central. Austen's mind and heart clung to the tradition of didacticism.

Anyone familiar with the novels of Austen knows that her treatments of such subjects as religion, politics, and sex are unlike those of some contemporary and most successive novelists. Ehrenpreis, in an article in The New York Review entitled "Jane Austen and Heroism," says:

Austen avoids religious debate and the particulars of Christian doctrine, though fifty percent of her heroes and two of her fools are clergymen. She gives no representation of sexual passion at its feverish height; yet her main characters include a bastard daughter (Harriet Smith, in Emma), the seducer of an orphan (Willoughby, in Sense and Sensibility), three runaway girls and their lovers (Lydia Bennet, in Pride and Prejudice; Maria and Julia Bertram, in Mansfield Park), and an unctuous widow who elects to be the

mistress of a double-dealing gentleman (Mrs. Clay, in Persuasion). (37)

Austen also conspicuously avoids political controversy, as seen in Northanger Abbey when Tilney, who delights in conversation, stops talking when his lecture on landscape carries him into a digression on the British constitution:

Delighted with her progress, and fearful of wearying her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject to decline, and, by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment, and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands, and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics, it was an easy step to silence.

(111)

Critics sometimes condemn Austen's omissions of explicit discussions of religion, politics, and sex, blaming these omissions on her ignorance of such subjects or on her distaste for the themes. The requirements of art are different from the requirements of life, and writers frequently write about what they are good at writing about, given their choice of genre and mode, and not necessarily about what they are most interested in. If Austen's talent or literary disposition was suited to didacticism, she finds clever and efficient ways to display her art. Austen, through narrative technique, inwardness of the action, and witty use of

irony and implication is able to create an effect that requires no explicit discussion of religion, politics, and sex.

It is the purpose of this study to deal briefly with the importance of decorum in Austen's six novels. How did Jane Austen believe well-bred people (especially young women of a certain class who were looking for husbands) should behave? What are the notions of decorum that operate in the lives of the characters she creates? How does she delicately handle the subjects of religion, politics, and sex? Such a study of decorum is workable only if we do not claim to be making a comprehensive study of the novels, and if we do not make assumptions that there can be rigid universal rules for conduct. Jane Austen herself might agree that none of us always knows what is right or wrong, discreet or indiscreet, wise or foolish when defining conduct. Nevertheless, Jane Austen is a writer whose writing is meant to be didactic and to reflect "what is fitting or proper in behaviour or demeanour, what is in accordance with the standard of good breeding" (OED).

Chapter I

How Does Jane Austen Believe Well-Bred Young Ladies Should Behave?

How does Jane Austen believe well-bred young ladies should behave? Historical and sociological accounts of Austen's lifetime (1775-1817) give varying, sometimes misleading, accounts of the mores and values of the society in which she lives, reads, and writes. If we read the diary of a man like James Boswell, who contracted venereal disease at least seventeen times from his amorous affairs throughout Europe, we might surmise that the men and women of England were permissive, almost licentious, in their attitudes about sex. If we read Thomas Gisborne's Enquiries into the Duties of the Female Sex (which we know Austen read from a letter she writes to her sister Cassandra), we might wonder how women ever got pregnant, much less were involved in extramarital affairs. Social historians tell us that women were getting much more brave in their questioning about sex and prevention of pregnancy during Austen's lifetime. It is not until the mid 1800's and early 1900's that Victorian prudishness encourages such behavior as the covering of piano legs so that men would not be reminded of the word "leg" in a lady's presence.

What does this mean, however, in relation to Jane Austen's ideas about the behavior of well-bred people? First, we should consider that, because of Cassandra Austen's

decision to destroy many of her sister's more intimate letters, we have very few letters that give us ideas and opinions about people's behavior from a person who would more than likely be frank in her letter writing (if people ever are when they write letters). Second, biographers like Halperin, Chapman, Wilks, and Kennedy give us details about Austen's life from almost a completely familial and historical perspective (although Halperin does change hats from time to time to become more critic and less biographer). And third, we have only six completed novels, a few minor works (Juvenalia), begun when Austen was about eleven or twelve years old, and one unfinished novel (Sanditon) to give us information about the brilliant clergyman's daughter who lived in a small county in rural England, but who made an impact on literature that has been felt for over two hundred years. I hasten to add, however, that a person could learn a great deal about people's behavior from a novel like Emma or Pride and Prejudice if a thorough and exhaustive sociological study were done. From the information we do have, it is safe to suggest that Jane Austen both is and is not a product of her times.

How can we be sure that what Jane Austen makes her characters say and do is what she herself would say and do? How can we be sure that she is not laughing at her characters, at herself, or at us? There are no specific answers to these questions. However, we can make some observations based on usual literary criticism procedures; we

can read her letters and biographical data; and we can appreciate the literary genius who gives us common, everyday human pathos, laughter, and life without the explicit sexual details of a Cleland's Fanny Hill, or the sentimental stickiness of Richardson's Clarissa or Pamela, or the historical and religious trappings of Scott's Waverly or Heart of Midlothian.

Austen does not write about why she writes novels, as Henry James, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf have done; she simply writes. The reception of her work ranks her with some of the great myth-makers of all times. Henry James, who was not, on the whole, an admirer of Jane Austen, made several laudatory references to her, and on one occasion even ranked her with Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Fielding among "the fine painters of life" ("The Lesson of Balzac, 1905" 63). While Austen's world is a different world from theirs in many ways, at the same time it is as complicated, and like the works of those great writers, her works do indeed deal with the conflicts (great and small) of the people in her world.

One of Austen's abilities to portray life is that, while we expect certain characteristics to be exhibited by types, we are often surprised, amused, and delighted to find that like most humans her characters do not fit into any molds. No twentieth-century woman can read Emma and not see a future emancipated woman in such expressions as "A woman is not to marry a man merely because she is asked, or

because he is attached to her" (54), or "it is always incomprehensible to a man, that a woman should ever refuse an offer of marriage. A man always imagines a woman to be ready for anybody who asks her" (60). (All quotations from Austen's works are from R. W. Chapman's The Novels of Jane Austen, Third Edition, Volumes I through VI.) At the same time many twentieth-century women might not understand some of Emma's feelings about social mores: "'Mrs. Weston's manners,' said Emma, 'were always particularly good. Their propriety, simplicity, and elegance would make them the safest model for any young woman'" (278).

Like Jane Austen, we know Emma and we do not know her--this is why we love her. Emma is the androgynous creature--part male and part female; like Elizabeth Bennet, she knows and feels she is equal to the men in her society and yet she is suspended in an age where gender is still more important than a good mind or common sense. It is dear Elizabeth Bennet, in Pride and Prejudice, who says "Stupid men are the only ones worth knowing, after all" (154). Elinor Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility is another of Austen's heroines whose sense stands her apart from most of the females in the society in which she lives. Even Mansfield Park's puritanical Fanny Price has enough sense to know her mind and heart about Edmund--certainly more than he knows his mind and heart about her. We have to wait through a whole novel before he realizes Mary Crawford is too shallow to merit his attention. Anne Elliot in Persuasion is

certainly not your everyday beautiful young heroine. She is neither young nor beautiful, having lost the bloom of her youth waiting around for Captain Wentworth to come back into her life. Maturity and patience are Anne's virtues; hers are quite different from the virtues of Maria Edgeworth's characters or Fanny Burney's heroines. They are all young and beautiful. Therefore, when we delve into Austen's characters to see how Austen believes well-bred young ladies should behave, we must be prepared to make some generalizations, realizing that her heroine's similarities are seen mostly in their external actions. We can be relatively sure that Austen does endow her creatures with those social graces and accomplishments that she herself has (within her own rural setting). From this viewpoint we may assume a pretty safe perch and observe how well-bred young ladies should behave.

Recently, I was talking to a librarian about the novels of Jane Austen. The thrust of the librarian's remarks during our brief discussion was that if Jane Austen were living today, and happened to peruse one of our more explicit "romance" novels, she would faint. At the moment, I agreed with him. Reflecting, however, upon the life and times of Austen, I am inclined to change my opinion. For one thing, Austen hated women who were given to such emotional self-indulgences as fainting. When she was eleven or twelve, Austen wrote a parody, "Love and Friendship," dated June 1790 (included in the Juvenalia), in which she spoofs

the popular novels of sensibility of that time. In this satire her two main characters faint upon a sofa at every crisis, and they continue to faint whenever a "Blow to our Gentle Sensibility" (89) is sustained. One of the heroines faints once too often, however, and dies as a result of a chill caught while lying on the cold, damp ground. She admonishes the other with her last words to:

Beware of fainting-fits . . . though at the time they may be refreshing and agreeable yet believe me they will in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your Constitution. . . . One fatal swoon has cost me my Life. Beware of swoons Dear Laura. (102)

More seriously, it must be remembered that Austen's forty-two years were filled with as much sorrow, disappointment, and frustration as the life of anyone who lived in such an eventful period in English and European history. England was at war for all but seventeen years of Jane Austen's life. And, although neither foreign travel nor public attention was hers, she obviously understood much of the affairs of the world. Brian Wilks, in his biography Jane Austen, tells us:

Two of her older brothers became admirals in Nelson's Navy, her eldest brother was adopted into the aristocracy and came to own and manage great houses, a cousin's husband fell victim to the revolutionary tribunal during the French

Revolution and died under the guillotine, while her older brother George had to be nursed throughout his life and was never able to take his place with his brothers and sisters as a normal healthy person. (9)

In his long poem "Letter to Lord Byron" in Collected Longer Poems, W. H. Auden certainly finds Austen very much a woman of the world:

You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
 Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
 It makes me most uncomfortable to see
 An English spinster of the middle class
 Describe the amorous effects of 'brass,'
 Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
 The economic basis of society. (41)

In the July before Jane Austen was born, the Battle of Bunker Hill in the American War of Independence was fought, and she died only two years after the Battle of Waterloo. Obviously the war with America and the wars with France and Napoleon were important factors in shaping the kind of world she knew. John Halperin, in his biography The Life of Jane Austen, quotes V. S. Pritchett, who says of Austen: "I think of her as a war novelist, formed very much by the Napoleonic wars, knowing directly of prize money, the shortage of men, the economic crises and changes in the value of capital" (59). Perhaps Pritchett teases us in describing her as a war novelist, but we are sure that

Austen's heart was engaged by these wars because of the involvements of her family. From her letters, we know that Austen's brothers took part in many of the sea-battles fought by the British Navy during the Napoleonic wars. Perhaps this is why there are either direct or indirect references to some aspect of military life in each of her novels. At the end of Persuasion the narrator tells us how Anne Elliot "gloried in being a sailor's wife" and how her dear Captain Wentworth's "profession was all that could ever make her friends wish that tenderness less, the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine" (252). Each novel contains a character or characters with some military ranking: in Emma we find Colonel Campbell and Captain Weston; in Northanger Abbey, General Courtenay, Captain Hunt, General Tilney and Captain Frederick Tilney; in Pride and Prejudice, Captain Carter, Colonel Fitzwilliam, Colonel Forster, Colonel Miller, Lieutenant Wickham; in Mansfield Park, Mr. Campbell (Surgeon of the Thrush), Admiral Crawford, Colonel Harrison, Captain Marshall, Lieutenant Price of the Marines, and Captain Walsh; and in Sense and Sensibility, Colonel Brandon.

It is interesting to note, as some critics have, that Jane Austen hated France all her life. Perhaps the death of her cousin Eliza's husband by guillotine during the French Revolution was responsible for most of this hatred. But historians agree that the average Englishman during this time believed that what was English was good, what was

French was bad. Ward Hellstrom in an essay, "Francophobia in Emma," sees indications of Austen's feelings about the French in her characterizations of George Knightley and Frank Churchill. Biographically, we know that Austen had finished writing this novel only six days after Napoleon escaped from his island exile and landed in France. Louis XVIII had fled Paris, and war with France was imminent. Hellstrom draws greatly from the historical circumstances and Austen's own family fears for her brother's safety to suggest that Austen names her two major characters to reflect the English and French national affinities. Frank Churchill, who is called "the little Frank" in the novel, is according to Hellstrom a play on Napoleon's stature and also a play on the word France. He is characterized as secretive and devious like his prototype Napoleon. George Knightley (for King George), on the other hand, embodies all the goodness of England. For as Hellstrom says, "Knightley is clearly the English knight" (611), and when given the opportunity to comment on his rival Frank Churchill, Knightley says:

'No, Emma, your amiable young man can be amiable only in French, not in English. He may be very 'amiable,' have very good manners, and be very agreeable; but he can have no English delicacy towards the feelings of other people--[there is] nothing really amiable about him.' (149)

While it would be difficult to prove Austen's intentions in naming and characterizing these two major characters for the French and English national affinities, since Austen never talks about this in any of her letters, Hellstrom's francophobia assumptions do seem justifiable in the light of historical context--at least they are interesting observations. We do know that it is part of Austen's narrative technique to contrast major characters so that she can decorously handle sensitive issues, and Frank Churchill and George Knightley make a delightfully ironic pair, as will be shown later in my discussion.

Critics often accuse Austen of too much self-restraint in expressions of affection in her published writings. Mark Twain once said that all of Austen's characters are "manufactures" which are unable to "warm up and feel a passion" (Watt 7). While Austen's own sense of decorum might preclude the public revelations of certain emotions, one can see that she is capable of great emotions by reading verses on the death of her friend Anna Lefroy. According to Halperin, Mrs. Lefroy was apparently the first person to really encourage her young neighbor Jane Austen in her work (29). William Austen-Leigh, in his biography, gives an account of Austen's relation with Mrs. Lefroy, the wife of a rector whose parish was close to the Austens:

Mrs. Lefroy was a remarkable person. Her rare endowments of goodness, talents, graceful persons and engaging manners were sufficient to secure her

a prominent place into any society into which she was thrown; while her enthusiastic eagerness of disposition rendered her especially attractive to a clever and lively girl [like] Jane Austen. (71)

Austen-Leigh adds that Jane's great sorrow over Mrs. Le-froy's death from a sudden fall from a horse on December 16, 1808 (Austen's twenty-ninth birthday), is shown by some lines of poetry written four years later. Part of the memorial verse reads:

The day returns again, my natal day!
 What mix'd emotions in my mind arise!
 Beloved Friend; four years have passed away
 Since thou wert snatched forever from our
 eyes.

. . .

Angelic woman! past my power to praise
 In language meet thy talents, temper, mind,
 Thy solid worth, thy captivating grace,
 Thou friend and ornament of human kind. (72)

These verses on the death of her friend show a woman who speaks as she feels, attempting in all warmth and depth of enduring attachment to paint a character she declares to have been past her power to praise.

Wilks reminds us in his biography of Austen that many historians see the years of her life as the heyday of the English leisure class. However, it was a time of great economic contrast and social inequality. There was great

elegance on the one hand, and on the other hand a third or more of the nation's population faced a daily struggle to survive. Some of Austen's more cynical critics suggest that Austen is shallow because she fails to depict the real world. For example, Diana Trilling in Lionel Trilling: The Last Decade, includes an essay, "Why We Read Jane Austen." Lionel Trilling (with an allusion to Marvell) speaks of Austen's world, which, "as it appears to the mind's eye, is so much more abundantly provided with trees than with people, a world in whose green-shade life for a moment might be a green thought" (209). He observes that the reader takes for granted that the novels represent a world which is distinctly, whether implicitly or not, gratifying to the eye:

We are seldom required by Jane Austen to envision a displeasing scene, such as Fanny Price's parental home, and almost all places, even those that are not particularly described, seem to have some degree of pleasantness imputed to them.

(210)

Trilling's observation seems valid when we think of Fanny Price's own abhorrence to her poor family's situation, for we realize that Austen's heroine, while by birth connected to such a family, feels she must rise above it:

Fanny was almost stunned. The smallness of the house and thinness of the walls brought everything so close to her. . . .

She was home. But, alas! it was not such a home, she had not such a welcome. . . . Yet she thought it would not have been so at Mansfield's. No, in her uncle's house there would have been a consideration of times and seasons, a regulation of subject, a propriety. . . . (Mansfield Park 382-83)

Trilling suggests that the society Austen depicts is one in which "most persons naturally thought that life consisted not of doing, but only of being" (214). For example, Austen's characterizations of Mr. Gardiner in Pride and Prejudice, Charles Bertram in Mansfield Park, or Captain Wentworth in Persuasion are based on just such a view of society--a society that would never judge these men on the merit of their work or occupation but for who and what they were, provided they used their time to make themselves decent and cultured people. Whether the actual people who lived during Austen's life felt this way or not is unimportant; Trilling's point is that such a depiction of life is one of the reasons some people enjoy Austen. In fact, he suggests that the "world of Jane Austen's novels . . . makes it congenial to the modern person who feels himself ill-accommodated by his own time" (210).

Jane Nardin, in "Jane Austen and the Problem of Leisure," included in David Monaghan's Jane Austen in a Social Context, further suggests that such a person as Gardiner, Bertram, or Wentworth is not "expected to do

sustained, socially valuable work, nor expected to be unhappy because he has little work to do" (129). Nardin disagrees with Trilling that such an attitude concerning the leisured class is demonstrated in all of Austen's works, however. She believes that Austen probably derived such ideas in part from her reading of eighteenth-century novels. Whether Austen's ideas about society's expectations of genteel men and women come from literature or real life is of little consequence, but the modern reader might however have problems understanding historically some of the relationships of the classes. For example, Trilling observes that

Austen does not find the relation between servants and their masters or mistresses as interesting as many English novelists do and therefore gives but little help to the modern reader in understanding the part servants played in the life of her time. (213)

Also the relations between sisters and brothers and sisters and sisters in Austen's novels suggest the possibility of a greater closeness than today's mobile and fragmented families share. Friendships as portrayed in her novels suggest notions of "youthful solidarity and community" (Trilling 214) that most people cannot relate to in today's world. Perhaps the modern reader enjoys Austen more because she wastes little time justifying the actions of her characters and their classes but devotes her energy and attention to the conflicts of their lives--the same conflicts in human

life that we vicariously experience, whether or not we understand class distinctions or family relations during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. Perhaps Brian Wilk's summarization of Austen's characterization of society explains her appeal:

Shunning the aristocracy and avoiding the dire plight of the poor, she wrote of the people whom she might have met in her own immediate circle. Of upper middle class parentage, it was of the upper middle classes that she wrote, wisely confining herself to that section of society that she knew well. (13)

It is in reference to this society that she examines human behavior and its motives; it is in reference to this society that we are able to discover how Austen really believed well-bred young ladies (especially young ladies in search of husbands) should behave.

Austen's life, despite her many biographers, seems neither to be neatly wrapped up in a litte box nor to be a mystery waiting to be unravelled. Those who seem to love her best, like E. M. Forster (who confessed to being a "Jane Austen-ite and therefore slightly imbecile, about Jane. . . . She is my favourite author. I read and re-read, the mouth open and the mind closed") are also among her harshest critics (Abinger Harvest 148). Another time, Forster, reviewing Chapman's edition of the Letters, called her trivial and said that she was uninterested in the

issues of her time or in contemporary events (Halperin 64). Virginia Woolf, who also claims to be a great Austen-ite, describes her, in a review of Chapman's edition of the novels, as "Charming but perpendicular, loved at home but feared by strangers, biting of tongue but tender of heart" (Nation 433). Woolf's description of Austen as perpendicular connects with Mary Russell Mitford's reference to Miss Austen in a letter written to Sir William Elford on April 3, 1815, in which Mitford says Austen has "stiffened into the most perpendicular, precise, taciturn piece of 'single blessedness' that ever existed" (The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford 127). Woolf's comments are not meant to show an author who is paradoxical or incompatible but to show that Austen is wonderfully complex as a person and a writer.

Edmund Wilson, in "A Long Talk about Jane Austen," included in Watt's Collection of Critical Essays, makes an observation about the enigmatic Jane Austen:

Jane Austen and Dickens rather queerly present themselves today as the only two English novelists (though not quite the only novelists in English) who belong in the very top rank with the great fiction-writers of Russia and France. Jane Austen . . . is perhaps the only English example of that spirit of classical comedy that . . . Moliere represents for the French. That this spirit should have embodied itself in England in

the mind of a well-bred spinster, the daughter of a country clergyman, who never saw any more of the world than was made possible by short visits to London and a residence of a few years in Bath and who found her subjects mainly in the problems of young provincial girls looking for husbands, seems one of the most freakish of the many anomalies of English Literary history. (35)

If we examine Wilson's description of this "anomaly," beginning with the well-bred spinster and ending with the young provincial girls looking for husbands, we can perhaps get a glimpse of Austen's ideas about the behavior and actions of well-bred young people which she illustrates in the characters of her heroines and the other women in her novels.

Anyone who delves into the personal life of Jane Austen learns quickly that there is one person in Austen's life who was as determined to keep critics curious as critics are determined to pry. That person is Cassandra Austen, Austen's older sister. In her essay, "Jane Austen," Virginia Woolf says about Cassandra:

It is probable that if Miss Cassandra Austen had her way we should have had nothing of Jane Austen's except her novels. To her elder sister alone did she write freely; to her alone she confided her hopes and, if rumour is true, the one great disappointment of her life; but when Miss

Cassandra Austen grew old, and the growth of her sister's fame made her suspect that a time might come when strangers would pry and scholars speculate, she burnt, at great cost to herself, every letter that could gratify their curiosity, and spared only what she judged too trivial to be of interest. (16)

Therefore, our knowledge of Austen is derived from a little gossip, a few letters, and her books. The Austen letters which remain are written mostly to her sister Cassandra, to her nieces and nephews, and to her publishers. She writes about family matters to relatives with answers to questions about romantic relations--and frequently about health problems, hers and her mother's. She also writes much about the writing of her novels and the problems she has with publishers. Like Jonathan Swift, whose letters are filled with delightful satirical swipes at friend and foe alike, Austen seldom misses an opportunity to take a swipe at some poor acquaintance, as in this letter to Cassandra on May 12, 1801:

Wednesday. Another stupid party last night; perhaps if larger they might be less intolerable, but here there were only just enough to make one card table, with six people to look on, & talk nonsense to each other. . . . I cannot anyhow continue to find people agreeable;--I respect Mrs. Chamberlayne for doing her hair well, but cannot feel a more

tender sentiment.--Miss Langley is like any other short girl with a broad nose & wide mouth, fashionable dress, & exposed bosom.--Adm. Stanhope is a gentleman like man, but then his legs are too short, & his tail too long. (Chapman 128-29)

One requirement for being a well-bred spinster in Austen's time (getting back to Edmund Wilson's description) must surely have been an adequate education. We know that Jane herself was sent off to boarding school at the age of seven, with Cassandra and their cousin Jane Cooper, to a Mrs. Cawley's at Oxford. Mrs. Cawley was reputed to have been stiff and formal and unpopular with her students, and after a bout with typhoid fever which nearly killed Jane (and did kill her cousin's mother), Jane and Cassandra were fetched home. In the following year, Cassandra, Jane, and their cousin were sent to the well-known Abbey School in the Forbury at Reading, which was run by a Mrs. Latournelle, an amiable, elderly English woman married to a Frenchman. Halperin says: "Her chief claims to culture were a vast knowledge of the contemporary theatre and an artificial leg made of cork. The girls liked her but learned little at her school" (25). Mrs. Latournelle probably introduced Austen to the play Lovers' Vows which Austen uses in Mansfield Park. Jane's father grew dissatisfied with the Abbey School, and after two years at the school, "when she was eleven, in 1787, Jane Austen's schooldays came abruptly to an end," says Halperin (26).

Obviously Austen's "formal" education was quite short. Halperin (and other biographers) proclaim that there is little doubt that the years of Austen's real education were those she spent under her father's tutelage (Halperin 26). The scene in Pride and Prejudice in which Lady Catherine de Bourgh cross-examines Elizabeth Bennet on the subject of her education must reveal something close to Austen's own situation. Lady Catherine says to Elizabeth:

'Then, who taught you? who attended to you?

Without a governess you must have been neglected.'

'Compared with some families, I believe we were; but such of us wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary. Those who chose to be idle, certainly might.' (165)

It is perhaps significant that Anne Elliot is the only one of Austen's heroines who goes to school. Halperin notes that most of her other heroines have the sort of education Austen herself had--largely the result, as one critic (and Elizabeth Bennet almost) says, "plenty of books, plenty of time, and plenty of good talk" (Halperin 26).

Certainly in Jane Austen's opinion the education of well-bred young people, whether it be from formal schooling or from life, should provide a person with understanding and good common sense. Again and again in her novels, her characters seem to fall into the categories of intelligent or stupid. Hoyt Trowbridge, in "Mind, Body and Estate: Jane

Austen's System of Values," included in From Dryden to Jane Austen says that perhaps the most obvious example of this division is found in Pride and Prejudice:

Mrs. Bennet and the younger girls, Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, Mrs. Philips, Sir William and Lady Lucas are all stupid people, though in differing ways. Elizabeth and Jane, their father, Bingley and Darcy, Charlotte Lucas, and the Gardiners all have good minds--good 'parts,' as Jane Austen says in her eighteenth-century vocabulary. (276)

These latter characters, the ones with good parts, have minds which operate on such vital concerns as the daily affairs of family and neighborhood--meeting the issues and problems, making the judgments and decisions that determine the quality of human lives and the happiness or unhappiness of the people who live them, the kinds of issues that might face the daughter of a country clergyman. Juxtaposed to the characters with "good parts" must of necessity be those with "bad parts." One wonders, as Edmund Wilson does, how "the daughter of a country clergyman, who never saw any more of the world than was made possible by short visits to London and a residence of a few years in Bath" (35), can depict these intelligent and stupid people in the same spirit of classical comedy as other great writers of literature have done. For the Mrs. Bennets and Mr. Collinses and Lady Lucases could not have all crossed Austen's path, and yet

they are wonderfully human characters created in the mind of a writer who, Virginia Woolf says, was "interested in things in themselves; in character in itself; in the book in itself" (Woolf 327).

Anyone familiar with Austen's novels realizes that the really stupid characters are not major characters in the sense of hero or heroine; they are, however, major in that they do more than develop the plot. They are also more than foil characters. They add pathos, humor, and often the irritation that make Austen's depictions so believable. We read about Mrs. Bennet's matchmaking and we think, I know someone like that, or we think of a fawning personality like Mr. Collins and we immediately remember a job somewhere, sometime where we worked with an individual like that. And yet it goes further. "Real" characters do not necessarily make the book come alive for us. As Woolf says, "Who are the judges of reality?" (325). A character may be real to one person and quite unreal to another. "There is nothing that people differ about more than the reality of character," says Woolf (325). What reality or lifelikeness does for the reader that is important is that it has the power to make one think of all sorts of things--of religion, of love, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, of the immortality of the soul, and on and on (Woolf 325). Jane Austen has allowed her reader to see whatever he or she wishes to see through some character with good or bad "parts." It is through Austen's heroines, however, that we

are more apt to see how Austen believes well-bred young ladies should behave. And, as many of her biographers suggest, these heroines act in much the same way as did the daughter of a country clergyman.

What did the daughter of a country clergyman do? Margaret Kennedy, in her Jane Austen, says:

They [Jane and Cassandra] walked, they rode, they made excursions, they played and sang, and sketched, and entertained callers. They read novels and sometimes braced themselves to attack stiffer books. They did a great deal of needlework, including all the hemming and stitching which is done nowadays by machine, and were responsible for the linen of their men-folk. They supervised the concoction of special family recipes. . . . They visited cottages and gave shifts to old women; they trimmed bonnets and they went to church. On red-letter days they had balls. (24)

These same activities are repeated again and again in the lives of the young women in her novels. Even though Henry James's remarks about Austen's use of the commonplace are sardonically intended, he may have come closer to the truth than he realized when he says:

The key to Jane Austen's fortune with posterity has been in part the extraordinary grace of her facility, in fact of her unconsciousness: as if,

at the most, for difficulty, for embarrassment, she sometimes, over her work basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing-room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one may say, into wool-gathering, and her dropped stitches, of these pardonable, of these precious moments, were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination. (63)

These little touches of human truth appear in the details of the everyday lives of provincial young ladies looking for husbands who must go through the routine of daily chores, daily visitations, social obligations and those special times when dances or balls or trips add variety to their usually repetitious lives. Austen creates the walks through the forests, the short excursions, the small and large social events and fills them with satiric, ironic conversations, irritating personalities, people with quirks, uncomfortable little scenarios, and she adds enough romance, warmth, and humor to amuse and entertain us. She successfully does this in each of her novels. For example, in Sense and Sensibility Elinor and Marianne are forever taking long walks, as the narrator points out:

The whole country about them abounded in beautiful walks. The high downs, which invited them from almost every window of the cottage to seek the exquisite enjoyment of air on their summits, were

a happy alternative when the dirt of the valley
beneath shut up their superior beauties. . . .

(40-41)

It is on one of these walks that Marianne's destiny is changed by her chance meeting with the scoundrel Willoughby. Like Jane and Cassandra, Marianne and Elinor walk and ride: "He [Willoughby] intends to send his groom into Somersetshire immediately for it [a horse], she [Marianne] added, and when it arrives we will ride every day. . . . Imagine to yourself, my dear Elinor, the delight of a gallop on some of these downs" (58). They made excursions: "their intended excursion to Whitwell turned out very differently from what Elinor had expected" (63). They played and sang:

In the evening, as Marianne was discovered to be musical, she was invited to play. The instrument was unlocked, everybody prepared to be charmed, and Marianne, who sang very well, at their request went through the chief of the songs which Lady Middleton had brought into the family on her marriage. . . . (35)

They did a great deal of needlework: "'I am glad,' said Lady Middleton to Lucy, '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'" (144). And, on red-letter days they had balls:

Little had Mrs. Dashwood or her daughter imagined, when they came first into Devonshire, that so many

engagements would arise to occupy their time as shortly presented themselves, or that they should have such frequent invitations and such constant visitors, as to leave them little leisure for serious employment. Yet such was the case. When Marianne was recovered . . . the private balls at the park began. (31)

We are made particularly aware of Austen's love of reading, especially novels, and dancing (attending balls) in some of her letters to Cassandra. Wilks suggests that it is not surprising that George Austen's home was filled with books since he was a one-time fellow of an Oxford college. "We are wrong, however, if we imagine that his library was purely theological," (75) says Wilks. The books at Steventon were certainly not all sermons, as Jane writes to Cassandra in 1798:

I have received a very civil note from Mrs. Martin requesting my name as a Subscriber to her Library which opens the 14th of January, and my name, or rather yours, is accordingly given. My Mother finds the Money.--Mary subscribes too, which I am glad of, but hardly expected.--As an inducement to subscribe, Mrs. Martin tells us that her Collection is not to consist only of Novels, but of every kind of Literature, etc., etc.--She might have spared this pretension to our family, who

are great Novel-readers and not ashamed of being so. (Chapman 38)

Not everyone thought the novel proper reading for young ladies. Some moralists of the day were blaming immorality and lowered standards on the novelist's depiction of questionable characters (Wilks 76).

However, reading was not the only passion of Jane Austen's life. Margaret Kennedy says, "Jane Austen adored dancing; it is a passion which she bestowed on all her heroines" (24). Many, many times Jane writes to her sister Cassandra about the balls and dances she attends:

[1796 - From Steventon] - We had an exceedingly good ball last night. We were so terrible good as to take James in our carriage though there were three of us before; but indeed he deserves encouragement for the very great improvement which has lately taken place in his dancing. . . . I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together. I can expose myself, however, only once more, because he leaves the country soon after next Friday, on which day we are to have a dance at Ashe after all. (Chapman 1-2)

[1798 - From Steventon] - There were twenty dances and I danced them all and without fatigue. I was

glad to find myself capable of dancing so much;
 . . . I had not thought myself equal to it, but
 in cold weather and with a few couples I fancy I
 could just as well dance for a week together as
 for half an hour. My black cap was openly admired
 by Mrs. Lefroy, and secretly I imagine by every-
 body else in the room. (Chapman 44)

[1804 - From Lyme] - The ball last night was
 pleasant. . . . Nobody asked me the first two
 dances; the two next I danced with Mr. Crawford
 and had I chosen to stay longer might have danced
 with Mr. Franville. . . . (Chapman 141)

[1808 - From Southampton] - Our ball was rather
 more amusing than I expected. Martha liked it
 very much, and I did not gape till the last quar-
 ter of the hour. . . . (Chapman 236)

[1809 - From Southampton] - The Manydown ball was
 a smaller thing than I expected, but it seems to
 have made Anna very happy. At her age it would
 not have done for me. (Chapman 249)

Truly, dancing would be near the top of Jane Austen's list
 of things that a well-bred young lady should be able to do.

Edmund Wilson says Austen's main subject is the problem
 of young provincial girls of a certain class who are looking
 for husbands. Margaret Kennedy makes an observation about
 views on marriage in Austen's day when she says:

The lot of an old maid, in those days, was such that few girls cared to face it. Marriage was the only career open to a woman; to remain single was to be branded as a failure, to be despised by other girls, patronised by married women, and ridiculed by men. Those who could not marry for love did so for a home, for . . . companionship and children. (27)

Mary Russell Mitford (a woman who knew the Austens as girls) makes some sarcastic remarks about Austen's own matrimonial state in a letter she writes to Sir William Elford on April 3, 1815:

I have discovered that our great favourite Miss Austen is my countrywoman; that Mama knew all her family very intimately; and that she herself is an old maid (I beg her pardon--I mean young lady) with whom Mama before her marriage was acquainted. Mama says she was then the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly she ever remembers and a friend of mine who visits her now says she has stiffened into the most perpendicular precise, taciturn piece of 'single blessedness' that ever existed, and that till 'Pride and Prejudice' showed what a precious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or a fire screen or any other thin, upright piece of wood or iron that

fills its corner in peace and quiet. The case is very different now; she is still a poker but a poker of whom everyone is afraid. (The Letters of Mary Russell Mitford 127)

We know from Austen's biographers that Austen had at least three (perhaps four) opportunities to marry. Halperin says:

It is impossible to believe that Jane Austen could ever have expected to remain a spinster or chosen such a fate willingly. All of her novels are concerned with love that leads to marriage. Still, she must have observed the dance of desire with some detachment--the detachment, perhaps, of the artist who is storing up material for use. And she must have seen early on that finding a match for herself, a man suitable in intellect and humour as in other things, would be no easy task.

(54)

If Halperin is suggesting that Austen's success as a novelist required a detachment from marriage and life, he may be on dangerous grounds, artistically speaking. However, his suggestion that she is unable to find a man suitable to her own intellect and humour may have some validity. Perhaps, as several critics have surmised, Pride and Prejudice is more autobiographical than some of her other novels, for we see Austen's views on marriage pictured in her heroine Elizabeth and another woman character Charlotte. In

the former we see Elizabeth's frustration (perhaps much like Austen's herself) in finding a man to love:

I am sick of them all. Thank Heaven! I am going tomorrow where I shall find a man who has not one agreeable quality, who has neither manner nor sense to recommend him. Stupid men are the only ones worth knowing, after all. (154)

And in the latter we see Charlotte's more conventional ideas about marriage:

Her [Charlotte's] reflections were in general satisfactory. Mr. Collins, to be sure, was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. But still he would be her husband. Without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it is 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. (122)

If we conclude that Charlotte's observations reveal Austen's only ideas about marriage we run into problems. Romantically speaking, it is after all Elizabeth who ends up in the happy-ever-after scenario with the man of her dreams. Charlotte, while professedly content, surely is not with her Prince Charming--Mr. Collins. In real life Austen never marries. Halperin suggests that there were no men in real

life who could meet her expectations. He says: "She found them only in her novels--in extraordinary men like Darcy, Henry Tilney, and Mr. Knightley. The men she met in real life suffered by comparison" (72). However, not all of Austen's heroines and other women characters end up with their Prince Charmings. As we said, Charlotte certainly does not. Lydia, in this same novel, ends up in an unhappy marriage. In Sense and Sensibility one sister (Elinor) gets her man Edward, but the other (Marianne), while contented, finds her own happiness "in forming his [Colonel Brandon's, a man much older and maturer]" (379) happiness. In Mansfield Park, Mary Crawford and Julia Bertram never marry and Maria Bertram's unhappy marriage ends in scandal and divorce.

It does appear, however, that the heroines and other women characters in Austen's novels who are happy with or without Prince Charming have similar characteristics. They are those characters with "good parts"--common sense, a sense of humor, the ability to change in order to survive. Perhaps we shall never know why Austen chose not to marry. The closest we may come to really discerning her feelings about marriage may be the opinions revealed in two of Austen's letters, one to Cassandra on December 27, 1808, and the other to Fanny Knight on November 18, 1814 (just three years before Austen's death). To Cassandra she writes:

Lady Sondes' match surprises, but does not offend me; had her first marriage been of affection, or

had there been a grown-up single daughter, I should not have forgiven her, but I consider everybody as having a right to marry once in their lives for love, if they can. . . . (Chapman 240)

To Fanny Knight she writes:

And now, my dear Fanny, having written so much on one side of the question, I shall turn round & entreat you not to commit yourself farther, & not to think of accepting him unless you really do like him. Anything is to be preferred or endured rather than marrying without Affection; and if his deficiencies of Manner &c strike you more than all his good qualities, if you continue to think strongly of them, give him up at once. (Chapman 410)

How did Jane Austen think well-bred young women should behave? Gleaning from her life, letters, and novels, we observe that this well-bred spinster, daughter of a country clergyman, had some very definite ideas about "accomplished" women. While we may be amused at Elizabeth Bennet's repartee with Darcy and Charles about "accomplished" young ladies in Pride and Prejudice, we can be relatively sure that Austen herself fits the "accomplished" description that these two haughtily give:

'Then,' observed Elizabeth, 'you must comprehend a great deal in your idea of an accomplished woman.'

'Yes, I do comprehend a great deal in it.'

'Oh! certainly,' cried his faithful assistant [Charles], 'no one can be really esteemed accomplished who does not greatly surpass what is usually met with. 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.'

'All this she must possess,' added Darcy, 'and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading.' (39)

Even though the reader is aware that irony is at work in these delightfully satiric passages, we know that Darcy and Charles' description of the "accomplished" young lady is more or less what people of their class believed to be true. The humor, of course, comes from the charmingly snobbish attitude of the pair as they are bantering with Elizabeth. Even so, the point is made and we see the catalogue of characteristics they propose exhibited again and again, novel after novel, in all her heroines and other women characters too.

Chapter II

Austen's Notions of Decorum

If Austen has certain ideas about the behavior of well-bred young ladies, she also has definite notions about the morals that motivate proper decorum. She reveals these notions through her characterizations. Remembering that Austen so successfully describes the universe which she treats that we sometimes forget what a tiny universe it is, we still may observe that the conception of propriety operates in the relation of character and action. Jane Nardin, in Those Elegant Decorums, insists that one cannot read Austen's works without understanding or at least appreciating "Austen's ideas about morality and the techniques she uses to dramatize them" (1).

Austen's ideas about manners are not preserved for posterity in a diary or notebook. She writes no brilliant moral tracts, as did John Wesley. She never stands in any pulpit to preach. Her letters to Cassandra and others contain no thou-shalts or thou-shalt-nots. Yet throughout her novels, she proposes that this or that is wrong--not for the world at large but for the people about whom she speaks in the place and time in which they live. In this way she is very much like Samuel Johnson, who in the eighteenth century uses his periodical essays to voice his notions of decorum and manners. She draws on exactly what she sees around her in a country life: "--3 or 4 Families in A Country Village

is the very thing to work on--," she once writes to her niece Anna Austen in 1814, while giving Anna advice about writing (Chapman 401).

Focusing on the problem of young ladies' (from the upper middle class) finding husbands, Austen uses the internal and external conflicts that such a task occasions to reveal her ideas about manners and decorum. Each novel contains a heroine (or heroines) who succeeds in getting her man. However, while these leading ladies are usually portrayed as having a true sense of decorum and manners (except possibly Emma who undergoes a more radical change than most of Austen's heroines), the minor characters and antagonists better reveal Austen's ideas about manners. For example, Sir John and Lady Middleton in Sense and Sensibility are a well-established married couple from the upper-middle-class society of Barton Park who are very involved in Elinor and Marianne's lives. Lady Middleton is a woman who appears to be very elegant in her behavior. Without Austen's ever stating the fact directly, it does not take the reader long to discover that Lady Middleton is not what she appears. The Middletons, a very social couple, are constantly entertaining the families of Barton Park. The narrator tells us that, while Sir John "delighted in collecting about him more young people than his house would hold," Lady Middleton "piqued [prided] herself upon the elegance of her table, and of all her domestic arrangements; and from this kind of vanity was her greatest enjoyment." The narrator is quick

to add that "Sir John's satisfaction was much more real" and that "He was a blessing to all the juvenile part of the neighborhood" (32). Earlier the narrator has given us another hint about the differences between Sir John and Lady Middleton:

The house was large and handsome; and the Middletons lived in a style of equal hospitality and elegance. The former was for Sir John's gratification, the latter for that of his lady. (32)

Austen exposes Lady Middleton's sense of decorum several times through the course of the novel until we are convinced that here is a lady who knows how to behave correctly in public but whose manners are not supported by any true feeling or sense of value.

One of the most clever revelations of Lady Middleton's manners is made when she blunders her way into an embarrassing faux pas at the first dinner party she arranges for the Dashwoods. Marianne had been invited to play the piano and had just finished playing. The narrator tells us:

Marianne's performance was highly applauded. Sir John was loud in his admiration at the end of every song, and as loud in his conversation with the others while every song lasted. Lady Middleton frequently called him to order, wondered how any one's attention could be diverted from music for a moment, and asked Marianne to sing a

particular song which Marianne had just finished.

(35)

Such wonderful jabs tempt one to agree with Virginia Woolf when she says that "Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off" (Ian Watt 20). While Sir John is guilty of some rudeness in talking during Marianne's performance, we forgive him because Austen has already told us that he truly enjoys people and that people love him; the narrator never says that about Lady Middleton, however.

Even though Austen exposes the shallowness of Lady Middleton's manners, she does not stereotype her or metonymically characterize her in the way she does Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice, who is always connected to husband-hunting, or Mrs. Allen in Northanger Abbey, who is always connected to clothes. The narrator says some complimentary things about her. For example, the very first time Elinor, Marianne, and their mother meet Lady Middleton, the narrator tells us:

They were of course very anxious to see a person on whom so much of their comfort at Barton must depend; and the elegance of her appearance was favourable to their wishes. Lady Middleton was not more than six or seven and twenty; her face was handsome, her figure tall and striking, and her address graceful. Her manners had all the elegance which her husband's wanted. (31)

However, it does not take the Dashwood girls or their mother long to realize (as the narrator quickly adds) that

they [her manners] would have been improved by some share of his [Sir John's] frankness and warmth; and her visit was long enough to detract something from their first admiration, by showing that, though perfectly well-bred, she was reserved, cold, and had nothing to say for herself beyond the most commonplace inquiry or remark.

(31)

Even though we are given the idea that Lady Middleton's manners are impeccable and Sir John's are not, surely Austen wants us to admire him more.

We are even more thoroughly convinced of the superficiality of Lady Middleton's manners by Austen's satirical description of what occurs at the Dashwood house during the Middletons' first formal visit. The narrator, with great understatement and wit, describes the action:

Sir John was very chatty, and Lady Middleton had taken the wise precaution of bringing with her their eldest child, a fine little boy about six years old, by which means there was one subject always to be recurred to by the ladies in case of extremity, for they had to inquire his name and age, admire his beauty, and ask him questions which his mother answered for him, while he hung about her and held down his head, to the great

surprise of her ladyship, who wondered at his being so shy before company as he could make noise enough at home. On every formal visit a child ought to be of the party, by way of provision for discourse. In the present case it took up ten minutes to determine whether the boy were most like his father or mother, and in what particular he resembled either, for of course every body differed, and every body was astonished at the opinion of the others. (31)

The situation is humorous, and we can sense the pretentious feelings of everyone present; more important however, we realize the significance of the narrator's having informed us that Lady Middleton took the "wise precaution of bringing her eldest child with her" (31). Here is a woman adept at compensating for her slight conversation skills--or perhaps a woman who really has nothing to talk about except her children.

The Middletons and the Dashwoods spend much time together in their social lives at Barton Park; however, we are always aware that these visits result from society's expectations, not from any fondness for each other's company:

Though nothing could be more polite than lady Middleton's behaviour to Elinor and Marianne, she [Lady Middleton] did not really like them at all. Because they neither flattered herself 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. (246)

Again, our narrator gets in a nasty jab at Lady Middleton's lack of depth. Surely Austen is making a statement about people whose observable manners and actions are above reproach, but whose lives reflect that there is no value, feeling, or common sense to support their actions. Lady Middleton's character is not developed enough to make her an important member of the cast, and we lose sight of her as the story develops. However, we should not underestimate the importance of Austen's depiction of such people in her society. There are many more Lady Middletons than Mariannes and Elinors in her novels.

We meet many shallow people in each of Austen's novels. Elizabeth Elliot in Persuasion has manners but no true sense of decorum. She is never developed as a character but serves as a source of embarrassment and irritation to the heroine Anne. Mrs. Allen in Northanger Abbey is shallow and weak and fails to prevent her charge, heroine Catherine Morland, from getting into trouble. Lydia Bennet in Pride and Prejudice appears to be well-bred and decorous but ends up eloping in a scandalous affair. Maria and Julia Bertram and Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park suffer from a lack of true propriety. Even a major character like Emma suffers

until she discovers the difference between true decorum and merely acting as she supposes other people expect.

We must return to Austen's Sense and Sensibility to clearly see the other side of her notions of decorum. While Lady Middleton's sense of manners is indeed a surface matter only, Elinor Dashwood's sense of decorum is based on principle, duty, common sense, and a sensitivity that goes beyond what one does because one must.

From the very beginning, we are aware of the larger conflict going on in this story--the conflict between Elinor's sense and her sister Marianne's sensibility. Marianne feels intensely about everything, while Elinor takes a more rational, analytical approach to life. While the main objective of our author is to show that both heroines must eventually learn to assume some of the other's characteristics (switch traits), at the same time, we can make some observations about Austen's notions of decorum that surface during these transitions.

Everett Zimmerman, in his essay "Admiring Pope No More Than Is Proper: Sense and Sensibility" says, "Readers have sometimes been annoyed by Jane Austen's preference for Elinor, a preference that seems to validate the importance of the social surface and to derogate feelings" (112). Marianne does act in accordance with her feelings, and it is true that she does get deeply hurt by Willoughby, but this in no way suggests that Austen thinks that having feelings is derogatory. (In fact, Elinor has to learn to rely on her

feelings before the story ends.) However, Zimmerman's reference to Elinor's interest in social conventions is credible when one considers how intensely interested Elinor is in satisfying the demands of society. One must admit that much chaos could have been averted if Marianne had heeded the prudential misgivings of her sister. Early in the story when Willoughby unexpectedly leaves Barton Place after he and Marianne have become involved, it is Elinor who questions his intentions (in the conversation with her mother) on the morning Willoughby leaves. Mrs. Dashwood asks Elinor, "'What is it you suspect of him?'" Elinor replies:

'I can hardly tell you myself.--But suspicion of something unpleasant is the inevitable consequence of such an alteration we have just witnessed in him. . . . Willoughby may undoubtedly have very sufficient reasons for his conduct, and I will hope that he has. . . . It may be proper to conceal their [Willoughby and Marianne's] engagement (if they are engaged) from Mrs. Smith-- . . . But this is no excuse for their concealing it from us.'

'Concealing it from us! my dear child, do you accuse Willoughby and Marianne of concealment? This is strange indeed, when your eyes have been reproaching them every day for incautiousness.'

'I want no proof of their affection' said Elinor; 'but of their engagement I do.' (79)

While Elinor is of course concerned for her sister's feelings because she loves her, she is also aware that a covert engagement is disapproved of in their society. When Willoughby turns out to be the scoundrel that he is, we know that Elinor's doubts were well-warranted. If Willoughby's intentions had been honorable, there should have been no reason for him to act other than society dictated.

Even though it is obvious that Austen would not disapprove of Elinor's concern for social conventions, she shows the painfully constricted life that can sometimes result from extremity in such concerns. For example, we know very early in the story how much Elinor loves Edward Ferrars. Once, however, she believes he is engaged to Lucy Steele (a really shallow, pretentious woman), she is determined to do the decorous thing. As Zimmerman says, "Elinor's understanding is not an active force; it is inhibited by her respect for social conventions. She long understood Lucy's calculations and Edward's misery" (120). Nevertheless, the narrator tells us, "Elinor gloried in his [Edward's] integrity" (270). Lucy and Edward had been engaged (according to Lucy) for four years because Edward's mother refused to give them permission or the inheritance that would allow them to marry. Even after Elinor realizes the kind of woman Lucy is and the kind of marriage they must have, she is still determined to honor their engagement. The narrator tells us that Elinor

had little difficulty in understanding thus much of her rival's [Lucy's] intentions . . . she was firmly resolved to act by her [Lucy] as every principle of honour and honesty directed, [and] to combat her own affection for Edward and to see him as little as possible. . . . (142)

In the end, the fickle Lucy runs off with Edward's brother Robert, and Elinor and Edward are at long last reunited. Elinor has no regrets that she acted above reproach, and she is obviously rewarded for her propriety which is motivated by true morals and values.

Lady Middleton and Elinor Dashwood are two characters in Sense and Sensibility who are concerned with decorum and propriety. Elinor sometimes observes arbitrary conventions for the simple sake of manners. She pays a formally required visit to Mrs. John Dashwood (her sister-in-law), although their dislike is mutual (294), and, as the narrator tells us, Elinor is not above the "task of telling lies when politeness required it" (122). However, she still has a sense of propriety or feeling that motivates her behavior. Lady Middleton, on the other hand, is a person whose surface manners are impeccable but whose motivations are shallow and false. Austen's notions of decorum are clearly presented in two such paradoxical creatures.

Chapter III

Religion, Politics, and Sex in Austen's Novels

Jan S. Fergus, in "Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen's Novels," says the definitive twentieth-century opinion of sexuality in Jane Austen's works was uttered in 1928 at one of Gertrude Stein's parties in Montparnasse, France, when a tweedy Englishman with a long ginger moustache said, "'You are talking of Jane Austen and sex, gentlemen? The subjects are mutually exclusive'" (66). In this chapter I want to show that even though Austen thinks the way she does about the behavior of well-bred young ladies (chapter one), and the morals and decorum which motivate such notions of behavior (chapter two), Austen's treatment of such subjects as religion, politics, and sex does not suffer. In fact, that treatment is brilliant, for through narrative technique (inwardness of the action--self-revelation in her heroines and heroes) and irony, she is able to treat such subjects decorously and not compromise her own ideas and beliefs and those asserted by her age.

In Austen's novels there are no long, explicit discussions of religion, politics, or sex. As Irvin Ehrenpreis in Acts of Implication says:

Anyone familiar with the novels of Scott knows how much Austen leaves out of her work. She hardly

describes the physical appearance of her characters. In Pride and Prejudice we never learn the color of Elizabeth Bennet's eyes or of Darcy's hair. Austen does not expiate on politics. In Emma we are not told what Mr. Knightley thinks of the Prince of Wales. Austen avoids religious debate and the particulars of Christian doctrine, though fifty percent of her heroes (and two of her fools) are clergymen. She gives no representation of sexual passion at its feverish height; yet her main characters include an illegitimate daughter (Harriet Smith in Emma), the seducer of an orphan (Willoughby, in Sense and Sensibility), three runaway girls and their lovers (Lydia Bennet, in Pride and Prejudice; Maria and Julia Bertram, in Mansfield Park), and an unctuous widow who elects to be a mistress of a double-dealing gentleman (Mrs. Clay in Persuasion).

(112-13)

Ehrenpreis thinks that Austen's omissions are not faults but that the elements of her greatness require such omissions.

Religion, politics, and sex do color Austen's themes, but very differently than in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. In Scott's novels, the plots depend on violent, external action, and his stories are shaped by political and religious conflicts. In novels like Waverly (published in 1814, the same year as Mansfield Park) and The Heart of

Midlothian, historical issues dominate. Metaphor and symbolism abound in Scott's works. Once, Austen's niece Fanny inquired of her Aunt Cassandra why her Aunt Jane used plain, figureless writing in an age of romantic and sentimental compositions. Here is Aunt Jane's witty response, satirically complete with sentiment, illustration, and metaphor in its final sentence:

I am gratified by her [Fanny's] having pleasure in what I write--but I wish the knowledge of my being exposed to her discerning Criticism, may not hurt my stile, by inducing too great a solicitude. I begin already to weigh my words and sentences more than I did, and am looking about for a sentiment, an Illustration or a metaphor in every corner of the room. Could my Ideas flow as fast as the rain in the Store closet it would be charming.

(Chapman 256)

Austen does not rely on external effects such as figurative language or historical topics as Scott and Samuel Richardson do (writers we know from her letters she frequently read). The major issues or conflicts in their works seem to be the problems of attracting and holding the people one loves or winning and keeping power or wealth. The protagonists and antagonists of such works are well-defined, and most of the action is external and visible. However, with Austen, while her major conflicts are those of young ladies' finding husbands, the obstacles along the way are presented as

obstacles which lie within the characters themselves. The stories are stories of self-discovery. For example, we may never know the color of Elizabeth Bennet's eyes or her family's ancestral significance in Pride and Prejudice, but we do know Elizabeth Bennet. The immediately observable conflict of a young woman's looking for a husband is dwarfed by the inner conflict of the young woman and the young man's maturing emotionally. Both discover they must come to terms with life and love. We are led to the brink of vicariously experiencing Elizabeth's own ephiphany when she declares:

'How despicably have I acted!' she cried--'I, who have prided myself on my discernment!--I, who have valued myself on my abilities! who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity in useless or blameable distrust.--How humiliating is this discovery!--Yet, how just a humiliation!--Had I been in love, I could not have been more wretchedly blind. But vanity, not love, has been my folly.--Pleased with the preference of one [Wickham], and offended by the neglect of the other [Darcy], on the very beginning of our acquaintance, I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment, I never knew myself.' (208)

Of course more is at work in this testimony of Elizabeth Bennet's confession than might first appear. Austen's

clever injection of "Had I been in love" is her authorial way of letting the reader know that Elizabeth Bennet is profoundly human. Of course she was "in love." Elizabeth knows that, Jane Austen knows that, and the reader knows that, so when Elizabeth says "if" she had been in love we know that irony is at work here.

In Emma we watch and wait, as Ehrenpreis puts it, while Mr. Knightley "hovers" (113) until the heroine sees for herself (at long last) that she loves him:

Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditating, in a fixed attitude, for a few minutes. A few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart. A mind like hers, once opening to suspicion, made rapid progress. She touched--she admitted--she acknowledged the whole truth. Why was it so much worse that Harriet should be in love with Mr. Knightley than with Frank Churchill? Why was the evil so dreadfully increased by Harriet's having some hope of a return? It darted through her, with the speed of an arrow, that Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself! (407-08)

In Persuasion Anne Elliot waits for Wentworth to come to the realization that he cannot love anyone but her. In Mansfield Park, it is not the heroine who finds herself--Fanny Price fully understands her own devotion to Edmund Bertram--it is Edmund who must wear out his own illusions

concerning Mary Crawford and come to realize that it is Fanny he wants and needs. In Sense and Sensibility Marianne must discover that romantic notions about life are often misleading and that she must come to a proper judgment about herself:

'My illness had made me think--It has given me leisure and calmness for serious recollection. Long before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect. I considered the past; I saw in my own behaviour . . . nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others. . . . I cannot express my own abhorrence of myself. Whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected, or some failing indulged. Everybody seemed injured by me. . . . Your [Elinor's] example was before me: but to what avail?--Was I more considerate of you and your comfort? Did I imitate your forbearance, or lessen your restraints. . . ? --No;--not less when I knew you to be unhappy, than when I had believed you at ease, did I turn away from every exertion of duty or friendship. . . .'

'You [Elinor] are very good.--The future must be my proof. I have laid down my plan, and if I am capable of adhering to it--my feelings shall be governed and my temper improved.' (345-47)

Marianne, as we see in this confession, not only comes to a knowledge about herself but she also comes to the realization of what her sister is really like. Actually, Marianne and her mother (whose nature is more like Marianne's) learn that they have grossly undervalued the depth of Elinor's character. Austen could have given the reader information about Elinor's depth of character through narration; however, she chooses to do that only at the very beginning of the novel when the narrator says:

Elinor, this eldest daughter 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. . . . She had an excellent heart;--her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong; but she knew how to govern them: it was a knowledge which her mother had yet to learn, and which one [Marianne] of her sisters had resolved never to be taught. (6)

From then on, we discover strengths and weaknesses through the actions and interactions of the characters. Thus, self-discovery becomes part of the way Austen uses narrative technique to develop the plot and to involve the reader.

Not all the action in Sense and Sensibility is internal. Ehrenpreis and other critics think that perhaps more external action takes place in this novel than all the others put together. The novel begins with the death of Mr.

Henry Dashwood which is handled judiciously in one succinct sentence: "The old gentleman died; his will was read, and like almost every other will, gave as much disappointment as pleasure" (4)--no moaning, no groaning, no grief. (This, by the way, is one of the few deaths in Austen's novels.) Austen develops the plot with another extrinsic action when Marianne encounters the deceitful Willoughby in a chance meeting after falling down in a meadow, spraining her ankle, and being romantically carried away in Willoughby's strong arms to her cottage. Later in the story Marianne almost dies because her love for Willoughby has made her physically ill. These few external actions advance the plot, but interestingly the onstage incidents are not nearly as exciting and expedient as the things we learn by innuendo and implication. For example, the reader learns that Elinor's beloved Edward has after all NOT married Lucy Steele by watching Elinor receive the information:

When Elinor had ceased to rejoice in the dryness of the season, a very awful pause took place. It was put an end to by Mrs. Dashwood, who felt obliged to hope that he had left Mrs. Ferrars very well. In a hurried manner he replied in the affirmative.

Another pause.

Elinor, resolving to exert herself, though fearing the sound of her own voice, now said,
'Is Mrs. Ferrars at Longstaple?'

'At Longstaple!' he replied, with an air of surprise--'No, My mother is in town.'

'I meant,' said Elinor, taking up some work from the table, 'to inquire after Mrs. Edward Ferrars.'

She dared not look up;--but her mother and Marianne both turned their eyes on him. He coloured, seemed perplexed, looked doubtingly, and after some hesitation said,

'Perhaps you mean--my brother--you mean Mrs.--Mrs. Robert Ferrars.'

'Mrs. Robert Ferrars!--was repeated by Marianne and her mother, in an accent of the utmost amazement;--and though Elinor could not speak, even her eyes were fixed on him with the same impatient wonder. (359-60)

It is through Elinor's consciousness (or eyes) that we often get the main action in this novel. As Ehrenpreis suggests, "This technique adds humor, pathos, or irony to incident after incident, and makes tiny gestures resonate with significance . . . the device also magnifies the inwardness of the plot" (114).

The heroines are not the only people in Austen's novels who are directed by the process of self-discovery. Her villains often find themselves in the dilemmas they are in because of their misunderstandings of themselves or other

characters. Elinor Dashwood explains this process of self-discovery plainly when she says:

I have frequently detected myself in . . . a total misapprehension of character in some point or other: fancying people so much more gay or grave, or ingenious or stupid than they really are, and I can hardly tell why, or in what the deception originated. Sometimes one is guided by what they say of themselves, and very frequently by what other people say of them, without giving oneself time to deliberate and judge. (Sense and Sensibility 93)

Thanks to such misapprehensions, Austen's villains trick themselves as much as they trick their victims. For example, Wickham in Pride and Prejudice takes advantage of Elizabeth Bennet's declaration about Darcy, "I think him very disagreeable" (77), to paint a dark picture of Darcy:

'I have no right to give my opinion [although as we will see, he readily does give his opinion],' said Wickham, 'as to his being agreeable or otherwise. I am not qualified to form one. I have known him too long and too well to be a fair judge. It is impossible for me to be impartial. . . .'

'I cannot pretend to be sorry,' said Wickham, after a short interruption, 'that he or that any man should not be estimated beyond their deserts;

but with him I believe it does not often happen. The world is blinded by his fortune and consequence, or frightened by his high and imposing manners, and sees him only as he chuses to be seen.' (77-78)

Of course, as the story unravels it is Wickham who is the scoundrel, who had tried to elope with Darcy's younger sister and who does elope with Lydia Bennet. In retrospect, we see wonderful irony in every word that Wickham says. When Wickham says he is not qualified to form an opinion of Darcy, he is telling the truth. He cannot be a fair judge of a man whose sister he has tried to seduce. When Wickham says that he cannot pretend to be sorry that a man should be estimated beyond his just deserts, we do not understand the significance of this ironic statement until Wickham's true character is revealed, and then we are satisfied that he deserves no sympathy.

Henry Crawford in Mansfield Park cheats himself by expecting to receive casual amusement from Fanny, who ends up winning his heart--and breaking it when she does not return his love. Austen tells her reader in a didactic aside that such a man as Henry Crawford not only deceives himself but also receives his just punishment when he behaves in such an indecorous way:

That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend his [Henry's] share of the offence, is, we know, not

one of the barriers, which society gives to virtue. In this world, the penalty is less equal than could be wished; but without presuming to look forward to a juster appointment hereafter, we may fairly consider a man of sense like Henry Crawford, to be providing for himself no small portion of vexation and regret--vexation that must rise sometimes to self-reproach, and regret to wretchedness--in having so requited hospitality, so injured family peace, so forfeited his best, most estimable and endeared acquaintance, and so lost the woman whom he had rationally, as well as passionately loved. (468-69)

Again and again the heroines, the villains, and the victims in Austen's novels are involved in processes of introspection and self-discovery which are in fact the substance of the stories, and it is in those processes conflicts are resolved. Not only is this inwardness of Austen's stories the source of their fascination, it determines the narrative technique with which Austen handles such subjects as religion, politics, and sex.

"By making the obstacles internal rather than external," Ehrenpreis says, "Austen drove her genius to invent ways of disclosing them" (115). Some of the devices that Austen chooses are explicit statement; having one person inform on another (sort of tattletale); narrative contrast (moral contrast and antithesis), which includes such

literary devices as metonymy and synecdoche; and of course implication and irony.

The simplest and most direct narrative technique which Austen uses is explicit statement. She often tells the reader outright what is happening in the hearts and minds of her creatures. We are left with little doubt about the character of Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice, because at the very beginning the narrator tells us:

She [Mrs. Bennet] 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. (5)

So much for Mrs. Bennet. The reader soon understands why Mrs. Bennet has not kept her husband's affection.

Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park is another creature who, we know soon and certainly, will behave in a constant manner. The author tells us that Mrs. Norris's love of money is equal only to her love of directing, and the alternation of bossiness with avarice explains much of her evildoing:

Mrs. Norris had not the least intention of being at any expense whatever in her [Fanny's] maintenance. As far as walking, talking, and contriving reached, she was thoroughly benevolent, and nobody knew better how to dictate liberality

to others: but her love of money was equal to her love of directing, and she knew quite as well how to save her own as to spend that of her friends.

(8)

Have not we all met a Mrs. Norris at some time in our lives? Not only are these characters (the Mrs. Bennets and Mrs. Norrises) catalysts in the great and small conflicts in these novels, they are depressingly familiar.

Another character whose attributes are revealed in explicit statement is Sir Walter Elliot in Persuasion. Very early Austen's narrator tells us:

Vanity was the beginning and end of Sir Walter Elliot's character; vanity of person and of situation. He had been remarkably handsome in his youth; and, at fifty-four, was still a very fine man. Few women could think more of their personal appearance than he did. . . . He considered the blessing of beauty as inferior only to the blessing of a baronetcy; and the Sir Walter Elliot, who united these gifts, was the constant object of his warmest respect and devotion. (4)

Given Sir Walter's narcissism, it is no wonder that the importunate Mrs. Clay tries to snare him with flattery. Austen clearly juxtaposes Anne's plainness of features and humble attitude about rank and title to her father who is handsome and ostentatious. From these two characterizations and the way the story ends, we can glean that Austen

wants us to learn that inner beauty (virtues like maturity and patience) is more rewarding than outer beauty and pride. This is not to say that Austen is suggesting that beauty and position are inherently bad; Sir Walter is portrayed as more pathetic than defective. Persuasion is Austen's last finished writing, and, as some critics have noted, the tone is more mellow--and even the satire is gentler--than in her other works.

Austen varies the technique of explicit statement with great skill, and her readers must be on guard, because often unconditional statements from her characters can be misleading or downright wrong. For example, Elinor Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility looks at a plait of hair in Edward Ferrar's ring and believes it to be hers:

She [Elinor] was sitting by Edward, and in taking tea from Mrs. Dashwood, his hand passed so directly before her, as to make a ring, with a plait of hair in the centre, very conspicuous on one of his fingers. . . . That the hair was her own, she instantaneously felt as well satisfied as Marianne. . . . (98)

Ehrenpreis thinks that few readers fail to accept Elinor's opinion about the hair, but that most of us have some doubt because of Edward's embarrassment (117). We do finally discover that it is not Elinor's but Lucy Steele's hair. "I [Lucy speaking] gave him a lock of my hair set in a ring when he was at Longstaple last" (135). Then we realize that

Austen has let us catch her heroine in a blunder. We can be reasonably sure that what the narrator tells us can be trusted, but we need to be wary of information from characters about other characters.

A heroine who delivers a wrong judgment of character is Anne Elliot in Persuasion. Anne errs greatly in dealing with her cousin Mr. Elliot. Not only does she grossly overvalue him, she feels confident that he is pursuing her sister Elizabeth. We discover, however, as the story unfolds, that when Mr. Elliot is not trying to keep Sir Walter and Mrs. Clay apart, he himself is after Anne. Anne Elliot is not like Emma, who is wrong about people more often than she is right. Anne is serious and mature, and she does not make snap judgments. The young Emma, on the other hand, makes snap judgments for herself and for other people. She is manipulative; therefore, we are not surprised or thrown off guard when she gets into sticky situations because of her misjudgments. However, a character like Anne Elliot is not supposed to make errors in her judgments. As Ehrenpreis suggests:

The explicitness of the novelist is sometimes only apparent, and at other times is a game played with an audience. By sounding blunt and outspoken in many of her judgments, Austen entices unwary readers into assuming that she is essentially straightforward. . . . Who among us is so acute as to notice when the author merely withholds her

opinion of a character from us? Who is so acute as to infer that in such cases she is letting us mislead ourselves? (118)

Another narrative technique which Austen uses to bring out hidden motives in her novels is to have one person inform on another. In Sense and Sensibility, we find out about the perverted nature of Willoughby when Colonel Brandon informs Elinor Dashwood (after he receives verification in a letter) of Willoughby's despicable actions. Colonel Brandon details the long and arduous story of Willoughby's seduction of his charge, Eliza Williams, whom he abandoned after he made her pregnant. When Marianne hears the second-hand story, we learn from the narrator the sordid details of a man's debauched impulses that will eventually prevent him from marrying the girl he loves:

She [Marianne] felt the loss of Willoughby's character yet more heavily than she had felt the loss of his heart; his seduction and desertion of Miss Williams, the misery of that poor girl, and the doubt of what his designs might once have been on herself, preyed together so much on her spirits, that she could not bring herself to speak of what she felt even to Elinor. . . . (126)

How like Austen to make Marianne regret the loss of Willoughby's character more than the loss of his love. We might wonder if this is a didactic, perhaps moralizing propensity of a clergyman's daughter coming through.

Perhaps a familiar episode of Richardson's *Clarissa* and Lovelace lurks in the recesses of Austen's mind. Whatever the case, sex, and illicit sex at that, is functioning here as an important part of the plot. Perhaps Gertrude Stein's mustachioed English gentleman slept through these passages.

Again, in Persuasion, we learn of the misdeeds of Mr. Elliot, the heroine's cousin, through a conversation between Mrs. Smith and Anne Elliot in which Mrs. Smith informs Anne about the cruel and treacherous youth of her cousin:

'I beg your pardon, my dear Miss Elliot,' she cried. . . . 'I have been uncertain what I ought to do . . . as to what I ought to tell you. . . . I think you ought to be made acquainted with Mr. Elliot's real character. . . . Mr. Elliot is a man without heart or conscience; a designing, wary, cold-blooded being, who thinks only of himself; who . . . would be guilty of any cruelty, or any treachery, that could be perpetrated without risk of his general character. He has no feeling for others. . . . Oh! he is black at heart hollow and black!' (198-99)

Just as Colonel Brandon tells Elinor that he would not have divulged Willoughby's past unless "had I not seriously and from my heart believed it might be of service, might lessen her [Marianne's] regrets" (125), so too does Mrs. Smith justify her account of Mr. Elliot's debauched past. Does Austen spend so much time justifying her character's tattling

so that we can see that it rises above mere gossip--that it is necessary to advance the workings of the plot? We know from the way things turn out in Persuasion that Mrs. Smith's account of Mr. Elliot is true; and Mr. Elliot gets his due, since we are led to believe that he will be "wheedled and caressed" into marrying the scheming Mrs. Clay.

By arranging for one person to inform us of another's hidden motives through secondhand conversations or letters, Austen takes us into the concrete ugliness of lust and greed as in the discovery of Willoughby's and Mr. Elliot's actions. Ehrenpreis suggests that such detailed revelations "in dialogue or by letter, have an old fashioned atmosphere," not out of keeping with "the probabilities of the rest of the story." They not only "fail to inhibit the discussion of politics, religion, or sexual passion; they . . . facilitate it" (119).

Austen's use of the "informant" narrative technique has raised questions about the endings of her novels. John Halperin believes that Austen's major flaw is in the way she ends her novels. Writing about the ending of Mansfield Park, Halperin says:

There is, finally, another botched ending here. Once again, in working out the novel's conclusion, Jane Austen uses summary rather than dramatic scene. Again she cannot bear, it seems, to show us her characters' happiness. That goes on

offstage; her interest is chiefly in their struggles. (249)

Perhaps Halperin's phrase, "her interest is chiefly in their struggles," is more insightful than he realizes. Austen's decision to tell us how things come out rather than to portray them is not a flaw but rather a conscious effort of an artist who is concerned with conflict, and once that conflict is settled, Austen might suggest, it is time to go on to another.

That Austen is interested in the source of the struggle more than the details of resolution seems probable; however, Austen's choice of summary (rather than description) is also a literary device which helps her accomplish other designs. For example, the tongue-in-cheek parody of Northanger Abbey would never be successful without the author's ironic ignoring of the important facts in favor of the trite and the trivial. No ending could be more understated, yet more wonderfully humorous, than "Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and everybody smiled" (252). As for Halperin's objection to Austen's inattention to the details of her characters' (Fanny and Edmund's) happiness in Mansfield Park, how much more happiness could we demand?

With so much true merit and true love, and no want of fortune and friends, the happiness of the married cousins must appear as secure as earthly happiness can be. (473)

Perhaps the best justification for Austen's use of informing through summary is given by the narrator in Emma. Mr. Knightley has just gone through a long protestation of his love and affection for his "Dearest Emma," and he and the reader are awaiting Emma's reply when the narrator intervenes:

What did she say?--Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does.--She said enough to show there need not be despair--and to invite him to say more himself. (431)

Then, waxing philosophically, our narrator hastens to justify her decision not to give us the juicy details:

Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised, or a little mistaken; but where, as in this case, though the conduct is mistaken, the feelings are not, it [further disclosure] may not be very material.--Mr. Knightley could not impute to Emma a more relenting heart than she possessed, or a heart more disposed to accept of his. (431-32)

Austen knew that life does not always turn out happily ever after. The good are not always happy and the bad are not always unhappy, as Austen tells us at the end of Sense and Sensibility:

But that he [Willoughby] was for ever inconsolable--that he fled from society, or contracted an

habitual gloom of temper, or died of a broken heart, must not be depended on--for he did neither. He lived to exert, and frequently to enjoy himself. His wife was not always out of humour, nor his home always uncomfortable; and in his breed of horses and dogs, and in sporting of every kind, he found no inconsiderable degree of domestic felicity. (379)

Austen presents life, and if we can believe that it is Jane Austen's voice speaking through the narrator in Emma and in Sense and Sensibility, we must believe that she tells us all she thinks we need to know. The rest she leaves to our imagination. I hasten to add, however, that Austen is sure that our imaginations do not work in total independence, for she has prepared our imaginations in such a way that they are likely to speculate along the lines that Austen would wish. For example, we are made aware of Emma and Harriet's diminishing relationship, occasioned by their marriages to Knightley and Robert Martin, when the narrator clues us:

Harriet, necessarily drawn away by her engagements with the Martins, was less and less at Hartfield; which was not to be regretted.--The intimacy between her and Emma must sink; their friendship must change into a calmer sort of goodwill; and, fortunately, what ought to be, and must be, seemed

already beginning, and in the most gradual, natural manner. (482)

It is, after all, Harriet's attraction to Mr. Knightley that has shocked Emma into the recognition that she loves him; it is not until Harriet presumes to think of herself as worthy of Knightley's love that Emma realizes that Mr. Knightley is superior to herself as well as to Harriet. Harriet, therefore, has been Austen's catalyst to help Emma become undeceived, to break free of the limitations imposed by her pride, by her father's indulgence, and by the limited views of the society in Highbury. The narrator tells us in the closing words of the novel:

The wedding [Emma and Knightley's] was very much like other weddings, where the parties have no taste for finery or parade; and Mrs. Elton, from the particulars detailed by her husband, thought it all extremely shabby, and very inferior. . . .
'--Very little white satin, very few lace veils; a most pitiful business!--Selina would state when she heard of it.'--But, in spite of these deficiencies, the wishes, the hopes, the confidence, the predictions of the small band of true friends who witnessed the ceremony, were fully answered in the perfect happiness of the union. (484)

We are led to believe that Emma and Knightley have the obvious potential for a successful marriage, because Emma has changed. Emma has learned (and we have too) the value of

the hopes, the confidences, and the predictions of true friends. There will always be the Mrs. Eltons and Selinas in this world who (like the old Emma) worry about white satin and lace veils, but they are no longer important.

One of Austen's narrative devices for disclosing the internal obstacles she so cleverly creates is narrative contrast. Austen's plots (if one can call them such) are conceived in terms of moral parallels and antithesis. "By pairing characters and actions, Austen endlessly brings out virtues, faults, and motives that would otherwise lie hidden," says Ehrenpreis (119). Two of Austen's most obvious contrasts are of course found in the novels whose titles themselves suggest contrasts, Pride and Prejudice and Sense and Sensibility. In the former we began with the obvious--Darcy's pride against Elizabeth Bennet's prejudice. This in itself is clever, but Austen's cleverness goes far beyond the surface, and Darcy's pride and Elizabeth's prejudice are subordinated by even more subtle inventions. For example, Darcy and Elizabeth's volatile contrast is set off by the easy harmony of Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley, on the one side, and the almost comically monotonous marriage of the plain Charlotte Lucas and the fawning Mr. Collins on the other. Not only are these major characters and their actions contrasted, but other details in their lives (their families, friends, and enemies) offer a series of contrasts too. Mr. Bennet's intelligence is paralleled to that of Mr. Gardiner, his brother-in-law, but his irresponsibility is

exposed by the latter's active wisdom. Elizabeth is happy and healthy while Anne de Burgh is weak and sickly. Darcy's sister Caroline is full of malice while Bingley's sisters are kind. These and other contrasts reflect strengths or weaknesses in their opposites.

In Emma the obvious contrast is the contrast of the impulsive Frank Churchill and the deliberate Mr. Knightley. However, the "obvious" is not quite so obvious in this novel. We do not know exactly how impulsive Churchill is until late in the story, because he is so secretive. It is interesting, according to Jan S. Fergus in "Sex and Social Life in Jane Austen's Novels," that a secret engagement like that between Frank Churchill and Jane Fairfax in Emma is felt by Highbury society to be reprehensible because it defies the notion operating in Austen's day that every stage of courtship must take place in the open (67-68). Obviously Emma and Knightley's courtship is a public courtship. We know that Emma herself compares Churchill's character to that of Mr. Knightley's after hearing about the secret engagement of Churchill and Jane:

Emma's feelings were chiefly with Jane . . . and on leaving Randalls, and falling naturally into a comparison of the two men, she felt, that pleased as she had been to see Frank Churchill, and really regarding him as she did with friendship, she had never been more sensible of Mr. Knightley's high superiority of character. (480)

Another contrast of the Emma-Knightley and Jane-Churchill duets that might not be readily discernible is in the ways in which the males are attracted to the females. Mr. Knightley's frank judgments of Emma's actions, and his ability to love her despite her foibles, show that he is attracted by Emma's spirit--a spirit, as mentioned earlier, that proceeds from a more androgynous mind than those of her female peers. Only once near the beginning of the novel does Knightley admit even to recognizing Emma's beauty:

'I have not a fault to find with her person. . . . I think her all you [Mrs. Weston] describe. I love to look at her; and I will add this praise, that I do not think her personally vain. Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it. . . .' (39)

Frank Churchill, on the other hand, is attracted by the physical beauty of Jane Fairfax, as we discover when he tells Emma of his love for Jane as he and Emma are talking in the drawing room at Hartfield:

'Did you ever see such a skin?--such smoothness! such delicacy!--and yet without being actually fair.--One cannot call her fair. It is a most uncommon complexion, with her dark eyelashes and hair--a most distinguishing complexion!--So peculiarly the lady in it.--Just enough colour for beauty.' (478)

Ironically, Emma, who is portrayed as a weak and manipulative creature, is paired with the strong and forthright Mr. Knightley. Jane Fairfax, who possesses all the charms and skills which Emma envies throughout the novel, is paired with the feckless, at times deceitful, Frank Churchill. At a point of introspection in Emma's maturing process, Emma herself realizes this irony when she says to Churchill about the covert engagement:

'I am sure it was a source of high entertainment to you, to feel that you were taking us all in. Perhaps I am the readier to suspect, because, to tell you the truth, I think it might have been some amusement to myself in the same situation. I think there is a little likeness between us.'

He bowed.

'If not in our dispositions,' she presently added, with a look of true sensibility, 'there is a likeness in our destiny; the destiny which bids fair to connect us with two characters so much superior to our own.' (478)

We have no reason to disbelieve that Emma is completely frank here. Is this another moment of introspection? Perhaps. But it may be that our author is allowing us to observe her character in a moment of truth so that we are convinced that Emma is changing (has changed), and she really does have the maturity to put her past values and actions into perspective. Even so (and enjoyably so) she was (and

perhaps in some ways still is) like Frank Churchill. As Catherine E. Moore says: "A fully realized character who develops during the course of the action, Emma is never forced by the author to be other than herself, despite her new awareness" (1768). Austen's clever injection "with a look [my emphasis] of true sensibility" suggests that, while Emma says one thing, her attempt at seriousness is perhaps hindered by a person who has only recently learned to be serious about life. Again, as Moore suggests, "Serious reflection upon her past follies is inevitably lightened by her ability to laugh at them--and herself" (1768).

Also, when we read this passage, we realize that this dialogue follows the associative processes of the thinking mind. Emma is thinking out loud as she talks to Churchill; the narrator says "she presently added" as if what she adds is an afterthought. Churchill is not talking, just Emma. Halperin suggests that this kind of dialogue, found more often in Emma than her other novels,

makes it one of the most 'scenic,' in Jamesian terms . . . and may help to explain why it is such a favourite of modern readers. Surely Virginia Woolf was right to suggest that Jane Austen, had she lived another twenty years, would be considered now a forerunner of James and Proust. (274)

Perhaps one of the pervasive features of Austen's technique of contrasts is that they are metonymic. As Ehrenpreis says, often in Austen's works when a person is

connected with a visible element, that element takes on the character of the person (122). One of the most obvious examples of metonymy is the way Austen uses personality traits (such as superficiality) to characterize certain people. For example, we have already discussed Mr. Knightley's attraction to Emma in contrast to Frank Churchill's raptures about Jane Fairfax's complexion, the most superficial part of her body. There are other characters whose superficiality is represented in their reactions to and judgments of other people and situations. In Mansfield Park, Sir Thomas Bertram is more interested in appearance and in the superficial than in deeper human nature, which will lead to his downfall. When he returns from a trip to Antigua, he notices his niece Fanny, but it is to her appearance that he gives the most attention:

He led her [Fanny] nearer the light and looked at her again--inquired particularly after her health, and then correcting himself, observed that he need not inquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. (178)

Later the narrator describes for us Sir Thomas's preoccupation with Fannie's outward appearance on the night of the ball:

Her uncle and both her aunts were in the drawing-room when Fanny went down. To the former she was an interesting object, and he saw with

pleasure the general elegance of her appearance,
and her being in remarkably good looks. (272)

Even Edmund notices Sir Thomas's preoccupation with Fanny's outward appearance, as we learn from his conversation with Fanny shortly after Sir Thomas's return from Antigua:

'Ask your uncle what he thinks, and you will hear compliments enough; and though they may be chiefly on your person, you must put up with it, and trust to his seeing as much beauty of mind in time.'

. . .

'Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny--and that is the long and short of the matter. Anybody but myself would have made something more of it . . . but the truth is, that your uncle never did admire you till now--and now he does. Your complexion is so improved!--and you have gained so much countenance!--and your figure. . . .' (197-98)

Austen pays close attention to minute detail when she is building a character. That is not to say that she gives minute details about a character's appearance; seldom does she do that. However, we can always retrace our steps with Austen, for the external workings of her plots are always preceded by the internal manifestation of some character(s) whose flaw or strength has been greatly detailed for us through exposition or dialogue. So it is with Sir Thomas Bertram. Austen allows us to discover for ourselves that

surfaces mean too much to Sir Thomas, and this weakness or flaw of character is what eventually makes him party to a disastrous marriage between his own daughter Julia and Mr. Rushworth, a marriage which will end in divorce and scandal. In time Sir Thomas comes to realize the error of his ways, but only after he has lost his own daughters.

We see the preoccupation with physical appearance connected to another set of characters in Mansfield Park. When the knavish Henry Crawford talks to his sister about Fanny Price and his intentions to make Fanny fall in love with him, he praises Fanny for being "absolutely pretty" (229-30). Crawford says:

I used to think she had neither complexion nor countenance; but in that soft skin of hers, so frequently tinged with a blush . . . there is decided beauty; and from what I observed of her eyes and mouth I do not despair of their being capable of expression enough when she has anything to express. And then, her air, her manner, her tout ensemble, is so indescribably improved! She must be grown two inches, at least, since October. (608)

Again, like Frank Churchill, here is a man taken with the most superficial part of Fanny Price. He does not see the beauty of her spirit. When he does, it is too late.

Mary Crawford, Henry's sister, is another character whose preoccupation with appearance is a matter of metonymic

characterization in Mansfield Park. At one point in the story Fanny receives a letter from Mary Crawford in which Mary talks about Edmund Bertram. Mary tells Fanny how her (Mary's) friends in London have praised Edmund's "gentleman-like appearance," and dwells on one lady's declaration that she knows "but three men in town who have so good a person, height and air." Fanny immediately condemns Mary as a "woman who could speak of him, and speak only of his appearance!--What an unworthy attachment!" (417) Austen is neatly tucking in all the corners here, for earlier she has revealed that Edmund has the same abhorrence of attachment to appearance instead of mind. We see this when he speaks directly to Fanny about her appearance:

Go to my father if you want to be complimented. He will satisfy you. Ask your uncle what he thinks, and you will hear compliments enough; and though they may be chiefly on your person, you must put up with it, and trust to his seeing as much beauty of mind in time. (197)

Mary and Henry Crawford care about appearance--the superficial; Fanny and Edmund care about the spirit and the mind. The former end up with unhappy attachments; the latter live happily ever after.

To represent some of her minor figures, Austen tends to employ not metonymy but synecdoche, or the substitution of a part for the whole. One element of a character functions for the entire person. Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice

embodies a passion for marrying off her daughters, just as Mrs. Allen in Northanger Abbey is reduced to an obsession with clothes. Ehrenpreis suggests:

This reductive method of characterization may sound like the tradition of the comedy of humors but it is closer to Pope's theory of ruling passion. The effect is not flat or stereotype because the element is conceived as governing other motives and not replacing them. (125)

As previously mentioned, the reader is told very early in Pride and Prejudice the "business" of Mrs. Bennet's life is to get her daughters married. This element of her character governs all her motives throughout the novel. Her favorite child is naturally Lydia, whose only occupation is the pursuit of men; her least favorite child is Elizabeth, who does not chase men and who even dares to turn down two proposals of marriage (for which reason her mother almost disowns her). Every conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bennet is related to the marriage of their daughters:

'What is his name?'

'Bingley.'

'Is he married or single?'

'Oh! single, my dear, to be sure! A single man of large fortune; four or five thousand a year.'

'What a fine thing for our girls!'

'How so? How can it affect them?'

'My dear Mr. Bennet,' replied his wife, 'how can you be so tiresome! You must know that I am thinking of his marrying one of them.' (3-4)

Her designs for her daughters lead her into situations in which she makes a complete fool of herself. Just before Darcy and Elizabeth's engagement is revealed to Mrs. Bennet, she makes some negative comments about Darcy to Elizabeth:

'I am quite sorry, Lizzy, that you should be forced to have that disagreeable man [Darcy] all to yourself. But I hope you will not mind it: it is all for Jane's sake, you know; and there is no occasion for talking to him, except just now and then. So, do not put yourself to inconvenience.'

(375)

However, as soon as Elizabeth reveals to her mother that she and Darcy are to be wed, Mrs. Bennet cannot contain her happiness:

'Good gracious! Lord bless me! only think! dear me! Mr. Darcy! Who would have thought it! And is it really true? Oh! my sweetest Lizzy! how rich and how great you will be! . . . You must and shall be married by a special license. But my dearest love, tell me what dish Mr. Darcy is particularly fond of, that I may have it tomorrow.'

(378)

Of course Mrs. Bennet's shallow character does not permit her to see her own fawning trait, but the reader sees her

completely for what she is. The narrator herself comments that "This was a sad omen of what her mother's behaviour to the gentlemen himself might be" (378). We sympathize with poor Elizabeth and laugh at Mrs. Bennet. The first chapter of the novel begins with Mrs. Bennet's lifetime motto, "It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife" (3), and the last chapter begins "Happy for all her maternal feelings was the day on which Mrs. Bennet got rid of her two most deserving daughters" (385). Austen's authorial voice intervenes through the narrator to let us know that poor Mrs. Bennet has come through all the events and conflicts in the story and is still completely oblivious to her own shortcomings:

I wish I could say, for the sake of her family, that the accomplishment of her earnest desire in the establishment of so many of her children, produced so happy an effect as to make her a sensible, amiable, well-informed woman for the rest of her life. . . . (385)

But she cannot. Mrs. Bennet has no moments of introspection, as Elizabeth, Darcy, and even Mr. Bennet do. Austen contrives her character to be just the way she is so that she can develop the plot, entertain us, and make us laugh at ourselves as we laugh at such a ridiculous human propensity as Mrs. Bennet's marriage obsession. In Austen's satire we are made aware of the values and restraints of a society

partially composed of snobs, exploiters, materialists, the proud, and others, but we are made aware through such delightful characterizations as Mrs. Bennet. We almost forget that Austen's deceptively simple antitheses "yield up the complexity of life itself," says Catherine E. Moore (5313).

Another characterization which depends on Austen's use of synecdoche is found in Pride and Prejudice. Lady Catherine does little but order other people around. In every conversation she alternates questions with directives. We see this propensity to manage other people's affairs when she talks to Elizabeth about her return to Longbourn after an extended visit with Charlotte and Mr. Collins. Elizabeth mentions that her uncle is to send a servant for them, to which Lady Catherine replies:

'Oh!--Your uncle!--He keeps a manservant, does he?--I am very glad you have somebody who thinks of those things. Where shall you change horses?--Oh! Bromley, of course.--If you mention my name at the Bell, you will be attended to.' (212)

Austen's reduction of Lady Catherine's main character trait to bossiness is also apparent in other ways. Even when Lady Catherine shows ample hospitality to the Collin's houseguest [Elizabeth], the ulterior reason is so that she can have even more people to dominate:

Lady Catherine observed, after dinner, that Miss Bennet seemed out of spirits, and immediately

accounting for it herself, by supposing that she did not like to go home again so soon she added,

'But if that is the case, you must write to your mother to beg that you may stay a little longer. Mrs. Collins will be very glad of your company, I am sure.' (211)

Lady Catherine assumes that she knows Elizabeth's reasons for contemplativeness. If she really did, she would be aghast (as she eventually will be when she learns of her nephew Darcy's engagement to Elizabeth). Like Mrs. Bennet, she is absorbed in her own world to the point that she cannot see the absurdity of her actions. Also, she is presumptuous when she says she is "sure" Mrs. Collins will not mind Elizabeth's staying longer. Mrs. Collins is in the room; clearly Lady Catherine does not care what Mrs. Collins might prefer. As Ehrenpreis says, characters like Mrs. Bennet or Lady Catherine are not stereotype characters, because more than overt action is at work here. The motivation behind these actions is the energy at work in Austen's characterizations (125).

While we may make elements of Austen's characterizations meet definitions of metonymy or synecdoche, clearly her chief narrative methods are implication and irony. Marvin Mudrick, in Jane Austen: Irony as Defense and Discovery, says:

Distance--from her subject and from her reader--was Jane Austen's first condition for

writing. She would not commit herself. To events, literary or actual, she allowed herself no public response except the socially conventional or the ironic; for neither of these endangered her reserve, both put off self-commitment and feeling, both maintained the distance between author and reader, or author and subject; both were primarily, defenses. (1)

While Mudrick's thesis works quite well for his discussion of Austen's use of irony in the selections he chooses, I do not agree that Austen's use of irony is mostly a defense. I rather think that irony is a deliberate method for achieving her purposes. The "socially conventional" is always uppermost in her mind, but commitment and feeling are not thereby lost. It is the very irony of which Mudrick speaks which heightens feeling and authorial involvement. When an author deliberately exposes incongruities of form and fact, she certainly risks the label of dogmatism. Austen is in some ways like the Augustan Jonathan Swift, who exposes his raw emotions and feelings through irony and satire. (This is not to say that Jonathan Swift or Jane Austen is never defensive, however.) While Austen's ironical persona never assumes the ridiculous masks of a Gulliver or an Irish political economist, Austen's own authorial persona is often quite humorous in novel after novel. Most of the time her authorial pose is didactic, but didacticism is a far cry from the avoidance of self-commitment. Austen contrives to

sound uncommitted when she injects her feelings into her work.

For irony to work, the reader must know that the speaker is saying something different from what she means, so that the reader, not the speaker, must make the transition. Irony is at the same time truth-revealing and can be quite humorous. The reader likes being involved; he likes to think; he is entertained by the humor. When the narrator in Sense and Sensibility says, "On every formal visit a child ought to be of the party, by way of provision for discourse" (31), the reader is aware that Austen thinks that talking about a child for several hours is the height of boredom. Social convention which requires people to talk about boring subjects just to be polite is the object of Austen's satire. This is not to say, however, that Austen believes that people should refrain from "telling lies when politeness required," as the narrator says of Elinor and Marianne later in this same novel (123). If Austen had actually said that one should not bring a brat into a room full of adults, we would have known exactly what she means, but at the same time, some would have criticized her for such an insensitive opinion. Even in her letters, Austen, who could be direct and frank if she wished, chooses irony and humor to make some of her ill-natured remarks about children. She once wrote to her sister Cassandra about her least favorite niece, also named Cassandra, who was visiting Chawton in her aunt's absence and sleeping in Austen's bed:

"I hope she found my Bed comfortable last night and has not filled it with fleas" (Chapman 378). Halperin says:

A myth still prevails in some quarters that Jane Austen loved children. We have ample evidence to the contrary. . . . [Her] novels convey an impatient understanding of spoiled children and of their flatterers, but of little else when it comes to the very young. (227)

The fact that Austen includes very few children in her novels may or may not be significant. However, from reading her letters to Cassandra and her nieces, one soon discovers that Austen was always glad to have her nieces and nephews visit but just as glad to see them leave.

While it is true that Austen herself is always conscious of social convention (because of her own proper upbringing), it is also true that she ridicules the very society of which she is a part. One must remember that manners and a sense of decorum, even at the end of the eighteenth century, are still important referents for people of the class of characters and readers with whom Austen was concerned. Austen's notion of decorum appears to operate on two different levels: one on which principle, duty, common sense, and feeling determine one's manners and actions, and another on which merely socially (observable) correct behavior is required--things that one does because one must. It is the latter notion of decorum that Austen unmercifully condemns through the use of implication and irony. Even

when we go to Austen's personal letters we see that she condemns some of the social mores of her day with branding ironical statements. Austen once complains to Cassandra about the way older, unmarried women are treated by well-meaning friends: "As I leave off being young, I find many Douceurs in being a sort of Chaperon for I am put on the Sofa near the Fire & can drink as much wine as I like" (Chapman 370). Obviously Austen felt that older, unmarried women were politely tolerated but never really taken very seriously. Outside the family circle an unmarried lady was more likely to lack "consequence," certainly; and "To be neglected before one's time" is "very vexatious," Fanny says in Mansfield Park (51).

It is perhaps in Mansfield Park that we learn Austen's strongest feelings about true and false values, right and wrong ways of looking at things. It is safe to assume that Fanny's values are almost always Jane Austen's. Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford have all the trappings a well-bred society offers, but none of the important principles, common sense, or true decorum. Fanny, on the other hand, has true morals and manners. The narrator tells us that even the despicable Henry Crawford recognizes Fanny's virtues, for

when he talked of her having such a steadiness and regularity of conduct, such a high notion of honour, and such an observance of decorum as might warrant any man in the fullest dependence on her

faith and integrity, he expressed what was inspired by the knowledge of her being well principled and religious. (294)

Fanny must, however, wait for Edmund to come to his senses and realize that he loves her. In the meantime she is not getting any younger, and she longs "To be in the centre of . . . a [family] circle, loved by . . . many . . . to feel affection without fear or restraint, to feel herself the equal of those who surrounded her, to be at peace" (370). These are the things Fanny cherishes, as the novelist surely did. Fanny feels that "she can never be important to any one," in her knowledge of "the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, of neglect," and in her desires "misunderstood" or "disregarded and her comprehension under-valued" (152). Austen would have us believe that these feelings are genuine humility and not merely self-abasement, for readers surely take with a grain of salt Mrs. Norris's declaration to Fanny that "wherever you are, you must be the lowest and last" (221). Fanny does, after all, get her man. Maria's marriage ends in disgrace and Mary Crawford becomes a spinster who goes to live with her sister.

Just as Austen successfully uses irony to describe such situations to her reader, her implicit treatment of religion, politics, and sex is also complicated. The reader who confuses subtlety with naivete might miss Austen's points about such subjects. "To start," says Ehrenpreis, "one may fairly tease an attitude toward government out of the

novels" (133). Austen avoids political controversy. This is especially evident in Northanger Abbey when she makes a character Henry Tilney, who delights in long-winded conversations, stop talking when his lecture on landscape brings him to a digression on the British constitution:

By an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics, and from politics, it was an easy step to silence. (111)

Also, in Sense and Sensibility, the reader detects something like a sneer when Austen refers to the ambitions of Edward Ferrar's mother and sister:

They wanted him to make a fine figure in the world in some manner or other. His mother wished to interest him in political concerns, to get him into parliament, or to see him connected with some of the great men of the day. Mrs. John Dashwood wished it likewise; but in the mean while, till one of those superior blessings could be attained, it would have quieted her ambition to see him driving a barouche. (15-16)

Ehrenpreis believes that Austen's "interchangeability of a barouche and a political career is not a slip of the pen. . ." (134). There is here suggested a traditional

attitude of the rural gentry--a suspicion of men at the center of the government. For Austen the social class that matters most is indeed the gentry. In his biography, Halperin speaks of the Austen family connections:

The Austens were what was known as gentry--vigorous landowning families which in the eighteenth century carefully educated its scions and sent them into the church, the law, and the military. The upper reaches of this class joined the aristocracy, while its lower ranks embraced the attorneys, apothecaries, and the surgeons of the country towns. All that separated the gentry and aristocracy were income and politics (the nobles were generally Whig, and Country gentry usually Tory). The gentry, like most middle classes, was prone to snobbery, since it had the best opportunity for social advancement; it was also prone to culture, refinement, and pragmatism in commonplace matters. It was this class--the hereditary ruling class of England, in fact--into which Jane Austen was born, in the midst of which she would be brought up, and about which she would write. (16)

Austen is a gentlewoman never above snobbery in her own personal feelings, as we can glean from some of her correspondence. At the same time she satirizes those individuals who arrange their friendships according to politics. In

Sense and Sensibility, it is the affected Mr. Palmer who engages himself in standing for Parliament, "'for Mr. Palmer is always going about the country canvassing against the election'" (113), his wife remarks. His simple-minded wife also suggests that Mr. Palmer could not visit Willoughby because the latter was, as she says, "in the opposition" (114). Also in Mansfield Park, we find that Sir Thomas Bertram is in Parliament, but Austen mentions his office only in a casual way and more as a duty for him than a distinction:

Lady Bertram, in consequence of a little ill-health, and a great deal of indolence, gave up the house in town, which she had been used to occupy every spring, and remained wholly in the country, leaving Sir Thomas to attend his duty in Parliament, with whatever increase or diminution of comfort might arise from her absence. (20)

In this same novel, it is a mark against Mary Crawford that she supposes that Edmund might go into Parliament to gain distinction. Edmund says to Mary:

'How may my honesty at least rise to any distinction?'

This was not so very easy a question to answer and occasioned an 'Oh!' of some length from the fair lady before she could add 'You ought to be in Parliament, or you should have gone into the army ten years ago.' (214)

At this point Edmund breaks into a tirade, and in a sarcastic reply lets Miss Crawford know his feelings about Parliament and his own position as a younger son:

That is not much to the purpose now; and as to my being in Parliament, I believe I must wait till there is an especial assembly for the representation of younger sons who have little to live on. (214)

Can we not say that Austen's decision not to draw political philosophy into her grand scheme, or not to shape her world into something recognizably political, is a statement in itself? Jane Austen was not unaware of politics. Quite the contrary. Her decision not to write explicitly about politics must have been a conscious one. She was much interested in history and politics from a very early age. Her precocious "History of England" (1791) is a hilarious and quite sophisticated parody of "partial [and] prejudiced" historians whose histories were a vehicle to express their social and political beliefs (Minor Works 139).

However, Austen's political philosophies are more closely related to her social doctrine. Ehrenpreis thinks that Austen's social ideology goes back to the seventeenth century, when "the gentry's independence of the court served as a moral principle" (135). In Northanger Abbey, it is the reprehensible General Tilney who has an old friend who happens to be a marquis (Marquis of Longtown). Also in Persuasion we get a good idea of Austen's attitudes toward

gentry's mixing with nobility. Anne Elliot reflects on the frivolous Sir Walter and her sister Elizabeth's fawning upon a viscountess and her daughter:

The Bath paper . . . announced the arrival of the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple, and her daughter, the Honourable Miss Carteret . . . the Dalrymples (in Anne's opinion, most unfortunately) were cousins of the Elliots. . .

Anne had never seen her father and sister before in contact with nobility, and she must acknowledge herself disappointed. She had hoped better things from their high ideas of their own situations in life . . . for 'our cousins, the Dalrymples', sounded in her ears all day long.

(148)

It was a common notion, in fact a matter of decorum, in Austen's society that people should not have social aspirations beyond their rank.

Even from Austen's letters we can infer some of her attitudes about the nobility. When she writes to Cassandra about the "very pleasing" manners of Lord Craven, she says, "The little flaw of having a mistress now living with him at Ashdown Park, seems to be the only displeasing circumstance about him" (Chapman 106). This sarcasm also hints that Austen must have had a deeper awareness of sexual goings-on than she usually exhibits explicitly in her novels.

Austen reveals her views concerning passion and courtship in her novels in social terms, just as she does her views on politics and religion. Jan Fergus says that Austen is interested in

dramatizing sex in everyday social life--in the drawing room rather than the bedroom. The courtship plots she created allow her to explore the relations between sex and moral judgment, sex and friendship, sex and knowledge--that is, between sex and character. In this sense, there is no escaping sexuality in Austen's novels. It is always present, treated with a variety and freedom that most modern readers overlook and that the novels of most of her contemporaries were unable, for various reasons, to achieve. (66)

We know historically that Austen's world had many social conventions that required or prescribed certain rules of behavior for courtship. Perhaps the people in the high classes (and the low classes for that matter) had little interest or need for respectability in courtship matters; however, there were those in the middle class who took to this matter of respectability with some degree of enthusiasm. They believed that courtships were public operations--only. However, as early as 1821, Richard Whately in an article in the Quarterly Review, remarks of Austen's unconventionality:

Her heroines are what one knows women must be, though one never can get them to acknowledge it. As liable to 'fall in love first,' as anxious to attract the attention of agreeable men, as much taken with a striking manner, or a handsome face, as unequally gifted with constancy and firmness, as liable to have their affections biased by convenience or fashion, as we, on our part, will admit men to be. (352)

Two of the most interesting of Austen's breaks with tradition are her acknowledgement of the possibility that antagonism can involve sexual attraction or grow into love and the consequences of divorcing sexuality from the protection of social convention. "Before Austen's novels," says Fergus, "the possibility that antagonism can include a form of sexual attraction or grow into love is not recognized, except perhaps by Richardson in Clarissa" (70). Sexual antagonism is most effectively dramatized in Pride and Prejudice. Undercurrents of sexual attraction and challenge accompany the antagonism which characterizes the early exchanges between Darcy and Elizabeth, an antagonism based on differences in manner and style. They come to know each other despite (and partly because of) early misjudgments and conflicts. Although understated, there is sexual suggestion in the narrator's remarks about Darcy's first stirrings of desire for Elizabeth:

Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger. (52)

Given the perceived social discrepancy, Austen's choice of the word "danger" indicates feelings of attractions--, which start within orthodox fashion, and lead to marriage. Darcy no doubt realizes that this attraction might be more powerful than even his social attitudes can overcome.

In Mansfield Park, however, sexuality becomes covert and uncontained by social conventions. Austen uses the play Lovers' Vows as a form of displacement of sexual attraction. Mansfield Park has had mixed reception among Austen's critics. Fergus says, "Although the novel is generally much better received now than it once was, its readers still tend to be troubled by the Lovers' Vows episode" (77). Many readers ask why so much fuss is made over the theatricals. What, in fact, makes the play so wrong? This question, posed by Tom and Maria Bertram within the novel, receives many answers in the text. Edmund banters back and forth with Tom and finally says: "'My father wished us, as schoolboys, to speak well, but he would never wish his grown up daughters to be acting plays. His sense of decorum is strict'" (127). Later, when Edmund is defending his decision to join the cast in order to preserve Mary Crawford's honor, he admits that he has fears that the theatricals will "do away all restraints" among the

actors (154). Several characters say that the play Lovers' Vows is offensive; however, Fergus says, "None of these precisely defines the real issue which is sexual" (77). Miss Crawford playfully asks, "Who is to be Anhalt? What gentlemen among you am I to have the pleasure of making love to?" The only possible reaction occurs: "For a moment no one spoke" (143). And so a playful question brings sexuality to the surface. The theatricals are a kind of displacement of the uncomfortable repressions which the young people have been experiencing since everyone's arrival at Sotherton: Mr. Rushworth, provisionally engaged to Maria, is jealous of Henry Crawford; Julia, infatuated with Henry, is jealous of her sister Maria; Fanny, in love with Edmund, is jealous of his increasing attention to Mary (Fergus 78).

The problem is that social conventions, as confining as they are, operate in the lives of these people as a security system to discharge some of the sexual tension that their society feels must be politely suppressed. "By contrast," says Fergus, "to act in 'Lovers' Vows' is to divorce sexuality from social life, from the protection and restraints that social conventions ordinarily supply" (78). Thus, when Edmund claims that the theatricals will "do away all restraints" (154) among the actors, he comes closest to articulating the truth of the situation. We discover that the only real sexual danger is for Maria. Fanny is hurt by Edmund's much-labored decision finally to join the play, but since the play never occurs that situation works itself out.

Julia is eliminated from the cast. However, Maria goes through many play practices in which the unrestrained Henry can declare his love for her as often as they rehearse. Social convention permits a declaration of love only in the context of courtship. Fergus says, "The context is clearly seduction or mockery, both of which call for indignant repudiation" (80). In the role of Frederick in the play, Henry not only can safely talk of love; he can also touch Maria. Because such physical contact is so rare in the social world Austen describes, this episode has sensual significance. Although Maria is an engaged woman, she is obviously seduced in heart (if not in body) by Crawford's play-acting:

Henry Crawford's retaining her hand at such a moment, a moment of such peculiar proof and importance, was worth ages of doubt and anxiety. She [Maria] hailed it as an earnest of the most serious determination, and was equal even to encounter her father. (176)

Later, Maria realizes that Henry has been as much "at treacherous play with her" (135) as he had been with her sister Julia:

He might talk of necessity, but she knew his independence.--The hand which had so pressed her's to his heart!--The hand and the heart were alike motionless and passive now! Her spirit supported her, but the agony of her mind was severe. (193)

Certainly Maria is not an innocent in this situation. Her vanity and her infatuation have made her believe that Henry Crawford was in earnest in Lovers' Vows. But as Fergus insists, Crawford's words, looks, and touches of love in the play do allow Maria an intensity of passionate response that social convention would have prevented until an engagement or a marriage (81). At the end of the novel when Maria, now a married woman, does indeed run off with Henry Crawford in a scandalous affair, Austen is surely saying to her readers that there are costs for social misconduct and for bad moral judgments, especially when those involved underestimate the power of the passionate feeling which can exist between a man and a woman. Thus we realize that Austen does not avoid sex. On the contrary, she presents it as an always-present, vital issue in all her heroine's relationships with their male counterparts.

Austen not only deals with the subjects of politics and sex differently than her contemporaries do, she also defines religion in a universal context. Ehrenpreis says:

She is not concerned to rank types of Christians any more than she ranks types of Englishmen. She chooses families that share the same religion, the same church, the same social order--the same opportunities to strengthen their moral natures; and then she sees what the individuals make of themselves under these conditions. (140)

One can see this in the way she characterizes the clergymen in her novels. Whether the clergymen are heroes or fools, they never discuss doctrine. If they did so, she would have to treat one sect as superior to another, and the religious associations would blur the personal traits of distinct characters. The effect would be like that of the metonymic characterizations of Mrs. Bennet in Pride and Prejudice and of Mrs. Norris in Mansfield Park. Gilbert Ryle, in a review of Austen's novels written when they were published (1815), goes so far to say that the protagonists in Austen's novels face their moral crises without apparent recourse to religious faith; and they never seek the advice of a clergyman (117). Ryle is correct when he suggests that her protagonists never seek the advice of clergymen; however, there are several references to religion and God in Austen's novels. In Sense and Sensibility, we find such a reference in Marianne's recollections of her dangerous attraction to the scoundrel Willoughby:

'I did not know my danger till the danger was removed; but with such feelings as these reflections gave me, I wonder at my recovery,--wonder that the very eagerness of my desire to live, to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all, did not kill me at once.' (346)

Marianne further believes that Willoughby's "remembrance can be overcome by no change of circumstances or opinions. But it shall be regulated, it shall be checked by religion, by

reason, by constant employment" (347). In Persuasion, Anne Elliot finds herself giving advice to Captain Benwick, who is mourning the death of his fiancée the summer before they were to marry:

Feeling in herself the right of seniority of mind, she ventured to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study. . . . Such works of our best moralists . . . as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurance. (101)

While this passage does indicate the religious views of the created heroine, the views of Austen herself are perhaps more clearly revealed in the few paragraphs following this, when the narrator says:

When the evening was over, Anne could not but be amused at the idea of coming to Lyme, to preach patience and resignation to a young man whom she had never seen before; nor could she help fearing, on more serious reflection, that, like many other great moralists and preachers, she had been eloquent on a point in which her own conduct would ill bear examination. (101)

Remembering that Austen's father was a clergyman, and (as Halperin says) Austen herself "was always a believing Christian, though rarely an aggressive one" (245), we can assume from the narrator's remarks about Anne that Austen

believes preachers and moralists must exercise great care to live what they preach. It is Edmund in Mansfield Park who defends clergy in small parishes (such as Austen's father would have preached in) when he is talking with Mary Crawford about his own desires to be a clergyman rather than a lawyer:

We do not look in great cities for our best morality. It is not there, that respectable people of any denomination can do most good; and it certainly is not there, that the influence of the clergy can be most felt. A fine preacher is followed and admired; but it is not in fine preaching only that a good clergyman will be useful in his parish and his neighbourhood, where the parish and neighbourhood are of a size capable of knowing his private character, and observing his general conduct, which in London can rarely be the case. The clergy are lost there in the crowds of their parishoners. They are known to the largest part only as preachers. And with regard to their influencing public manners . . . I mean to call them arbiters of good breeding, the regulators of refinement. . . . The manners I speak of might rather be called conduct, . . . the result of good principles . . . and it will, I believe, be everywhere found, that as the clergy are, or are

not what they ought to be, so are the rest of the nation. (93)

Austen certainly reacts against sanctimoniousness. However, she does establish something like a religious position in her novels. Piety is not set as a standard, but rewards follow acts of kindness and charity. Ehrenpreis says that now and then in the novels we find that "Benevolent deeds become not only pleasure in themselves but also the mysterious causes of personal advantage" (141). This is most clearly seen in Persuasion, where the novelist early establishes the charitable disposition of her heroine Anne Elliot. When Anne goes to Bath, she feels sorry for an old schoolmate, Mrs. Smith, who is now a poor, widowed invalid. Anne goes regularly to comfort and entertain this obscure and isolated woman. Even Anne's father Sir Walter and her selfish sister Elizabeth make fun of her for connecting herself with such an "everyday" person, as Sir Walter calls Mrs. Smith:

A widow Mrs. Smith, lodging in Westgate-buildings!--A poor widow, barely able to live, between thirty and forty--a mere Mrs. Smith, and every day Mrs. Smith, of all people and all names in the world, to be the chosen friend of Miss Anne Elliot. . . . (158)

As the story unfolds, however, it is the everyday Mrs. Smith who provides Anne with the precious information which keeps her from yielding to her evil cousin Mr. Elliot. Austen

takes the opportunity for her narrator to dwell on the link of goodness and its reward:

She [Anne] had never considered herself as entitled to reward for not slighting an old friend like Mrs. Smith, but here was a reward indeed springing from it!--Mrs. Smith had been able to tell her what no one else could have done. (212)

We do find rewards for benevolence in Persuasion.

There has also been a great deal of perceptive criticism concerning the significance of the interposition of Providence in the affairs of men in this novel. Paul N. Zietlow, in "Luck and Fortuitous Circumstances in Persuasion," suggests that the whole novel seems calculated to encourage us to trust in Providence (134). This interpretation seems credible in reference to Anne Elliot's melancholy decision to reject Captain Wentworth's original proposal of marriage years before, when the narrator tells us:

How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been,--how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion and distrust Providence! (30)

Our narrator informs us that Anne had once mistrusted Providence, and in so doing she had lost (for a time) Captain Wentworth, the only man she had ever loved. When the two lovers are at last securely reunited, Austen contrasts the

fortunate Captain Wentworth with the undeserving Sir Walter, who had failed "to maintain himself in the situation in which Providence had placed him" (248). As Zietlow implies, our author seems to be suggesting that those who recognize Providence's hand in their lives succeed in finding happiness if they are patient; those who do not, however, get what they deserve.

While the subjects of religion, politics, and sex are not handled explicitly in the works of Jane Austen, it is a mistake to think that such a lack of explicitness results from artistic, emotional, or moral limitations.

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