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The Rewards of Impertinence: Happy and Unhappy Endings in Jane Austen's Novels

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The Rewards of Impertinence:
Happy and Unhappy Endings in Jane Austen's Novels

An Honors Thesis presented by
Elizabeth Bolger
to the Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
Honors in the Major Field

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Abstract

In this thesis, I use a wide range of period sources—the law governing marriage in the United Kingdom, sermons, and treatises on women’s education—to argue that Jane Austen uses irony and satire to defend “impertinent” women by exposing the villainy of a patriarchal order that attempts to restrain female desire. Her literary strategies of indirection, including irony and satire, have an ethical purpose that is neglected by the many critics who read her works as endorsing conservative values. Her novels function within a traditional narrative framework in order to expose and ultimately undermine the oppressive morals inherent within the patriarchal structure. I revisit two of Austen’s best-known novels—which I read alongside key intertexts explicitly named in the novels—in order to illustrate how Austen’s works refute the gender-deterministic claims that perpetuate the conservative tradition that held women as the property of men.

I argue that James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* is a more important object of satire in Austen’s novels than has been previously recognized. Through my comparative reading of Fordyce’s sermons and Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, I argue that Elizabeth Bennet’s marriage to Mr. Darcy is ironic because she enjoys the advantageous marriage that Fordyce recommends, but by a method that Fordyce strictly cautions against. While many critics claim that Elizabeth’s mortification disciplines her for her “impertinent” behavior, I argue that mortification in Austen marks the passage from innocence to experience in the Romantic model of the development of the subject.

I then use *Pride and Prejudice* and Elizabeth Inchbald’s play *Lovers’ Vows* to demonstrate how *Mansfield Park* satirizes the very landed class to which the heroine belongs. While *Pride and Prejudice* offers an “impertinent” heroine who challenges traditional gender-deterministic claims, *Mansfield Park* provides a passive protagonist who typifies the conservative notion of an ideal female. After comparing the two novels’ endings, I argue that Fanny Price has an unfortunate fate in *Mansfield Park* precisely *because* she follows Fordyce’s advice. Critics have traditionally read the use of *Lovers’ Vows* in *Mansfield Park* as evidence that Austen’s political convictions lay somewhere between moderate and conservative on questions of gender and sexuality. This thesis, by applying a comparative and intertextual method of close reading, yields a different conclusion about the play’s meaning in this deeply ironic novel and, thus, about Austen’s true politics: her sympathies for “fallen” and “impertinent” women and her rejection of the patriarchal society that would punish and expel them.

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Chapter One Introduction

Many scholars have interpreted Jane Austen's published works as promoting conservative values and the restraint of female desire. Such critics claim that her novels ridicule women and cast them as potential dangers to domestic peace. While I agree that Austen uses the patriarchal milieu of her time as the narrative framework of her novels, I argue that her works consistently challenge conservative values by defending "impertinent" women and by exposing the villainy of a society that punish and exclude them. *Pride and Prejudice*, one of the novels that is often read as supporting traditional values, satirizes the conservative framework in which the plot takes place. Austen exposes the ways in which conservative practices create fools of men and women alike and results in a life of misery. Through her heroine, Elizabeth Bennet, Austen refutes her culture's restrictive view of women and poses an ironic alternative that not only values the individual woman but turns the bases of the conservative argument about gender upside down.

In *Mansfield Park*, Austen criticizes the conservative family to which the heroine belongs. While the novel follows a family of the landed class, it does so in a manner that undermines paternal authority. I argue that *Mansfield Park* should be read as a satire that exposes patriarchy as a toxic environment that breeds selfish, unfortunate people of either gender. It portrays the men in power as egotistical villains who commodify women for their own personal gain and as their pawns who do not have enough autonomy to determine their own fates.

My focus on Austen's irony is similar to that of Claudia Johnson who in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* states that Austen uses irony "to expose and explore those aspects of traditional institutions—marriage, primogeniture, patriarchy—which patently do not serve her heroines well" (Johnson xxiv). While Johnson contrasts Austen's novels to

conservative fiction in order to demonstrate Austen's use of irony, I identify a different, more specific, object of satire: James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*. My Reading of Fordyce as an interlocutor in *Pride and Prejudice* reveals the ways in which Austen uses irony to satirize his gender-deterministic advice and thereby refute the sexist practices that underpinned eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. While Fordyce often appears as a footnote in *Pride and Prejudice*, I have done a closer comparative reading of *Sermons to Young Women* and *Pride and Prejudice* than commonly appears in criticism of Austen. In chapter two, I argue that *Pride and Prejudice* offers a point-by-point refutation of Fordyce's conservative claims about women. Austen uses satire to not only discredit the sexist foundations of English society, but also to offer a new perspective on the role of women. Instead of the static lifestyle that conduct books support, Austen promotes a developmental alternative that positions mortification as an essential experience in the development and maturation of women and men.

I read *Mansfield Park* as a satire of conservative values in regard to gender and the family among the landed class. The method by which I produce this analysis is through a close reading of the novel alongside *Pride and Prejudice* and Elizabeth Inchbald's play *Lovers' Vows*. *Pride and Prejudice* provides an idealized, fairy-tale ending for a provocative woman in this time period. This is why Claudia Johnson refers to it as an "almost shamelessly wish fulfilling" novel (Johnson 73). In chapter three, I juxtapose *Lovers' Vows* with *Mansfield Park* in order to reveal that Austen's characters fail to live up to the roles that they perform in the play. This comparison positions the male Bertrams and their close acquaintances as conservative fools whose selfish use of women prevents them from being able to justly rule. In this manner, *Mansfield Park* criticizes the conservative patriarchy and depicts this lifestyle as a gloomy alternative to the life offered in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Critical Background

Among the most widely read critics, there are many who argue that Austen's works promote traditional values that subjugate women. Marilyn Butler states in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, that "The women she [Austen] allows to speak out form the largest single group of her minor characters—her female fools" (Butler xli). Mary Poovey also shares a conservative reading of Austen's novels in *The Proper Lady and the Woman*, where she claims that Austen uses marriage, the event that ends all her novels, as the moment in which love is combined with the conservative principles that will suppress unruly female power (Poovey 192-193).

Butler places Austen's texts in the political aftermath of the French Revolution and examines the ways in which the repressive climate of the post-war period influenced her writings. She claims that Austen promotes traditional values through her texts because her "manner as a novelist is broadly that of a conservative Christian moralist in the 1790s" (Butler 164). By analyzing the plots, Butler divides Austen's novels into two categories: the "Heroine who is Wrong" and the "Heroine who is Right" (Butler 166). The importance of this distinction is summarized in the following lines: "Where the heroine is fallible, the novel as a whole can be said to enact the conservative case; where the heroine is exemplary, she models it" (Butler 166). According to this analysis, Elinor, Fanny, and Anne promote proper values, while Elizabeth, Emma, and Catherine embrace impropriety only to be punished for such behavior.

Mary Poovey shares a similar interpretation as Marilyn Butler but produces her analysis by a different method. Poovey examines the idea of the proper lady and how it influenced the careers of female authors. By placing Austen in the context of Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* explores how Austen's works provide a

solution for the ideological problems that are discussed in the other two women's writings.

Poovey states that

Considering Austen's novels from the perspective of these issues and in terms of the debate already set out in the works of Wollstonecraft and Shelley enables us to recognize what the challenge to traditional values looked like from the inside and how an artistic style could constitute part of a defense against this challenge (Poovey 172).

This passage claims that, while Austen's works recognize social contradictions, her novels often support the conservative order of society. Poovey summarizes her argument in regard to Austen's text when she explains her analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*. She states that:

Jane Austen's irony, then, enables her to reproduce—without exposing in any systematic way—some of the contradictions inherent in bourgeois ideology; for by simultaneously dramatizing and rewarding individual desire *and* establishing a critical distance from individualism, she endorses both the individualistic perspective inherent in the bourgeois value system *and* the authoritarian hierarchy retained from traditional, paternalistic society (Poovey 205).

According to Poovey, Austen's works ultimately support a conservative societal structure that is founded on paternal authority. Therefore, Poovey also claims that the reader is supposed to identify with Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*, even though her passivity, as Poovey admits, ultimately makes her a less inspiring heroine.

On the contrary, Claudia Johnson argues in *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* that Austen explores the societal structures in order to reveal how they negatively impact women. Like Butler and Poovey, Johnson examines Austen in relation to her historical context, but uses her research to disagree with critics who claim that Austen's novels promote conservative values. Johnson argues that Austen is able to subtly expose the faults of conservatism “though various means of indirection—irony, antithetical pairing, double plotting, the testing of subverting of overt, typically doctrinaire statement with contrasting dramatic

incident” (Johnson xxiv). Irony is a literary tool that Johnson calls close attention to in Austen’s writings as a method of revealing the author’s more liberal beliefs.

Historical Background

The use of conduct books, which instructed women how to behave, in the eighteenth-century is an appropriate starting point for reconstructing the historical context in which Austen wrote. Nancy Armstrong explains in *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* that conduct books appealed to a wide audience because they “were acutely sensitive to the subtlest differences in status, and each represented his or her readers’ interests in terms of a differential system that opposed country and town, rich and poor, labor and leisure, and no doubt more refined or local socioeconomic interests” (Armstrong 69). During a time in which there was a rising middle class, but not yet an existing name for it in England, conduct books appealed to all groups and modeled an ideal household that everyone could attempt to achieve (Armstrong 64-65, 69). The conduct books defined femininity as being pleasing to men. Armstrong explains that women’s “duties were pared down to those that seem remarkably frivolous but that were [...] considered nonetheless essential to domestic happiness” (Armstrong 68). Her historical account of conduct books reveals a national belief that proper female behavior was essential to maintain unity and “domestic happiness.”

Among the many moralists who wrote educational books during this time, James Fordyce was regarded as “one of the most celebrated and fashionable preachers in London, and the famous and well known flocked to hear him” (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). One of his most famous works is *Sermons to Young Women*, which was reprinted and translated many times (Oxford Dictionary of National Biography). Similar to other moralists from this period,

Fordyce offers a gender-deterministic perspective to explain the social differences between the sexes. He encourages women to behave in a manner that is most appealing to the opposite sex. More specifically, Fordyce claims that, when women's impulses and erotic powers are unrestrained, they have the power to produce chaos. Fordyce warns that "If men discover that you [women] study to captivate them by an outside only, or by little frivolous arts, there are, it must be confessed, many of them who will rejoice at the discovery; and while they themselves seem taken by the lure, they will endeavor in reality to make you their prey" (Fordyce I.19-20). Fordyce thereby excuses men's sexual desires, yet cautions women against their own because between the genders it is women who will suffer from their actions; women, not men, are responsible for the outcome of behavior. Therefore, women must not partake in unruly actions because they would lead to widespread disorder.

While Fordyce does not provide much detail in his sermons as to the specific order women's actions can disrupt, my historical research, combined with Austen's texts, reveals that the security of property and inheritance depended on women due to their child-bearing roles. Sandra Macpherson explains in "Rent to Own: Or, What's Entailed in *Pride and Prejudice*" that Austen "recognizes more clearly than legal historians have done, that with respect to the question of the agency and durability of the donor's will—and especially with respect to the question of gender—fee simple, fee tail, and strict settlement are structurally identical" (Macpherson 8). Austen's focus on entails that pass to male heirs, particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*, reveals perhaps one of the reasons women's sexuality was so tightly controlled in this time period; if a woman was promiscuous and indulged in sexual relations with a man out of wedlock, the outcome could be a child who potentially gains claim to land to which he is not otherwise

entitled. This would degrade the validity of inheritance, which England's societal structure was primarily based on among both new and old money:

By the seventeenth century entails were primarily favored by the newly gentrified, successful lawyers, merchants, or tradesmen who'd amassed fortune enough to purchase an estate they didn't want to see wasted, mortgaged, or sold by profligate heirs. Entails were not, that is, favored by Tories with whom absolutism is usually associated, but by Whigs who wanted to see acquired land achieve the same durability as land with a centuries-long pedigree (Macpherson 7).

Austen's focus on gender relations in her novel emphasizes the problem of gender in regard to inheritance. For the Bennet daughters, destitution is an imminent fear due to an entailment that forces their home to go to the next male heir in line. Austen thereby forces the reader to question the sexism inherent in the laws of distributing land, which further questions the female role in securing or impacting the future legacy of property.

Yet the way in which gender is connected to the practice of bequeathing land is not so simple. Macpherson explains that "embedded in the fee simple's privileging of the donor's agency and intentionality at the expense of the heir's *was* a surprising challenge to the instrumentalism of primogeniture or 'necessary' succession" (Macpherson 4). Primogeniture makes the first-born male the rightful heir. While some of Austen's novels, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, discuss entails, the majority of her works explore the predominance of male heirs without connecting it to an entail. Due to the strict nature of primogeniture, fee simple is widely regarded as a more progressive method of bequeathing property—since it meant that property could be inherited by women (Macpherson 5). Yet Macpherson explains that the relationship between these two methods of inheritance is not so simple:

In 1285 the second statute of Westminster, *de donis conditionalibus* ('of conditional gifts') was devised to shore up the sovereignty of the tenant in fee. According to Blackstone, the statute paid 'greater regard to the private will and intentions of the donor, than to the propriety of such intentions, or any public considerations whatsoever'; and Baker agrees that it protected the 'intentions of donors from frustration in the most liberal

terms' and allowed them to 'restrict categories of heirs in ways not possible at common law.' One of the first restrictions sought was on female inheritance (Macpherson 5).

While primogeniture and fee simple may seem to exist in opposition, they were often both practiced in a manner that excluded women. Although male inheritance is the most common way land is secured in Austen's novels, there are a few exceptions. Lady Catherine De Bourgh, for example, owns her own property. Nevertheless, land-owning women are scarce in Austen's works, and women are often positioned at the mercy of men—for, without a husband or kind relative to house them, they have nowhere to live.

The importance of property heirs in England during this time is further emphasized by laws which were tightened in the period, such as the Marriage Act of 1753. This law prevented people under the age of twenty-one in England and Wales from getting married without parental consent or a marriage license (An act for the better preventing of clandestine marriages, 1753, 26 Georgii II, cap. 33). The statute's most severe punishment for someone who performs a marriage illegally "shall be deemed and adjudged to be guilty of felony, and shall suffer death as a felon, without benefit of clergy" (An act for the better preventing of clandestine marriages, 1753, 26 Georgii II, cap. 33). Such a strict punishment reflects the importance of marriage, or more specifically the importance of regulating matrimony, during this time period. David Lemmings states in "Marriage and the Law in the Eighteenth Century: Harwicke's Marriage Act of 1753" that the law of 1753 "suggest[s] that children, and especially daughters [...] remained essential objects of commerce in the accumulation of property that underwrote the power of the male parliamentary elite" (Lemmings 343). He thereby implies that this strict law was created so that parents could regulate marriage and ensure that the practice could be used to better the family's name and position through the accumulation of land. This claim allows one to better understand the extent to which the stability of the patriarchal hierarchy depended upon the subjugation of

women. The order of British society, during this time period, depended upon male heirs and male right to property and power—which was most commonly based on land. The development of the middle class during this period perhaps explains why Parliament and moralists deemed a need for tighter regulation and a stricter control over women—the very beings whose sexuality and subjugation could either strengthen or destroy the conservative social structure that traditional Britain depended upon.

Recognizing the threat women pose to the social and economic order of society, Fordyce teaches women to believe that their chief purpose in life is to better the community. He claims that a woman's responsibility is to maintain peace by focusing her attention on pleasing her family and husband (Fordyce I.12-15, I.21-25). While Fordyce claims that women are the greatest source of shame and chaos, they are also the very beings who can turn a foolish man into a gentleman (Fordyce I.21-25). A proper woman, therefore, should find pleasure in pleasing those around her, particularly her husband, because "What honor can be enjoyed by your sex [women], equal to that of showing yourselves every way worthy of a virtuous tenderness from ours [men's]?" (Fordyce I.33-34). Women's worth and happiness, according to Fordyce, depend upon their husbands and their duty to maintain peace and order in the home. Fordyce therefore frames his claims and rightful duties of women as not only their natural responsibility, but also as their only source of happiness in life.

Due to his frequent reference to what men like in a woman, Fordyce's sermons read as an instruction manual on how to secure a respectable husband. This can be further inferred through the historical context in which Fordyce wrote. During this time period, a woman's livelihood depended upon a man—either a father, brother, or husband. Christine Stansell explains in *The Feminist Promise: 1792 to the Present* Mary Wollstonecraft's analysis of women in relation to

the societal structure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England. She states that “Women learned to be women, she [Wollstonecraft] insisted, in order to survive in a society that made marriage their sole destiny. There was nothing natural about female character; it developed out of fear of being left alone, shunned and penniless—a reject of the marriage market” (Stansell 20). Destitution was an imminent fear for many women during this time period.

Wollstonecraft, who was a fierce critic of the conservative moralists’ gender-deterministic claims, offers a response to the traditional definition of femininity. She encourages women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, to put their own development first:

Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegancy of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone (Wollstonecraft 25).

Wollstonecraft thereby rejects the traditional understanding of femininity and instead encourages women to be “masculine” because that which is masculine is

the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennobles the human character, and which raises females in the scale of animal being, when they are comprehensively termed mankind;—all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that they may every day grow more and more masculine (Wollstonecraft 24).

Wollstonecraft’s analysis of women reveals the ways in which the terms “masculine” and “feminine” restricted women and secured their position in life as being inferior to men. It is important to recognize the more liberal sentiments that existed in this time period, as they provide one with a better sense of the opinions and notions regarding the role of the sexes in society during this time.

In order to recognize the ways in which Austen refutes conservative values, one must understand Fordyce's main arguments. In *Sermons to Young Women*, Fordyce claims that women should behave in a manner that is most appealing to their parents, should refrain from using wit, should aspire to be accomplished, should maintain an elegant, graceful figure that can be maintained by refraining from exercise which is a masculine activity, and should never be the first to express strong feelings towards a man (Fordyce I.12-17, I.190-194, I.207-262, II.224-245, I.114). Fordyce encourages all women to follow his guidelines in order to avoid mortification and instead remain static throughout life—one is not to learn through experience, but rather follow his codes of conduct strictly. Women, therefore, are not supposed to develop or grow as individuals. Fordyce claims that acting against his codes of conduct is sure to not only dishonor one's family, but also to prevent a woman from holding onto a man's affections, which would in turn lead to her misery.

In this effort to restrict women's autonomy, theater became a source of contention. Penny Gay explains in *Jane Austen and the Theatre* that Austen grew up in a household that frequently put on household plays. By exploring Austen's exposure to theater, Gay claims that "[...] Austen took pleasure in acting, in the dramatic embodiment of such characters as she herself created in her fiction and which she delighted to recognize in the fiction of her sister novelists" (Gay 11). Austen's knowledge of the theater seems to be significant, as her use of Elizabeth Inchbald's *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* has created a debate among contemporary critics as to Austen's intentions of including a scandalous play. While I will focus on the importance of this play in Austen's novel later on, I wish to discuss here the historical significance of theater in Austen's time. Anna Lott explains in "Staging a Lesson: The Theatricals and Proper Conduct in *Mansfield Park*" that

Austen published *Mansfield Park* in 1814 in the context of a widespread public dispute over the theater's didactic purpose. The conflict involved various parties, one that saw drama (and by extension theatricality) as a destroyer of existing social and moral hierarchies and another that felt that drama was a reinforcer of social stability (Lott 275).

The proper role of theater in the community was widely debated during Austen's life. Lott explains that Hannah More, once a playwright herself, declared in her later life that the theater is a dangerous platform for women. Lott summarizes More's sentiments when she states "She [More] was afraid that the elevation of potentially dangerous passions through dramatization—or any other form of embodiment or physicality—would have a damaging effect on women's place within the existing social and moral order" (Lott 276). According to many conservatives, the stage was a dangerous place for the easily impressionable female.

The use of Inchbald's play in Austen's novel is not only controversial because women are involved in the production, but because the show discusses radical notions about gender and class. Susan Allen explains in "It is about Lovers' Vows': Kotzebue, Inchbald, and the Players of Mansfield Park" that *Lovers' Vows* is "a German play, a sentimental drama of revolutionary sympathies that presents the upper classes as needing reformation for a variety of sexual, moral and economic faults"—a message that I argue is conveyed through the satirical nature of *Mansfield Park* (Allen). Paula Byrne explains the controversial elements of *Lovers' Vows* in greater detail when she states in *Jane Austen and the Theatre* that "Elizabeth Inchbald's play raises considerations about the rights of women to choose their own husbands, about a father's responsibilities to his children, and perhaps most radically, about the validity of innate merit rather than social position" (Byrne 153). Recognizing the significance of including Inchbald's play in *Mansfield Park* forces one to realize the radical sentiment behind the production of this show within the novel.

Yet as controversial as this play was, it was also extremely popular. Byrne explains that it was frequently performed from 1789-1799 during which it was staged at Convent Garden forty-two times. While Austen lived in Bath, the play was performed there roughly seventeen times. Paula Byrne explains that *Lovers' Vows* is an “expurgated version of August Kotzebue’s” play and that Austen was a fan of Kotzebue’s plays (Byrne 149). Austen was no doubt aware of the controversial nature of the play—of its criticism of German theater, the treatment of women, and class—when she chose to include it in her novel. The historical relevance of this play makes its role in *Mansfield Park* all the more significant and important to explore.

Chapter Two
***Pride and Prejudice* as a Critical Response to**
James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*

Elizabeth Bennet is renowned for her individualistic energy and witty comments that resist the efforts of authority figures to govern her behavior. While I argue that *Pride and Prejudice* invites the reader to admire Elizabeth's "impertinent" behavior, many critics claim that the novel punishes and corrects her unruly attributes. Marilyn Butler argues in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* that oftentimes readers do not recognize how earnestly Austen criticizes Elizabeth's conduct. (Butler 216). Butler claims that *Pride and Prejudice* is a conservative novel because the heroine's marriage to the rich hero signifies that Elizabeth has matured into a state where she can finally make rational decisions. Yet Butler acknowledges that "The reader cannot help admiring Elizabeth's wit and sharing her lively and satirical vision" and accounts for this ideological contradiction by claiming that "[...] Jane Austen might have appeared to err from orthodoxy, not willfully, but through a fault in execution [...]" (Butler 216, 218). Such an analysis concludes that the reader's admiration of the heroine's "impertinence" is a fault of the author.

Mary Poovey makes a similar claim in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* when she states that Elizabeth's "charming wit is another incarnation of willful desire, which, by rendering judgement unstable, contributes to moral relativity" (Poovey 195). Poovey claims that Elizabeth's imagination "harm[s] others" and that her "quick wit and powerful feelings may be unreliable moral guides" (Poovey 196). She concludes that Elizabeth is only able to have an advantageous marriage because Elizabeth is deprived of the power she wishes to obtain (Poovey 201). Marriage, according to Poovey, is posed as a "corrective" device that remedies the problems often attributed to individualism (Poovey 194). She explains that "at the level of the

plot, power is taken from egotism and given to love; at the level of the reading experience, power seems miraculously both to emanate from and to reward individualistic desire” (Poovey 201).

This conservative reading of *Pride and Prejudice* argues that marriage ultimately suppresses the individualistic desires that disrupt the community.

While I do not believe that the plot does in fact suppress Elizabeth’s “impertinence,” I agree that Elizabeth does mature throughout this novel. She and Darcy alike experience mortification, and as a result they both grow from innocence to experience. Elizabeth reflects after she reads Darcy’s letter and discovers her own fallacies. He matures after he confidently proposes to Elizabeth only to receive a rejection laced with a list of his personal faults. I argue that this form of developmental growth does not reinforce conservative values, but rather promotes a form individualism that is commonly rejected by traditional society.

I maintain that the liberal sentiments of this novel can be clearly identified when *Pride and Prejudice* is compared to James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*. This inarguably conservative conduct book, which is mentioned in the novel, clearly defines the role of a proper lady and warns that the women who do not follow the codes of conduct will experience mortification. These unfortunate women, according to Fordyce, will be unable to find a suitable husband—a decidedly negative experience in Fordyce’s scheme. Yet Elizabeth’s success in this novel suggests otherwise. To Austen, I argue, mortification is not posed as a punishment for either gender, but rather as a method of development that values the individual. Whereas Fordyce encourages women to remain static in their lives, Austen encourages them to develop—to not be afraid to gain experience through trial and error. Elizabeth is able to retain her “impertinent” behavior and have the most advantageous marriage to appear in all of Austen’s novels *because* she experiences mortification.

The Role of Men in *Pride and Prejudice*

To read *Pride and Prejudice* as conservative fiction is to miss the satire of conduct books and conservatism that is embedded throughout the novel. While Marilyn Butler states that the women in Austen's novels are "female fools," such an analysis of Austen's text forgets that the silliest character in *Pride and Prejudice* is the "absurd" Mr. Collins (Butler xli; *Pride and Prejudice* 76). The heroine, Elizabeth, whom the novel invites us to identify with, finds Mr. Collins to be an unbearable and embarrassing addition to her party (*Pride and Prejudice* 109-114). It is this man, the very being who admires Fordyce's sermons and thereby exemplifies conservative values, that is a source of comedy and contempt throughout the novel. While his desire to read Fordyce's sermons aloud to the Bennets is a clear way in which Austen connects Mr. Collins to conservative values, his manner and understanding of marriage further strengthens this satiric connection.

Mr. Collins' conservative values are demonstrated through his use and understanding of marriage as a societal duty—a practice that he uses to solidify good relations and acquire higher social standing. He does not seem to believe that love is a crucial or even important element to marriage because his sole reason for visiting the Bennets is to marry one of the daughters and thereby reconcile his familial relationship (*Pride and Prejudice* 78). This is one of Mr. Collins' character faults. Sandra Macpherson explains in "Rent to Own; or, What's Entailed in *Pride and Prejudice*" that Elizabeth and the reader alike regard Mr. Collins as a conceited man due to his manner of behaving in relation to the entail that makes him the heir of Longbourn. Macpherson explains that "Mr. Collins is a mere cog in an elaborate conveyance that preexists him and will outlast him. By apologizing—by 'continue[ing] to apologise for about a quarter of an hour' (45) after he arrives in the flesh—he is ascribing to himself a distinction and an agency in relation to

entailment that he doesn't in fact possess" (Macpherson10). Mr. Collins' attempt to marry one of the Bennet daughters as a means of atoning for his late father's bad relationship with the family, and as a method to "make them every possible amends" for his being the next entailed to Longbourn, illustrates Mr. Collins as an arrogant man whose egotistical nature makes him believe that he has more power over the fate of Longbourn than he truly does (*Pride and Prejudice* 70).

Mr. Collins' narrow-minded understanding of entails, combined with his "pride and obsequiousness, self-importance and humility," leads him to believe that he should marry one of the Bennet daughters because such a decision is "full of eligibility and suitableness, and excessively generous and disinterested on his own part" (*Pride and Prejudice* 78-79). His sense of self-righteousness cannot be missed by the reader. As Macpherson explains, Mr. Collins takes this unfortunate situation—an entail that ignores Mr. Bennet's children because they are all women—as a chance to be a hero (Macpherson 11). He recognizes the real threat of destitution that his cousins face, and regards offering his hand in marriage as a noble means to protect them. In this manner, the subjugation of women is preserved through entailments.

Mr. Collins views the basis of marriage as a societal opportunity, rather than as an act of procuring one's love. When Mr. Collins discovers that Jane is expected to become engaged to another man, he easily adapts and decides to marry Elizabeth instead. After Elizabeth rejects his hand in marriage, Mr. Collins proposes to Charlotte Lucas three days later (*Pride and Prejudice* 141). His ability to so easily switch prospects reveals that love is neither his concern nor his objective. Instead, he believes marriage is the duty of a clergyman. This is an understanding he proudly aligns with Lady Catherine De Bourgh who advises him to marry because "A clergyman like you must marry" (*Pride and Prejudice* 119). This further reinforces Mr. Collins'

conservative values. After Mr. Collins explicitly claims that his reasons for marriage are his familial and societal obligations, he states that “This has been my motive, my fair cousin, and I flatter myself it will not sink me in your esteem” (*Pride and Prejudice* 119). Such a statement undoubtedly reflects his pride and righteousness in regard to his understanding and practice of marriage because he expects his cousin to admire his reasons for matrimony. Marriage, to Mr. Collins, is not founded on love, passion, or companionship, but rather an outdated and self-serving notion of duty, honor, and integrity.

If one compares Mr. Collins’ morals and practices with those of Darcy, it raises the question as to whether the latter of the two men is the symbol of conservatism in *Pride and Prejudice* that many critics take him to be. While Darcy is certainly the scion of patriarchy, as he is the heir to Derbyshire, his actions nevertheless represent very liberal values. Unlike the abominable Mr. Collins, Darcy does not use marriage to uphold or to better his social standing. Rather, he marries for love and admiration. He defies his duties as the heir of Derbyshire and does not follow through with the marriage to his cousin, Miss Anne De Bourgh, which was planned since their birth (*Pride and Prejudice* 393). Nor does he pursue Caroline Bingley whose conception of an accomplished woman undoubtedly aligns her more closely than Elizabeth Bennet with Fordyce’s model of womanhood, as will be discussed in more depth later on. Darcy’s refusal to marry Miss Anne De Bourgh or Caroline demonstrates his rejection of marriage as a societal obligation. He explicitly recognizes his dismissal of societal expectations when he proposes to Elizabeth and states that he wishes to marry her despite the ““inferiority of your connections”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 215). Although Elizabeth’s refusal of both Mr. Collins’ and Darcy’s proposals undoubtedly injures both men’s pride, Darcy, unlike Mr. Collins, continues to pursue Elizabeth. Darcy’s determination to marry Elizabeth demonstrates that he is

willing to sacrifice his honor, dignity, and pride due to his love for Elizabeth, as he is willing to be related to Wickham even though he has caused the Darcys much pain. It is important to understand the extent to which Darcy's perception of love is not only remarkable for the time, but extremely liberal. Such a practice rejects the values promoted in conduct books and Parliamentary laws that attempt to uphold the very patriarchy Darcy represents.

Elizabeth Bennet: The Antithesis of Fordyce's Ideal Woman

Elizabeth's personality, combined with her advantageous marriage, reveals Austen's clear rejection of Fordyce's proper woman. Fordyce's priorities are: a woman's good relationship to her parents, ability to refrain from using wit, aspiration to become "accomplished," and ability to maintain an elegant figure by refraining from exercise (Fordyce I.12-17, I.190-194, I.207-262 passim, II. 224-225). Elizabeth, however, behaves in the exact opposite manner and is rewarded with the most advantageous marriage out of all of Austen's heroines—the type of marriage moralists and conservatives alike would deem as an ideal marriage for any respectable woman.

If Elizabeth had followed Fordyce's advice, her union with Darcy would never have occurred. In order to please her mother and fulfill her womanly obligation as a daughter, she would have married Mr. Collins, who proposed to her long before Darcy. Instead, Elizabeth chooses her own happiness before her obligations and thereby rejects his proposal, even though her mother threatens to "never see her again" if she does not marry Mr. Collins (*Pride and Prejudice* 125). Mrs. Bennet refers to Elizabeth as an "undutiful" child and states that she is "done with [Elizabeth] from this very day" (*Pride and Prejudice* 126). Elizabeth's actions in this situation would, without doubt, have been condemned by Fordyce, who states: "Do nothing

to make them [parents] unhappy; do all in your power to give them delight” (Fordyce I.14).

Elizabeth forfeits her mother’s happiness, however, when it would come at the expense of her own.

Elizabeth’s position on female accomplishments directly refutes Fordyce’s advice on this topic. In *Sermons to Young Women*, Fordyce dedicates three chapters to outlining the various traits and practices that make women accomplished. He stresses the importance of being well-versed in the arts, being a proper wife, and studying only the subjects that are acceptable for women; subjects that have “the heart for its object, and [are] secured by meekness and modesty, by soft attraction and virtuous love” (Fordyce I.272). Elizabeth, however, openly contests the notion of an accomplished woman. She states that ““I never saw such a woman. I never saw such capacity, and taste, and application, and elegance, as you describe, united”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 43). Elizabeth outwardly questions the importance and the existence of a woman who dedicates her life to being deemed perfectly accomplished.

Elizabeth’s opinion on female accomplishments makes it no surprise that she never saw a need for a governess. During a conversation with Lady Catherine, she is not ashamed at her lack of musical talent nor does she apologize for not being educated by a governess. Elizabeth states that ““such of us as wished to learn, never wanted the means. We were always encouraged to read and had all the masters that were necessary”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 186). She thereby defends the manner in which she was raised and has to keep herself from smiling at Lady Catherine’s surprise that Elizabeth was raised without a governess and at her accusation that ““your mother must have been quite a slave to your education”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 186). It is important to recognize that Elizabeth’s lack of a supposedly proper education does not prevent her from having the advantageous marriage accomplished women aspire to attain.

Elizabeth behaves in a manner that Fordyce's text criticizes as being masculine when she not only chooses to exercise as a practical mode of transportation, but also as a form of entertainment. Fordyce claims that in regard to women,

exercises are never graceful; that in them a tone and figure, as well as an air and deportment, of the masculine kind, are always forbidding; and that men of sensibility desire in every woman soft features, and a flowing voice, a form not robust, and a demeanour delicate and gentle. These indeed are considered as alike requisite and natural [...] (Fordyce II.224-225).

After Elizabeth travels several miles by foot in order to see her sister, however, Darcy finds himself more attracted to Elizabeth precisely because of the exercise. When Caroline Bingley inquires whether the impropriety of Elizabeth's exercise has made Darcy lose his interest, he states "Not at all [...] they [Elizabeth's eyes] were brightened by the exercise" (*Pride and Prejudice* 39). Darcy becomes more attracted to Elizabeth after her long walk, which is a practice Fordyce states will make women unattractive to men (Fordyce II.224-225). This perhaps partially explains how Darcy went from viewing Elizabeth as "tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me" to a woman of his own affections (*Pride and Prejudice* 12).

It is not only through Elizabeth's actions, but also through her unique, impertinent personality that this heroine rejects Fordyce's model woman. While Fordyce strongly cautions that "[...] Wit is commonly looked upon with a suspicious eye, as a two-edged sword, from which not even the sacredness of friendship can secure," our heroine is praised for this trait (Fordyce I.191). Fordyce claims that wit is particularly "dreaded in women" and asks "But when I speak on this subject, need I tell you, that men of the best sense have been usually averse to the thought of marrying a witty female?" (Fordyce I.191-192). Yet Darcy admits that he admires her "For the liveliness of your mind," or as Elizabeth phrases it, for her "impertinence" (*Pride and Prejudice* 421). Elizabeth elaborates on the source of his affection in the following lines:

‘The fact is, that you were sick of civility, of deference, of officious attention. You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*. Had you not been really amiable you would have hated me for it; but in spite of the pains you took to disguise yourself, your feelings were always noble and just; and in your heart, you thoroughly despised the persons who so assiduously courted you’ (*Pride and Prejudice* 421).

This explanation for why Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth explicitly rejects the conservative teachings that instruct women to all behave in a similar manner. He falls in love with Elizabeth because she was different; unlike the other women, Elizabeth shares her own thoughts and does not act in an effort to gain a man’s affections. Rather, she behaves and speaks for her own pleasure. It is Elizabeth’s *uniquely* impertinent qualities that enrapture Darcy.

Elizabeth’s “‘impertinence’” challenges Fordyce’s claim that a woman’s duty in life to act subservient to men. Fordyce states that “your [women’s] business chiefly is to read Men, in order to make yourselves agreeable and useful” (Fordyce II.273). Not only does Elizabeth’s impertinence defy such an obligation, but Darcy’s attraction to Elizabeth due to her impertinence refutes Fordyce’s description of what men like in women. According to *Pride and Prejudice*, men do not like it when women position their entire lives around coddling men; they are “‘disgusted’” by it (*Pride and Prejudice* 421) This is further supported when Elizabeth criticizes Charlotte’s opinion that women, particularly Jane, should secure a man as quickly as possible because “When she is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chuses” (*Pride and Prejudice* 24). Elizabeth criticizes such an opinion when she responds by saying:

‘Your plan is a good one [...] where nothing is in question but the desire of being well married; and if I were determined to get a rich husband, or any husband, I dare say I should adopt it. But these are not Jane’s feelings; she is not acting by design. As yet, she cannot even be certain of the degree of her own regard, nor of its reasonableness. She has known him only a fortnight’ (*Pride and Prejudice* 24).

Elizabeth does not believe that women should “[act] by design” or marry without affection. It is also revealed in this passage that Elizabeth is not “determined to get a rich husband, or any husband,” which further proves that she is never acting in a calculated manner to please a man. Contrary to Fordyce’s claims, Elizabeth is able to acquire a loving and advantageous marriage by simply being herself.

Elizabeth’s developmental growth rejects not only Fordyce but all conduct books that encourage women to remain static. Character development in Austen’s novels is a widely-debated topic in the critical field. Marilyn Butler claims that

Women in Austen don’t age well—none is shown having grown to wisdom through experience, or even exercising authority over servants or children. Collectively, Austen’s women are oddly and even unnatural ineffective. With the presumed exceptions of Elinor and Anne, the heroines are shown as undereducated, unambitious to work outside the home, and probably not qualified to manage on their own (Butler xl).

What critics such as Butler do not recognize, however, is that Austen is rejecting a specific education—one that stems from conduct books such as *Sermons to Young Women*—but praising a more individualistic approach to maturation. This can most clearly be seen through the role of mortification in *Pride and Prejudice*.

While many critics claim that mortification is used in Austen’s novels to correct the erroneous behavior of females, I argue that it is portrayed as a form of education that values the individual and undermines the use of conduct books. Butler claims that Austen’s novels rely on either of two plots: one in which the protagonist is right, and the other in which the protagonist is wrong. Butler states that, in regard to the protagonists who are wrong, “The moment of self-discovery and self-abasement, followed by the resolve in future to follow reason, is the climactic moment of the majority of anti-jacobin novels,” thus lumping Austen into the category of anti-jacobin novelists (Butler 166). Furthermore, “Where the heroine is fallible, the novel as a whole

can be said to enact the conservative case; where the heroine is exemplary, she models it” (Butler 166). Similarly, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar claim in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that

The mortifications of Emma, Elizabeth, and Marianne are, then, the necessary accompaniment to the surrender of self-responsibility and definition. While Marianne Brandon, Elizabeth Darcy, and Emma Knightly never exist except in the slightly malevolent futurity of all happily-ever-afters, surely they would have learned the intricate gestures of subordination (Gilbert and Gubar 163).

These critics conclude that Austen uses mortification to punish her female characters who display impertinent behavior.

But the criticism Austen’s works frequently receive in regard to her foolish women is best summarized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” when she states that “Austen criticism is notable mostly, not just for its timidity and banality, but for its unrelenting exaction of the spectacle of a Girl Being Taught a Lesson—for the vengefulness it vents on the heroines whom it purports to love, and whom, perhaps, it does” (Sedgwick 125). Sedgwick’s summary alludes to the common assumption that mortification is a corrective device that subjugates female characters after they were carried away with the notion that they had any power. Sedgwick refutes this interpretation by stating that

Even readings of Austen that are not so frankly repressive have tended to be structured by what Foucault calls ‘the repressive hypothesis’—especially so, indeed, to the degree that their project is avowedly *antirepressive*. And these *antirepressive* readings have their own way of re-creating the spectacle of the girl being taught a lesson (Sedgwick 126).

Sedgwick rightly points out that many critics have interpreted Austen’s works to be about a “girl being taught a lesson,” yet even her interpretation fails to acknowledge the importance of experience as a stage of development. While Sedgwick brilliantly counters this conservative reading of Austen’s novels, she does not recognize the important role of mortification in the novels’ plot.

These claims which state that mortification is used as an instructional tool, are not outlandish, as Fordyce frequently states that his codes of conduct are a method of avoiding mortification. Shame is clearly regarded as a threat that is to be avoided at all costs. Fordyce treats mortification as a punishment experienced by women who behave in an inappropriate manner. While there are many instances in which mortification is discussed in Fordyce's sermons, one significant case is when he states that "Now and then indeed there may be an invidious female, who cannot bear to see herself outdone. But that is a circumstance, which will only add to your exaltation; while every one else will be tempted, for the sake of mortifying her, to pay more respect to you" (Fordyce I.300). This statement reveals that mortification is a retribution for improper women, but also an opportune circumstance for worthy women to receive proper attention. Therefore, it is not unfounded for some critics to view mortification in the traditional method—as form of punishment.

Critics such as Butler and Gilbert & Gubar fail to recognize, however, that mortification acts as a positive turning point in Austen's novels—particularly in *Pride and Prejudice*. After Elizabeth receives Darcy's letter and learns the truth about Mr. Wickham, she reflects:

She grew absolutely ashamed of herself. —Of neither Darcy nor Wickham could she think, without feeling that she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd.

'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, and offended by the neglect of the other, 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' (*Pride and Prejudice* 230).

This moment of awakening for Elizabeth is not a punishment that results in her subordination, but rather a lesson that leads to her personal growth. It is a moment of self-reflection when

Elizabeth can learn from her mistakes. If Elizabeth were truly ruled by her pride, she would not have been able to admit her errors and learn from them. This is an educational experience for Elizabeth because ““till this moment, I never knew myself.”” She matures out of innocence and into experience. Due to mortification, Elizabeth is able to recognize her own faults and, going forward, account for them. Elizabeth’s experience of shame is therefore a turning point in her developmental scheme, but also in the narrative. After this moment, the reader and heroine alike view certain characters differently and the plot becomes more clear because the truth has been revealed.

Elizabeth’s growth also alters the way she reflects on the past. Ashley Bennett reminds her readers in “Shame and Sensibility: Jane Austen’s Humiliated Heroines” that by the end of the novel, Darcy’s letter that once caused Elizabeth great shame, is eventually referred to as a nostalgic memento. She quotes this passage from *Pride and Prejudice* to further prove her point, with which I agree, that mortification in Austen’s novels is not depicted as a form of punishment:

““But think no more of the letter. The feelings of the person who wrote, and the person who received it, are now so widely different from what they were then, that every unpleasant circumstance attending it, ought to be forgotten. You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure”” (*Pride and Prejudice*, quoted in Bennett 396).

Bennett makes the excellent point about the passage above, that “Elizabeth’s ‘philosophy’ in fact imagines a form of ‘remembrance’ in which the traces of shame are part of what ‘gives [...] pleasure’” (Bennett 396). I would add that Elizabeth believes one should view past mortification as a positive experience *because* it has led to personal growth. It is because Elizabeth and Darcy “are now so widely different from what they were then” that they can reminisce on the embarrassing experience and “every unpleasant circumstance attending it, ought to be forgotten.”

If they had not matured and become better people from this mortifying event, they would not be able to think back fondly of the letter.

It is important to recognize that this experience does not result in Elizabeth's subordination because she continues to act in a manner that may be considered impertinent, but which supports her principles. After Elizabeth experiences humiliation, she is still able to stand up for herself—the only change is that she defends Darcy, not Wickham. When Lady Catherine visits Elizabeth and attempts to prevent her from becoming engaged to Darcy, Elizabeth states that ““You have widely mistaken my character, if you think I can be worked on by such persuasions as these”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 396). Elizabeth refuses to be intimidated by Lady Catherine and has no difficulty making witty and bold comments such as ““If you believed it impossible to be true [...] I wonder you took the trouble of coming so far. What could your ladyship propose by it?”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 392). Elizabeth continues to use wit to express and defend her beliefs and she still has the courage and audacity to speak to Lady Catherine, a woman who is above her own rank, in a manner that is considered impertinent. Furthermore, Elizabeth continues to be a strong-willed woman—her relationship with Darcy continues to border on disrespectful, at least in Georgiana's opinion, which reveals that Elizabeth has not lost her qualities that make her exceptional (*Pride and Prejudice* 430).

Whereas conduct books, including *Sermons to Young Women*, encourage women to remain static—to strictly follow the codes of conduct laid out before them—Austen encourages women to develop and grow in an individualistic manner. Austen promotes individualistic growth through her heroine, who is one of the only characters to mature in this novel. Elizabeth's experience of mortification is not portrayed as a negative consequence to behavior, but rather as a form of constructive criticism that encourages her growth and development in manner that

better herself. Therefore, mortification is not a destructive experience that reinforces Fordyce's method of educating women, but is rather an educational lesson through which one learns through experience. In *Pride and Prejudice*, mortification is posed as an essential form of growth, as it is ultimately what changes Elizabeth's good opinion of Wickham and it is what allows her to change her misguided opinion of Darcy. This is exceptional because most of the people from Hertfordshire retain their high regard for Mr. Wickham and their negative opinion of Darcy throughout the novel. Therefore, growth through experience is not only necessary, but essential if one wishes to acquire a truer understanding of one's surroundings and self.

It is important to recognize that Darcy, too, matures due to his experience of mortification. When Darcy proposes to Elizabeth, "he was not more eloquent on the subject of tenderness than of pride" and "he had no doubt of a favourable answer. He *spoke* of apprehension and anxiety, but his countenance expressed real security" (*Pride and Prejudice* 211, 212). When Elizabeth not only rejects his proposal, but shares with him her knowledge of his past mistreatment of Wickham and his efforts to prevent Bingley from marrying Jane, Darcy "looked at her with an expression of mingled incredulity and mortification" (*Pride and Prejudice* 215). Instead of moving on from this rejection, as Mr. Collins did after he was turned down by Elizabeth, Darcy learns from Elizabeth's comments and works to redeem his previous errors. Darcy is the reason that Bingley and Jane become engaged and that Lydia marries Wickham. He recognizes his errors and accounts for them. This also reveals a form of growth that is similar to Elizabeth's maturation, as if each of them needs to experience mortification in order to grow and mature into a better person. When he proposes to Elizabeth the second time and she accepts, he reflects on his first attempted proposal and says "what did you say of me, that I did not deserve? For, though your accusations were ill-founded, formed on mistaken premises, my behavior to

you at the time, has merited the severest reproof. It was unpardonable. I cannot think of it without abhorrence”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 407-408). When critics like Butler interpret mortification as the disciplining of an unruly heroine, they neglect the fact that some of Austen’s men undergo mortification as well, Darcy most conspicuously. Darcy’s attitude and understanding of his previous actions changes due to his experience of mortification. Mortification, in *Pride and Prejudice*, is what allows Darcy and Elizabeth to reflect on their behavior and learn from their mistakes. Furthermore, the only reason the reader and characters gain their happy ending is that Darcy and Elizabeth experience mortification.

The way Elizabeth and Darcy mature in this novel reveals, I argue, a similarity between the sexes. While many moralists, such as Fordyce, were determined to prove the ways in which men and women differ, Austen reveals a developmental similarity between them. Elizabeth and Darcy both improve due to their experience of mortification. This does not mean that they become weaker beings; rather they learn from their faults and adjust their behavior, yet still remain characters who are strong enough to defy the norm. This is clear because, as stated previously, Elizabeth is still willing to be impertinent in order to defend her beliefs, and Darcy marries Elizabeth even though it is an act that is not supported by his aunt. The similarities between Darcy and Elizabeth, combined with their exceptional marriage that resembles a partnership, refute the gender-deterministic approach to understanding the sexes. Elizabeth and Darcy are both strong characters who are able to mature, learn, and admit their faults through the experience of mortification. This novel thereby questions the distinction of education between the sexes.

This form of developmental growth that is promoted in *Pride and Prejudice* is significant beyond the moral implications of the novel. By depicting mortification as a transitional event

that allows one to move from innocence to experience, Austen aligns her novel with the main currents of the Romantic era. Austen uses mortification in this novel as a method of framing *Pride and Prejudice* around the growth of the individual, who is in this case Elizabeth. The first half of the text consists of all the events that ultimately result in Elizabeth's mortification—which as discussed above, occurs at the moment she reads Darcy's letter. The second half of the novel is about reconciliation: Elizabeth matures from her mortification and marries the man whom she loves, but once misunderstood. I focus on Elizabeth's growth here, and not Darcy's, only because she is our heroine and the focus of this novel. But it is her growth along with Darcy's that allows for the "wish fulfilling" ending in which everyone is reunited—Elizabeth and Jane live close to one another with their new husbands, and the younger Bennet daughters profit from their older siblings' marriages (Johnson 73). This focus on personal growth and the individual connects Austen to other Romantic-era writers, such as William Wordsworth whose long autobiographical poem *The Prelude* exemplifies the new Romantic model of individual growth.

The Lives of James Fordyce's Model Women in *Pride and Prejudice*: Charlotte and Caroline

Elizabeth Bennet's "impertinence" and her progressive marriage to Darcy make her situation special because she is rewarded rather than punished for her unusual behavior (*Pride and Prejudice* 421). In comparison, the female characters who follow Fordyce's advice and dedicate their life to finding a suitable husband, do not have positive experiences in this novel. Charlotte Lucas is a prime example of such an instance. While she comes from a good, respectable family, Charlotte has difficulty finding a man that will secure her future. Charlotte's reasoning for marrying Mr. Collins is explained by the narrator in the following lines:

Mr. Collins to be sure was neither sensible nor agreeable; his society was irksome, and his attachment to her must be imaginary. Bust still he would be her husband—without thinking highly either of men or of matrimony, marriage had always been her object; it was the only honourable provision for well-educated young women of small fortune, and however uncertain of giving happiness, must be their pleasantest preservation from want. This preservative she had now obtained; and at the age of twenty-seven, without having ever been handsome, she felt all the good luck of it (*Pride and Prejudice* 138).

Such a justification for Charlotte’s marriage explains why she chooses to be united with a man she neither loves nor admires. The position of many women in society—their forced dependence upon a man for survival—explains why many of the marriages in Austen’s novels are not founded on love. Charlotte’s disposition also illustrates the disadvantage she experiences for being less attractive than others—a woman’s ability to gain an advantageous marriage depends upon characteristics that are out of her control. This is perhaps why the beautiful Jane Bennet finds an agreeable, wealthy man to marry, but why Charlotte is not fortunate enough to have the same future. Austen uses marriage in her novel as both a social commentary on the expectations of women and as a method of exposing the cruel disposition of women in society—a disposition that is preserved through conduct books, such as *Sermons to Young Women*.

While Charlotte’s disposition makes her circumstances more challenging, Jane’s traditional behavior initially results in her heartbreak. Jane, whose mild temper, humility, and passive personality align her more closely with Fordyce’s ideal woman than Elizabeth, at first loses Mr. Bingley because, as Darcy states, ““her heart was not likely to be easily touched”” (*Pride and Prejudice* 220). Darcy believed her to be ““indifferent”” and he therefore encouraged his friend to no longer pursue the relationship (*Pride and Prejudice* 220). The very reason Austen provides as to why Jane loses Mr. Bingley contests Fordyce’s claims towards women’s behavior. Fordyce claims that

Some men, I confess, may be flattered by forward advances from those of your sex, whom the ingenious Mr. Richardson used to term Seekers. But is there not reason to

apprehend, that when they come to reflect coolly, their esteem will not be lasting, where the foundation of it is not natural? There are other men, it is but fair to tell you, who will appear delighted with this kind of courtship, pretend the highest regard, pay you a world of compliments by which they mean nothing, and swear to the first worthless companion they meet, that you have a design upon them. Can you bear the thought of exposing yourself to such imputation? How mortifying, on such occasion, to hear a girl seriously boast of her imaginary conquests! (Fordyce I.114)

He strongly cautions his female readers against pursuing men, because it will undoubtedly lead to their mortification. Yet Jane almost loses the man she loves because she is *not* forward in her efforts to be with him. The only reason she ends up married to Bingley is because Darcy experiences mortification, which leads him to encourage Bingley to propose to Jane.

Yet the character who seems to suffer the most due to her traditional values is Caroline Bingley. A close examination of Caroline alongside Fordyce's texts reveals that she is a close model of his ideal woman. She is well-versed in the arts and has aspired to become an "accomplished" woman. Caroline follows Fordyce's rule that

She will not only return his love with equal affection, but endeavor to ensure and heighten his esteem by every engaging and respectable virtue. She will not only avoid whatever might provoke or displease, but study to deserve well of him by promoting his interest, and raising his reputation; and that not merely by starts, or in transient fits of good humour, but uniformly and constantly every day of her life (Fordyce I. 213).

This is seen most clearly when Caroline takes an interest in Darcy's letter-writing and offers to mend his pen (*Pride and Prejudice* 52). She also defends everything that Darcy says and, unlike Elizabeth, she never says anything that might offend him. This is perhaps why the narrator ironically refers to Caroline as Darcy's "faithful assistant" (*Pride and Prejudice* 43). It is important to realize, however, that even though Caroline tries very hard to capture Darcy's attention, she is never successful. Elizabeth's "impertinence" was far more captivating and alluring than Caroline's calculated, subservient behavior (*Pride and Prejudice* 421).

Jane and Caroline are two examples of how Fordyce's guidelines can actually deter men. In *Pride and Prejudice* Darcy falls in love with Elizabeth because, as she tells him, "you were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking, and thinking for *your* approbation alone" (*Pride and Prejudice* 421). There are some men, like Darcy, who respect "impertinent," independent women. The women who calculate their behavior to appeal to the opposite sex are considered boring to respectable men such as Darcy. Fordyce's advice does not help one secure a husband—it is actually the very reason some women in *Pride and Prejudice* have trouble attracting a man. The importance of this discovery will be discussed at further length later on, as it is a crucial element that leads one to recognize the irony in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Irony in *Pride and Prejudice*

While Elizabeth's progressive personality and relationship are described in a manner that are inspirational, they are also characterized as exceptional. Elizabeth is one of the few heroines in all of Austen's novels whose story has an unquestionably romantic ending. She is also one of the only characters in *Pride and Prejudice* that has an advantageous marriage and position in life by the end of the novel. The focus of Elizabeth and Darcy's romance is perhaps the reason why critics such as Claudia Johnson have claimed that this novel "is almost shamelessly wish fulfilling" (Johnson 73). It is no doubt true that Elizabeth and Darcy's union at the end of this novel is like a fairy-tale—it is a romantically ideal marriage.

While many critics claim that this union is the very reason *Pride and Prejudice* can be read as a form of conservative fiction, I believe that the exceptional quality of their union proves otherwise. This ideal marriage does not demonstrate that the conservative social structures lead

to a marriage that resembles Elizabeth and Darcy's; rather, it proves that one must overcome the social boundaries and restrictions that prevent marriages such as this one from taking place.

Their partnership, when compared to the lives of other characters by the end of the novel, reveals that their marriage is exceptional, ideal, and hard to find. The social structure in place does not typically result in such marriages—if it did, almost all the characters in the novel would have a similar happy ending. Therefore, this novel is “wish fulfilling” as it may lead the reader to believe such an ideal ending and marriage are possible to obtain, but this novel also exposes the challenges one must face and the social obligations one must overcome in order to achieve this form of marital bliss.

I argue that the irony of this “wish fulfilling” marriage in *Pride and Prejudice* is what makes this novel an outstanding form of criticism to conduct books. Austen begins her novel by claiming

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters (*Pride and Prejudice* 3).

Such a claim reveals that there is a palpable urgency among women and their families to find a wealthy husband for a single woman to marry. According to Fordyce, the woman who is most likely to marry such a gentleman is the same individual who follows the guidelines articulated in his conduct book. Yet Elizabeth, the woman who has the most advantageous marriage out of any of Austen's heroines, defies every code of conduct Fordyce encourages. Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy seems ironic because Elizabeth obtains the marriage that Fordyce claims women should aspire for, but she does so because she acts *against* Fordyce's codes of conduct. Therefore, their

union refutes Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* as a method of attracting a successful husband, and thereby discredits his understanding of what men look for in a woman.

Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage invites not only other female characters in the book, but also the reader, to reevaluate their understanding of a woman's place in society. Georgiana adjusts her view on women after experiencing her brother's relationship with Elizabeth. This is explained in the following lines:

Georgiana had the highest opinion in the world of Elizabeth; though at first she often listened with an astonishment bordering on alarm, at her lively, sportive, manner of talking to her brother. He, who had always inspired in herself a respect which almost overcame her affection, she now saw the object of open pleasantry. Her mind received knowledge which had never before fallen in her way. By Elizabeth's instructions she began to comprehend that a woman may take liberties with her husband, which a brother will not always allow in a sister more than ten years younger than himself (*Pride and Prejudice* 430).

Georgiana, who was raised to become an "accomplished" woman, learns through Elizabeth that she does not need to be, nor should she be, passive among men. Rather, due to Elizabeth's "lively, sportive, manner of talking," Georgiana sees a pleasant side of her brother that she had not seen before. Georgiana's perception of impertinent behavior in a woman changes from being a negative quality to a positive one.

Kitty also benefits from Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage. The narrator explains that "In society so superior to what she had generally known, her improvement was great. She was not of so ungovernable a temper as Lydia, and removed from influence of Lydia's example, she became, by proper attention and management, less irritable, less ignorant, and less insipid" (*Pride and Prejudice* 427-428). The novel attributes Kitty's growth to the time she spends with her two older sisters after they are married. In this manner, Elizabeth's marriage improves the lives of at least two young people, who are able to learn from her and view her as a source of guidance.

Through the use of Elizabeth, Austen forces her readers to question the limitations of gendered-deterministic attitudes. Point-by-point, Elizabeth rejects Fordyce's restrictive guidelines for women and yet she, unlike almost every other female character, marries a wealthy man who not only provides for her, which is a necessity in this time period, but also embraces her individuality. The text invites us to admire Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage, while at the same time, it encourages us to place it on a pedestal and recognize its exceptional quality. This rare union is "wish fulfilling" because Elizabeth successfully defies all the societal regulations that attempt to oppress her, and still finds love and a happy, comfortable marriage. Yet it also reminds us that even the most ideal situation still has its faults. Darcy's wealth is a reminder to the reader of the inequalities that still exist within this fairy-tale like ending—women, even our liberated heroine, still depend upon a man for their livelihoods.

Yet Austen's ending for not only Elizabeth, but Georgiana and Kitty offers hope in a brighter future for women. It foreshadows a future in which unions such as Elizabeth and Darcy's are no longer rare, but commonplace. Creating a novel in which the readers respect a union that resembles some form of equality between the sexes is a step forward. *Pride and Prejudice* provides a subtle glimpse of a future in which the sexes are deemed equal—where marriages become partnerships founded on mutual respect and admiration.

Chapter Three

Mansfield Park: Satire by Intertextuality

Critics often claim that in *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price is a heroine to be admired. While Mary Poovey and Marilyn Butler both recognize that Fanny is not the most beloved character in Austen's novels, both critics argue, nevertheless, that the reader is invited to learn from this positive representation of the ideal female. Poovey states that *Mansfield Park* is problematic because while Austen attempts to "make Fanny's principles both imaginatively and morally appealing," she fails in the effort to do so (Poovey 222). Poovey states that "If our identification with Fanny *could* be rendered complete, we would—like Mansfield Park itself—be reformed by an internal agent (the principled imagination), not by an external and authoritarian teacher" (Poovey 223-224). Marilyn Butler makes a similar claim when she states in *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas*, that Fanny's "shyness, her headaches, the childish quality of her feeling for William and even Edmund, are amiable instances of personal weakness which are supposed to give additional lustre to her powers of endurance and her eventual victory" (Butler 248). Butler claims that while *Mansfield Park* has brilliant elements, the second half of the novel is an "artistic failure" due to the author's inability to make Fanny agreeable (Butler 249). While these critics believe that the greatest fault of this novel is the unappealing heroine, I claim that Fanny's disagreeable qualities make this novel a success of a different kind.

While I agree that Fanny possesses all the characteristics that moralists such as James Fordyce admire, I do not believe that the novel invites us to admire her conservative attributes. Rather, Fanny is important because she reveals the flaws of the conservative system, not its virtues. This heroine's function is to shatter the positive image of the landed class. More specifically, Austen uses Fanny to expose the sexism inherent in a conservative family whose values are solely materialistic. Consequently, I agree with Claudia Johnson who states in *Jane*

Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel, that *Mansfield Park* is “Austen’s most, rather than her least, ironic novel and a bitter parody of conservative fiction” (Johnson 96). *Mansfield Park* is meant to be read as a satire: a novel that through the use of the heroine, who is the victim of the gentry family, not its savior, exposes the corruption of the conservative elite.

By reading Elizabeth Inchbald’s *Lover’s Vows*, James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women*, and *Pride and Prejudice* alongside *Mansfield Park*, I demonstrate in this chapter how Austen’s novel satirizes conservatism and positions England as an unjust country that idealizes its men at the expense of its women. This novel’s unfortunate, miserable characters are a product of their upbringing—they reflect the values and societal standards that allow men to live without social consequences, but that restrict women from experiencing any form of freedom at the risk of being ostracized. *Mansfield Park* is Austen’s darkest novel because it depicts the landed gentry as cold-hearted villains, beneath a genteel surface. Due to their excessive power and wealth, the men in *Mansfield Park* are able to rule unchecked. By portraying Fanny as a weak and disagreeable heroine who aligns her values with those of her oppressors, Austen invites the reader to criticize a woman who lacks any compassion for her own sex. Consequently, the reader is encouraged to find someone to admire in the more “impertinent” character of Mary Crawford.

The Role of Women

Where *Pride and Prejudice* shows the positive outcomes of a resilient heroine, *Mansfield Park* reveals the disastrous outcomes of a complacent woman. Contrary to Poovey’s and Butler’s claims, Fanny is not a heroine Austen wants us to admire. While both critics recognize that Fanny is not particularly appealing, they fail to recognize the function of a disagreeable character. Contrary to Butler’s claim that the second half of *Mansfield Park* is an “artistic

failure” because the heroine is depicted in an unlikable manner, the reason that Fanny is unappealing is not that Austen failed as an artist but, rather, that her unpleasant, conservative characteristics prevent her from being a source of undeserved praise (Butler 249). The reader is invited to dislike her for the exact opposite reason they are invited to admire Elizabeth Bennet: Fanny represents James Fordyce’s ideal female. Her character is instrumental in exposing the contradiction of conservative ideals. Fanny’s tale is a cautionary one: her conservative values and behaviors lead to an unfortunate life.

The depiction of Fanny clearly aligns her with James Fordyce’s ideal woman: She hardly exercises, she feels a certain gratitude to her parent figures even when they do not deserve it, she studies only appropriate topics for a young lady, she is never first to express feelings for a man, and she behaves in a way that is at all times appropriate and well-mannered (Fordyce I.224-225, I.12-17, I.272, I.114). This claim is well-accepted: for instance, Anna Lott in “Staging a Lesson: The Theatricals and Proper Conduct in *Mansfield Park*” states that Fanny “represents in many respects an ideal conduct-book woman” (Lott 278).¹ Yet my reading of *Mansfield Park* differs from those of critics, including Lott, who claim that Fanny is the “morally superior member” of the family (Lott 276). Fanny Price’s conservative values are flawed—her upbringing has taught her to be passive at her own expense and others’ gain.

Contrary to many critics’ claims, I argue that a close comparison of *Mansfield Park* to *Pride and Prejudice* exposes Fanny as a source of contempt. Mary Poovey claims that

Besides the charming, outspoken Elizabeth Bennet, Fanny Price holds little appeal for many readers, but as a response to the complex dangers threatening the values of traditional society, she promises a more convincing solution than Elizabeth Bennet could offer. For though Elizabeth’s impertinence could be schooled into love, the individualistic energy she represented was ominously akin to one of the primary

¹ Other critics who make this claim include Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 212; A. Marie Sprayberry, “Fanny Price as Fordyce’s Ideal Woman? And Why?” *Persuasions* 35.1 (2014).

antagonists of social order. By contrast, Fanny Price is outwardly everything a textbook Proper Lady should be; she is dependent, self-effacing, and apparently free of impermissible desires. If so ideal an exemplar of femininity could be made both sympathetic and powerful, Austen would be able to demonstrate how traditional society could be regenerated from within its own values and institutions (Poovey 212).

While I agree that Elizabeth's fate is probably not very realistic, her "charming, outspoken" traits alongside her idealistic fate make her a heroine that readers are invited to admire. Consequently, Fanny is depicted as a weak, inferior heroine *because* she "is outwardly everything a textbook Proper Lady should be." Fanny's marriage to her cousin Edmund is not depicted as a desirable union: it leads her to identify, admire, and love the very beings who degrade her. Therefore, Fanny does not, as Poovey claims, revamp the conservative elite's lifestyle "from within its own values and institutions." Rather, Fanny perpetuates the conservative tradition that holds women as the property of men.

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth and Darcy's union is depicted as a partnership of equals rather than a marriage in which the male possesses all the power. As I discussed in my previous chapter, their progressive marriage provides Georgiana and Kitty the model for a similar type of marriage. Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage is celebrated by the novel because, by being what Claudia Johnson describes as "almost shamelessly wish fulfilling," it allows the reader to believe that a woman can be independent, witty, and impertinent—she can be an individual and not force herself to bend to conservative demands—and still find a husband who loves her *because* she is impertinent (Johnson 73).

In contrast, Fanny Price does not marry Edmund because he admires her for her personality. Rather, Edmund marries her because the woman he has desired all along has, to his misfortune, become intolerable to his conservative moral framework. As a man in need and want

of a wife, he changes his romantic prospects from Mary Crawford to Fanny. This back-up choice marriage to his cousin is summarized in the following passage:

I purposely abstain from dates on this occasion, that every one may be at liberty to fix their own, aware that the cure of unconquerable passions, and the transfer of unchanging attachments, must vary much as to time in different people.—I only entreat every body to believe that exactly at the time when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny, as Fanny herself could desire (*Mansfield Park* 544).

Edmund's change in sentiment is similar to Mr. Collins' ability to become interested in Charlotte only three days after he was rejected by Elizabeth. In both cases the man is at first attracted to an impertinent female but, after experiencing disappointment from that very woman, is able to adjust to the next female he lays his eyes upon. Being a second choice does not make for a romantic fairy-tale.

It is significant that for the majority of the novel Edmund is madly in love with the woman who is "impertinent." Mary Crawford shares her opinions, even when they are not well-received; she makes jokes that are borderline inappropriate, eagerly participates in a play despite the negative social implications, and offers her opinions without being asked—even when it is to share how she criticizes her own guardian, an opinion Edmund is shocked to hear. Yet despite all these traits that are deemed unattractive by conservative moralists, Mary remains Edmund's first choice. When he is ultimately unable to marry her, which will be discussed further later on in this chapter, the narrator describes his decision to marry Fanny instead in the following manner:

whether Fanny herself were not growing as dear, as important to him in all her smiles, and all her ways, as Mary Crawford had ever been; and whether it might not be a possible, an hopeful undertaking to persuade her that her warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love. [...] With such regard for her, indeed, as his had long been, a regard founded on the most endearing claims of innocence and helplessness, and completed by every recommendation of growing worth, what could be more natural than the change? Loving, guiding, protecting her, as he had been doing ever since her being ten years old, her mind in so great a degree formed by his care, and her comfort depending on his kindness, an object to him of such close and peculiar interest,

dearer by all his own importance with her than any one else at Mansfield, what was there to add, but that he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones (*Mansfield Park* 543-544).

Not only does this passage reiterate that Fanny is Edmund's second choice, it equates Fanny and Edmund's love for each other as affection shared between siblings. It is not romantic that Edmund must "learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones" nor is it encouraging that a man marries a woman whose "mind in so great a degree [was] formed by his care." The reader is not invited to desire Fanny's marriage, but rather to cringe at an incestuous marriage that perpetuates the traditional gendered hierarchy between men and women.

Unlike the union between Elizabeth and Darcy, Fanny and Edmund's marriage allows the mistreatment of women to endure. Fanny, who for years was treated as a servant, is replaced by her sister Susan who

became the stationary niece—delighted to be so!—and equally well adapted for it be a readiness of mind, and an inclination for usefulness, as Fanny has been by sweetness of temper, and strong feelings of gratitude. Susan could never be spared. First as a comfort to Fanny, then as an auxiliary, and last as her substitute, she was established at Mansfield, with every appearance of equal permanency (*Mansfield Park* 546-547).

Fanny's marriage does not offer a better future for younger generations, but rather offers a similar or lesser fate than Fanny's. Fanny is not changing the conservative society from within, as Poovey suggests, but rather perpetuating the role of women in society as men's property—as existing only to please those around her. Susan does not have the same bright future that Georgiana and Kitty are provided through Elizabeth's marriage to Darcy.

The admittance of Susan into Mansfield Park shortly after Mary and Maria are expelled further demonstrates that the only role available for women in a patriarchal context is a subservient one. Mary, as I have briefly discussed, is the most "impertinent" female character to appear in *Mansfield Park*. The role of Mary Crawford in the novel is, I argue, to reveal what

Claudia Johnson states is “a phenomenon which has preoccupied modern feminists: the dependence of certain kinds of masculine discourse on feminine silence. Mansfield Park runs smoothly only so long as female dissent can be presumed not to exist” (Johnson 112). I agree with Johnson that Mary’s “impertinent” actions are ignored, and I would add, excused by a lack of female accountability until they become too serious to disregard. Mary’s role in this novel is to reveal that a powerful woman will not be tolerated in a patriarchal climate—even if her radical morals are just. While Johnson claims that Mary is not expelled from Mansfield Park for having “an opposing ideological position,” I disagree and claim that this is exactly the reason Mary cannot stay at the estate and marry Edmund (Johnson 113). Her morals demand a level of equality and compassion for not only “fallen women,” but women in general who undermine the authority of men and question the ability of the patriarchy to justly rule. Her outspoken compassion for women makes her a threat to a gendered hierarchy that conservative elites are desperate to secure through their practice of disempowering women.

Mary Crawford is the only character in this novel who consistently expresses sympathy for women. She does not encourage Fanny to participate in *Lovers’ Vows* when Fanny rejects a role, she frequently writes to Fanny after she is expelled to her parents’ home, and she attempts to be a companion to Fanny, which is more than Fanny’s own family has ever done for her. While Mary’s compassion for women would seemingly be a positive attribute, it is this very trait that results in her removal from Mansfield Park. Edmund recalls Mary’s sympathy for Maria after her infidelity, with horror: Edmund claims that ““Her’s are faults of principle, Fanny, of blunted delicacy and a corrupted, vitiated mind”” (*Mansfield Park* 528). In this moment, Edmund acknowledges that he cannot marry a woman with such “corrupt” morals.

Edmund faults Mary for wanting to redeem Maria and Henry's affair through marriage and forgiveness. He recalls Mary's solution with disgust:

“‘We must persuade Henry to marry her,’ she said, ‘and what with honour, and the certainty of having shut himself out for ever from Fanny, I do not despair of it.... My influence, which is not small, shall all go that way; and, when once married, and properly supported by her own family, people of respectability as they are, she may recover her footing in society to a certain degree. In some circles, we know, she would never be admitted, but with good dinners, and large parties, there will always be those who will be glad of her acquaintance; and there is, undoubtedly, more liberality and candour on those points than formerly. What I advise is, that your father be quiet. Do not let him injure his own cause by interference. Persuade him to let things take their course. If by any officious exertions of his, she is induced to leave Henry's protection, there will be much less chance of his marrying her, than if she remains with him. [...]’” (*Mansfield Park* 528-529).

Mary's speech as retold by Edmund, depicts Mary as a strong woman with much influence, who has sympathy for Maria and wishes to prevent her from being ostracized by her family. Edmund is appalled by Mary's solution even though it would protect his own sister from being rejected by society. Edmund objects to

‘the manner in which she treated the dreadful crime committed by her brother and my sister [...] but the manner in which she spoke of the crime itself, giving it every reproach but the right, considering its ill consequences only as they were to be braved or overborne by the defiance of decency and impudence in wrong; and last of all, and above all, recommending to us a compliance, a compromise, an acquiescence, in the continuance of the sin [...] all this together most grievously convinced me that I had never understood her before [...]’ (*Mansfield Park* 529).

It is important to recognize that what seems to offend Edmund most is the manner in which Mary speaks of her plan. He further objects that Mary was “last of all, and above all, recommending to us a compliance, a compromise, an acquiescence [...]” which implies that her greatest offense was the authority with which she spoke. It appalls him that she suggested Sir Thomas and the family “be quiet,” which disrupts the “dependence of certain kinds of masculine discourse on feminine silence” that Johnson discusses (*Mansfield Park* 528; Johnson 112). Mary discusses her solution with an authority that resembles a sense of masculinity that will not be tolerated in a

woman by a conservative man such as Edmund. One cannot help but associate Mary's manner of speaking with Mary Wollstonecraft's claim that women should "every day grow more and more masculine" (Wollstonecraft 24).

The removal of Mary from *Mansfield Park* forces the reader to recognize that without Mary there is no one left to support women. While Sir Thomas and Edmund pretend to care for their female companions' future, they clearly do not have the women's best interest in mind. Their advice and actions always reflect their own interests and often come at the expense of the female they are advising. In comparison, Mary almost always attempts to help the women around her. Not only is she the only character who attempts to save Maria from social ruin, but she is also the only character who supports Fanny when she is otherwise left to her own devices. When Fanny is being bullied to participate in the play, Mary, not Edmund, comes to her rescue. When Fanny states "'You must excuse me, indeed you must excuse me,' cried Fanny, growing more and more red from excessive agitation, and looking distressfully at Edmund, who was kindly observing her, but unwilling to exasperate his brother by interference, gave her only an encouraging smile," Edmund sits and watches her suffer, and chooses not to interfere (*Mansfield Park* 172). While Edmund does intervene when Mrs. Norris attempts to persuade Fanny to join, because perhaps Edmund feels as if he has the power to overrule Mrs. Norris but not his older brother, he ultimately becomes quiet because "Edmund was too angry to speak [...]" (*Mansfield Park* 173). It is at this moment that Mary takes control: she takes the attention off of Fanny by making a comment about the temperature of the room as she subtly moves next to Fanny in order to console her. Mary "with pointed attention continues to talk to her and endeavor to raise her spirits, in spite of being out of spirits herself" (*Mansfield Park* 173). Mary is the only selfless

character who has compassion for her female companions. No other character in this novel demonstrates the same level of care and sympathy for women.

While Edmund and Fanny are appalled that Mary wishes to help Maria, the reader is invited to view Mary's determination to help Maria as noble. While in *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy's decision to save Lydia and the Bennet family from social ruin is deemed a heroic action—it makes Elizabeth and Darcy's engagement possible—Mary's attempt to save Maria is the very action that costs her Edmund's hand in marriage. The parallels between these two novels reveals that if *Pride and Prejudice* is “wish fulfilling,” then *Mansfield Park* is darkly realistic (Johnson 73). The rejection of Mary and Maria from *Mansfield Park* exposes the Bertram men as monsters—as cold-hearted people who are incapable of expressing compassion towards women. The treatment of Fanny, Mary, and Maria exposes the conservative elites as men who secure their power through the subjugation of women.

It is important to recognize, however, that while Edmund and Fanny scold Mary for her values, the novel does not punish her in the same manner. I argue that Mary has an admirable outcome—one of the best offered in this novel. Mary goes to live with her beloved sister, Mrs. Grant, and has £20,000 to her name. She is therefore provided with a comfortable home, a loving roommate, and enough money to live comfortably. Furthermore, Mary have always regarded marriage as

“a manoeuvring business. I know so many who have married in the full expectation and confidence of some one particular advantage in the connection, or accomplishment or good quality in the person, who have found themselves entirely deceived, and been obliged to put up with exactly the reverse! What is this, but a take in?” (*Mansfield Park* 53-54).

Therefore, it seems fortunate than an “impertinent,” liberal woman did not marry a conservative man such as Edmund. If they had married, it can be presumed that her fear, as stated above,

would have come true. Thus, her fate is arguably even better than Lady Susan's, who in Austen's unpublished story "Lady Susan" is able to manipulate men to her own liking, but still must ultimately marry an unappealing man in order to be comfortable in life. *Mansfield Park* does not punish Mary; rather, it provides her with the best situation possible in this otherwise darkly realistic novel.

Undermining the Patriarchy Through Male Characters

Sir Thomas, as the head of the Bertram household, stands as a symbol of patriarchy. He is the one who creates a foundation of laws for the family: it is he who declares that Fanny is to be always regarded as less than family, that the production of *Lovers' Vows* is to be shut down, and that Maria is to be expelled due to her indecent behavior. Yet the novel undermines his ability to be both a moral leader and father, because his inconsistent values reveal him to be a heartless man who is more concerned with his own wealth and status than his family's well-being.

Sir Thomas' inconsistency is perhaps most clearly depicted through his relationship with his daughters. Although he first declares Fanny to be inferior, he changes his mind once her connection to his family provides him a means to increase his social standing. He gains respect for Fanny once Henry Crawford expresses an interest in marrying her. Shortly thereafter, Fanny is treated with more respect around the house—she gets a fire in her room and is invited to be a member of their party. She no longer acts as a servant, but rather becomes a member of the family. The novel invites the reader to criticize Sir Thomas' parental ability when he sends Fanny back to her biological parents after she refuses to marry Henry. Sir Thomas' decision to punish her for refusing a marriage that he encourages reveals that he uses his parental authority for his selfish gain. Only a few chapters earlier Sir Thomas provided Maria a means to end her

engagement with Mr. Rushworth because as a father he did not want his daughter to be in an entirely loveless marriage. Yet when the marriage benefits his own honor, as it does with Fanny and Mr. Crawford, Sir Thomas is suddenly devoid of empathy for a loveless union. He recognizes the exchange value of marriage and uses it to his advantage even though it is at the expense of a family member. The novel exposes Sir Thomas as a hypocrite—he changes his values to match the circumstance that benefits him the best.

While Sir Thomas recognizes his failures as a father, he does not work to make amends for his errors. The narrator explains that “the anguish arising from the conviction of his own errors in the education of his daughters, was never to be entirely done away” (*Mansfield Park* 535). The narrator continues to explain Sir Thomas’ inner thoughts:

bad as it was, he gradually grew to feel that it had not been the most direful mistake in his plan of education. Something must have been wanting *within*, or time would have worn away much of its ill effect. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments—the authorized object of their youth—could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition; and of the necessity of self-denial and humility, he feared that they had never heard from any lips that could profit them” (*Mansfield Park* 536).

While Sir Thomas attempts to understand the scandalous fate of his two daughters, he ultimately fears that it was his own actions that led to their misery. He recognizes that their education was lacking because “to be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments—the authorized object of their youth—could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind.” It is important to recognize that in *Pride and Prejudice* Lydia’s irresponsible decision to run away with Wickham is also blamed on her education. Elizabeth explains Lydia’s decision to be with Wickham by stating ““she has never been taught to think on serious subjects,”” an observation

which faults her education for not teaching her to make prudent choices (*Pride and Prejudice* 313). The glaring difference between these two situations, however, is that Mr. Bennet attempts to resolve the matter in his daughter's favor, whereas Sir Thomas expels his daughter from the neighborhood once her infidelity becomes public knowledge. For this reason, Lydia has a more fortunate fate than Maria.

According to Sir Thomas, dishonoring the neighborhood would be a greater offense than abandoning his own daughter. Yet the irony of this could not be clearer: his solution to being an unaffectionate father is to show no affection to his daughter. Sir Thomas' negligence and emotional withholding are evident in the following passage that demonstrates the family's feelings in regard to his departure earlier in the novel:

The Miss Bertrams were much to be pitied on the occasion; not for their sorrow, but for their want of it. Their father was no object of love to them, he had never seemed the friend of their pleasures, and his absence was unhappily most welcome. They were relieved by it from all restraint; and without aiming at one gratification that would probably have been forbidden by Sir Thomas, they felt themselves immediately at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach (*Mansfield Park* 37).

Maria and Julia are happy to have their father leave because it means that they can experience "gratification that would probably have been forbidden by Sir Thomas." This perhaps explains why Maria and Julia later run away with men against Sir Thomas' will—they believe that they can only experience delight in the absence of their father. Sir Thomas recognizes that "his own severity" in conjunction with Mrs. Norris' affection was an ineffective way to raise two daughters (*Mansfield Park* 535). He reflects that "he had but increased the evil, by teaching them to repress their spirits in his presence, as to make their real disposition unknown to him" (*Mansfield Park* 535). The suggestion is clear: Sir Thomas' poor relationship with his daughters is what leads them to find affection elsewhere.

Sir Thomas' inability to take full responsibility for his faulty parenting reflects his general attitude towards women: that they are pawns to be used for his own gain. Sir Thomas' attitude towards Maria and Julia suggests that he believes their role is to elevate his honor. He raises his daughters to "think matrimony a duty" which is why Maria chooses to marry Mr. Rushworth even though she does not love him (*Mansfield Park* 44). It is important to recognize that Sir Thomas is not entirely cold-hearted because he does express concern over the union between Maria and Mr. Rushworth and offers her a way out of the engagement. Yet he does not strongly encourage her to reconsider because he acknowledges that the union is advantageous. He justifies the marriage in the following passage:

Sir Thomas was satisfied; too glad to be satisfied perhaps to urge the matter quite so far as his judgement might have dictated to others. It was an alliance which he could not have relinquished without pain; and thus he reasoned. [...] if Maria could now speak so securely of her happiness with him, speaking certainly without the prejudice, the blindness of love, she ought to be believed. [...] Such and such-like were the reasonings of Sir Thomas—happy to escape the embarrassing evils of a rupture, the wonder, the reflections, the reproach that must attend it, happy to secure a marriage which would bring him such an addition of respectability and influence, and very happy to think any thing of his daughter's disposition that was most favourable for the purpose (*Mansfield Park* 234-235).

The passage suggests that while Sir Thomas speaks to Maria because he can see that she does not think fondly of Mr. Rushworth, he does not strongly encourage her to end the engagement because he wishes to increase his honor. Sir Thomas does not think highly of Mr. Rushworth and recognizes that his daughter's fiancé is "an inferior young man, as ignorant in business as in books, with opinions in general unfixed" and yet he is delighted when his daughter chooses to go through with the marriage. Despite Mr. Rushworth's unappealing qualities, Sir Thomas acknowledges that "it was an alliance which he could not have relinquished without pain" (*Mansfield Park* 233).

Sir Thomas also attempts to use Fanny in order to elevate his own reputation. He encourages Fanny to marry Henry Crawford, even though she states that she could never be happily married to a man with such poor morals. When she refuses to marry Henry, Sir Thomas states:

You have shewn yourself very, very different from any thing that I had imagined. The advantage or disadvantage of your family—of your parents—your brothers and sisters—never seems to have had a moment's share in your thoughts on this occasion. How *they* might have benefited, how *they* must rejoice in such an establishment for you—is nothing to *you*. You think only of yourself [...] (*Mansfield Park* 367).

Sir Thomas views marriage as a duty of a dependent female in a patriarchal system. He accuses her of being selfish because she does not wish to marry a man who lacks any decency—who looks like a gentleman but behaves in an unappealing, selfish manner. Henry Crawford is depicted as an egotistical flirt who seduces Maria while she is engaged, and only becomes interested in Fanny because she is a challenge. The narrator explains that “A little difficulty to be overcome, was no evil to Henry Crawford. He rather derived spirits from it. He had been apt to gain hers too easily. His situation was new and animating” (*Mansfield Park* 377). Henry Crawford's immoral reasons for pursuing Fanny make him an unsuitable husband. It is clear that Sir Thomas does not care whether Fanny loves or even likes the man she marries—he is only concerned about elevating his own reputation. According to Sir Thomas, to reject an advantageous marriage is a “gross violation of duty and respect” (*Mansfield Park* 368). Sir Thomas has no concern for Fanny's opinions because he believes that it is her duty to blindly follow his orders and to benefit the Bertram family honor, even if it is at her own expense.

Men, however, are not forced to sacrifice their own desires for the sake of family honor. Tom, who is Sir Thomas' eldest son and heir of Mansfield Park, is allowed to behave as he chooses without any consequences. While Sir Thomas states that he wishes Tom would marry

early, he never forces or even strongly encourages Tom to find a wife. Maria and Fanny, however, are not allowed the same freedom. Furthermore, Tom is never punished for his lavish spending—even though it is at the expense of his younger brother. It only results in Sir Thomas and Tom’s departure to Antigua, so that they can secure their business overseas. Additionally, men in this novel are granted sexual freedom without consequences. While Maria’s affair with Henry Crawford permanently ruins her social standing, Henry experiences no social consequences. The narrator addresses this double standard in the following lines: “That punishment, the public punishment of disgrace, should in a just measure attend *his* 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” (*Mansfield Park* 542). While women are held to high standards, men are free to act on whim without any fear of retribution.

Sir Thomas may be the most powerful man in *Mansfield Park* who uses women for his own advances, but he is not the only one to do so. His younger son, Edmund Bertram, is also guilty of the same crime. While Edmund cares for Fanny and helps with her education, he sacrifices her desires and well-being for his own gain on multiple occasions. While Edmund claims that Fanny has done nothing wrong in refusing Henry Crawford’s proposal, he then strongly encourages her to eventually accept his hand. He speaks with her on his father’s behalf, and attempts to persuade her to marry Henry, claiming that she will eventually grow to like him. He thereby disregards her feelings, claims that Henry is a changed man, and encourages Fanny, who is like a sister to him, to marry a man that she dislikes.

While Edmund does not always have Fanny’s best interests in mind, it seems that his greatest fault is that he underestimates women. It disturbs him that Mary, the woman he loves, could have beliefs and opinions that he finds immoral. Yet Edmund continues to love her despite

these differences because he convinces himself that she is only joking when she makes comments he does not like. Edmund states:

I know her disposition to be as sweet and faultless as your own, but the influence of her former companions makes her seem, gives to her conversation, to her professed opinions, sometimes a tinge of wrong. She does not *think* evil, but she speaks it—speaks it in playfulness—and though I know it to be playfulness, it grieves me to the soul (*Mansfield Park* 312).

Edmund justifies her morals by claiming that she says it out of “playfulness” and emphasizes that “she does not *think* evil” but rather only “speaks it.” It is clear that Edmund does not take Mary seriously because he refuses to believe that she means what she says. Similarly, Edmund does not trust that Fanny means what she says when she states that she will never be able to marry Henry. He criticizes Fanny for making a statement with conviction and states: ““Never, Fanny, so very determined and positive! This is not like yourself, your rational self”” (*Austen, Mansfield Park*, 402). Edmund clearly does not respect Fanny’s strong opinion because he claims that to be “so very determined and positive” is not “rational.”

Edmund criticizes women for having convictions, yet believes that it is a fault of men to be persuaded against their beliefs. This is clear when he decides to take the part of Anhalt in *Lovers’ Vows*, which allows him to play the love interest of Mary Crawford’s character. Edmund recognizes his hypocrisy and states that ““No man can like being driven in to the *appearance* of such inconsistency”” (*Mansfield Park* 180). There is an emphasis placed on “appearance” because Edmund has created an excuse for why his participation in the play is selfless. Edmund deludes himself into believing that he is a righteous man who is always consistent. Yet the novel depicts him as an entirely different character. He claims that he will be acting in the play in order to save the family from embarrassment, but his repeated concern over Mary Crawford suggests that he is taking the part of Anhalt to pursue his personal interest in Mary.

This is not the only occasion in which Edmund contradicts himself in order to please Mary Crawford. After going to great lengths to secure Fanny a horse, he happily monopolizes the horse in order to teach Mary Crawford how to ride. Edmund's desire to spend more time with Mary on horseback negatively impacts Fanny, who is unable to ride, and therefore unable to exercise. This is brought to everyone's attention when Mary apologizes to Fanny for using the horse for so long and Edmund responds by "[adding] his conviction that she could be in no hurt. 'For there is more than time enough for my cousin to ride twice as far as she ever goes [...]" (*Mansfield Park* 80). This is a detail that Marilyn Butler briefly discusses when she states in the context of this scene that "Edmund, who has always been considerate of Fanny, is now seduced by his physical delight in Mary into forgetting her" (Butler 223). While I argue that Edmund is neglectful of Fanny on multiple occasions, I do agree with Butler that his interests in Mary cause him to disregard Fanny's welfare.

Mansfield Park is not the only novel in which Austen depicts the subjugation of women as a villainous act. Mr. Wickham's attempt to elope with the young Georgiana Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* as a means of procuring a large income, is the action that casts him as an abominable man. Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility* Willoughby is depicted as a villain once it is revealed that he abandoned a young woman that he seduced and impregnated. In *Northanger Abbey*, our opinion of General Tilney is further tarnished when he banishes Catherine from his estate once he learns that she does not possess a fortune. Austen's novels depict the oppression of women by men as a common practice. Yet by equating this practice with villainous men, Austen undermines patriarchal authority. While *Mansfield Park* discredits conservative practices, just as Austen's other texts do, this novel does so in a distinctive way by not offering an ideal character. I argue that none of the characters in *Mansfield Park* are depicted as a model because

the reader is not invited to idealize any of them. Rather, the novel invites us to scrutinize their behavior and recognize that they are flawed and devoid of happiness due to their conservative practices.

The Role of *Lovers' Vows*

While I agree with the many critics who argue that the performance of *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* is important due to the sexual components of the production, I argue that the play is significant beyond the scandalous nature of its content. The casting of *Lovers' Vows* forces the reader to compare each cast member with their counterpart in the play and ultimately recognize the faults and vices of the Bertram family and their close relations in comparison to Inchbald's righteous characters. It is therefore not surprising that so many critics claim that Fanny Price is a disagreeable character. It seems that Austen uses *Lovers' Vows* to make a mockery of her own characters and to force the reader to recognize that while the play is widely regarded as shocking, it should not be scandalous to express sympathy towards a "fallen woman." A close examination of *Lovers' Vows* in *Mansfield Park* reveals the novel to be a satire of conservatism that questions the values and practices that reduce women to mere pawns in a patriarchal order.

While *Mansfield Park* and *Lovers' Vows* deal with a similar story line—a woman who has sex out of wedlock—the endings of the texts are vastly different. Whereas Maria is expunged from the family and ostracized from society, Agatha is reunited with the man who impregnated her years prior and is welcomed back into the community. While *Lovers' Vows* rectifies the wrongs done to Agatha, *Mansfield Park* punishes the woman who has sexual experiences outside of her marriage. Although the narrative punishes Maria, the novel does not seem to support this mistreatment of a "fallen woman." My examination of the ways in which the play foreshadows

the fate of the Bertram family reveals that Austen uses *Lovers' Vows* to uncover the oppressive nature of patriarchy.

The ultimate fate of Maria and Julia is forecast in the process of casting *Lovers' Vows*.

The foreshadowing is clearly illustrated in the following lines:

She [Julia] was slighted, Maria was preferred; the smile of triumph which Maria was trying to suppress shewed how well it was understood, and before Julia could command herself enough to speak, her brother gave his weight against her her too, by saying ' Oh! Yes, Maria must be Agatha. Maria will be the best Agatha. Though Julia fancies she prefers tragedy, I would not trust her in it. There is nothing of tragedy about her. She has not the look of it. Her features are not tragic features, and she walks too quick, and speaks too quick, and would not keep her countenance' (*Mansfield Park* 157).

The competition between Maria and Julia over Henry Crawford's attention is resolved in this very scene, when Crawford chooses Maria for the part of Agatha over her sister. This is why the narrator explains that Julia "was slighted, Maria was preferred." The reader is told in this moment that Maria's fate, not Julia's, will be tragic because "there is nothing of tragedy about" Julia. Such a claim implies that there is tragedy in Maria, but the exact form of misfortune Maria will face is only hinted at but, not revealed until Sir Thomas returns from Antigua.

When Sir Thomas stops the production of the play, the reader is informed that the ending of this novel will not mimic that of *Lovers' Vows*. The moment Sir Thomas returns, horror strikes almost everyone. Yet it is perhaps Julia's reaction that is the most telling:

Julia was the first to move and speak again. Jealousy and bitterness had been suspended: selfishness was lost in the common cause; but at the moment of her appearance, Frederick was listening with looks of devotion to Agatha's narrative, and pressing her hand to his heart, and as soon as she could notice this, and see that, in spite of the shock of her words, he still kept his station and retained her sister's hand, her wounded heart swelled again with injury, and looking as red as she had been white before, she turned out of the room, saying 'I need not be afraid of appearing before him' (*Mansfield Park* 205-206).

This moment foreshadows the ending of the novel because, compared to Maria, Julia has little reason to fear her father. Just as her involvement in the play is wrong, but perhaps not as horrible

as Maria's portrayal of an indecent woman, Julia's decision to elope with Mr. Yates does not compare to Maria's choice to have an extramarital affair with Henry. The difference between Maria and Julia is emphasized in the italicized "I" when Julia states: "*I* need not be afraid of appearing before him." Julia does not have to fear seeing Sir Thomas, but Maria will ultimately fear her father because, after her marriage ends due to her infidelity, Sir Thomas casts her out of the family.

The return of Sir Thomas, the head of the household and the symbol of patriarchy, turns *Mansfield Park* into a dark, cruel, and loveless estate. The narrator shares that

Sir Thomas's return made a striking change in the ways of the family, independent of *Lovers' Vows*. Under his government, Mansfield was an altered place. Some members of their society sent away and the spirits of many others saddened, it was all sameness and gloom, compared with the past; a somber family-party rarely enlivened (*Mansfield Park* 229).

Sir Thomas' arrival means that the ending of *Lovers' Vows* cannot happen—the fairy-tale ending of a fallen woman redeemed cannot become a reality. Maria will not find compassion from her family for having sex out of wedlock, even though Agatha eventually does; Edmund and Mary will not get married, as Amelia and Anhalt do in *Lovers' Vows*. It is "under [Sir Thomas'] government" that the happy, love-filled, and redemptive ending of *Lovers' Vows* ceases to become a possibility. Therefore, the widespread sadness that is experienced upon Sir Thomas' return foreshadows a gloomy ending to the novel, one in which a family is divided rather than reunited.

The one character who is not sad, however, is Fanny. Her absence from the play suggests that there is no role for a conservative woman like her in a play that promotes radical values about women. Fanny's conservative, traditional values cannot exist in the ending of *Lovers' Vows*. While Fanny is one of the most passive characters in this novel, she stands by her

principles with no exception. She is adamant about refraining from the play and about rejecting Henry's proposal. While one could argue that this is one of Fanny's redeeming qualities, it also seems to be one of her greatest faults because, due to her unyielding principles, there is no place for her in *Lovers' Vows*. When the novel ends in the opposite way of *Lovers' Vows*, that is when Fanny is happy. She can only get her happy ending when everyone else is miserable—when no one else can have the future they desire because their household is too conservative to permit their desires to become a reality. This is clearly depicted in the beginning of the final chapter: "My Fanny indeed at this very time, I have the satisfaction of knowing, must have been happy in spite of every thing. She must have been a happy creature in spite of all that she felt or thought she felt, for the distress of those around her" (*Mansfield Park* 533). Fanny's "happy ending" occurs only because everyone else does not get the happy *Lovers' Vows* ending that they were hoping for.

The parallels between *Lovers' Vows* and *Mansfield Park* force the reader to question which ending is more appropriate between the two texts. Should women be irredeemably punished for acting on their sexual desires? While the plot punishes Maria, the narrator invites the reader to sympathize with her and other "fallen women." If there is any doubt about Austen's sympathy for fallen women, one can turn to *Sense and Sensibility* to see that Willoughby and Colonel Brandon's father and brother are cast as villains because of their treatment of the two Elizas. Colonel Brandon's father and brother use Eliza for her money, then get rid of her when she is no longer of use to them. Willoughby sleeps with Eliza's daughter, then abandons her when he discovers that she is pregnant. It is only when the reader and the Dashwoods discover this information that Colonel Brandon is deemed a hero, due to his compassion towards these fallen women, and Willoughby is depicted as a villain. In *Pride and Prejudice*, as I have already

shown, Lydia is forgiven for her sexual transgressions. By the same logic, the men who punish women, who expel Maria, are, I argue, the villains of *Mansfield Park*.

Moreover, it seems that while we are invited to view Mary's ending as a positive outcome, we are also invited to acknowledge that she was rejected for unjust reasons. This should not be the best possible future for a woman who is as kind and intellectual as Mary—she should be able to have an ending similar to Elizabeth. While Elizabeth finds an ideal man, Mary cannot find “idle heir apparents, who were at the command of her beauty, and her 20,000£. any one who could satisfy the better taste she had acquired at Mansfield, whose character and manners could authorise a hope of the domestic happiness she had there learnt to estimate, or put Edmund Bertram sufficiently out of her head” (*Mansfield Park* 543). If Mary cannot find a man more suitable or more admirable than Edmund Bertram, then there are few commendable men in England.

Mary's inability to find a husband or home that matches Edmund and Mansfield Park further reveals that England is an inhospitable country for independent women. While Mansfield Park is depicted as a cold estate riddled with corruption, by Mary's reckoning it is the embodiment of “domestic happiness.” Yet when one compares Mansfield Park to the environment in which Mary was raised, Sir Thomas' home does not seem like the cruelest estate in England. Admiral Crawford is described as “a man of vicious conduct, who chose, instead of retaining his niece, to bring his mistress under his own roof” (*Mansfield Park* 47). However, if Mansfield Park is considered an ideal in this country, as an estate of “domestic happiness,” then the overall climate of England is rather bleak.

My argument that *Mansfield Park* is the antithesis of *Lovers' Vows* reveals the novel to be a satire of patriarchal authority. Unlike Austen's other novels, there is no heroic male

character in *Mansfield Park*. Recognizing that the only character the novel invites the reader to admire is Mary, it can be no surprise that she cannot find a husband, and that her spinsterhood is depicted as a sort of blessing. In this world controlled by conservative men, there is no man like Darcy or Colonel Brandon who values a woman's mind and voice. While *Pride and Prejudice* is "wish fulfilling" to the extent that it invites the readers to strive for Elizabeth's life, *Mansfield Park* is gloomy to the point that it deters readers from coveting the lifestyle of the landed class (Johnson 73).

Chapter Four Conclusion

Recognizing the irony in Austen's novels allows one to better understand how the same author of *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice* also wrote the unpublished works such as "Lady Susan," "The History of England," and "The Beautifull Cassandra." If one disregards the ironic and satirical nature of her published novels, there is an unexplained problem of reconciling how an author wrote disparate, even opposing texts. It is only through satire and irony that Austen could publish novels that indirectly convey the same sentiment that is explicit in her unpublished works. The moral and ethical purposes of Austen's literary strategies are to convey sympathy towards women—particularly those who are deemed "impertinent" by conservative elites. Austen's novels carefully depict exceptional women whose greatest struggle in a marriage-plot novel is not finding a man to marry but, rather, an environment that values their individuality. Through satire and irony, Austen challenges the patriarchal authority that regards females as the inferior sex; she instead encourages women to embrace their impertinence and to behave in a manner that Wollstonecraft referred to as "masculine" (Wollstonecraft 24).

Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for the liberal sentiments of Austen's works to be overlooked or misunderstood today. *The New York Times* and the *Guardian*, among other news publications, have reported on research done by Nicole M. Wright, an assistant professor of English at the University of Colorado Boulder, which reveals that Jane Austen has recently been used to promote conservative values in today's political climate. In "Alt-Right Jane Austen" an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Wright states that "Venturing into the mire, I found that there are several variations of alt-right Jane Austen: 1) symbol of sexual purity; 2) standard-bearer of a vanished white traditional culture; and 3) exception that proves the rule of female inferiority" (Wright). Her work has been used by individuals who are looking to reinstate

the oppressive values that many civil rights groups are still working to overcome and that, I argue, she herself firmly opposed.

Even critics who have access to all of Austen's works still argue that her novels promote conservative values and liken her to women authors of the time like Jane West, whose works depict patriarchs as benevolent caretakers. While such critics have at least deemed her works as worthy of study, there are many others who have reduced her novels to insignificant texts that are unsuited for scholarly attention. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar list some of the famous writers who have dismissed Austen, such as Elizabeth Barret Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Mark Twain, and Henry James. Emerson was particularly harsh in finding Austen

vulgar in tone, sterile in artistic invention, imprisoned in the wretched conventions of English society, without genius, wit or knowledge of the world. Never was life so pinched and narrow. The one problem in the mind of the writer in both the stories I have read, *Persuasion*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, is marriageableness. All that interests in any character introduced is still this one, Has he or (she) the money to marry with, and conditions, conforming? 'Tis 'the nympholepsy of a fond despair,' say, rather, of an English boarding-house. Suicide is more respectable (quotes in Gilbert and Gubar 109).

Emerson suggests that her texts lack meaningful substance because their plots are focused on marriage. He claims in this scathing review that Austen does not demonstrate any skill or "knowledge of the world" through her literature. He is therefore "at a loss to understand why people hold Miss Austen's novels at so high a rate" (quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 109). Gilbert and Gubar connect Emerson's review to Elizabeth Barret Browning's claims that Austen's novels are as "perfect as far as they go—that's certain. Only they don't go far, I think" (quoted in Gilbert and Gubar 109). Many great authors have therefore reduced Austen's texts to mere marriage-plot novels that lack importance, excellence, or relevance worth any form of examination.

While these critics claim Austen's works lack skill or content of significance, I argue that her indirect method of exposing the faults of conservatism are the exact reason she is due praise. While Emerson may have missed Austen's "genius, wit, [and] knowledge of world," such a claim disregards Austen's ability to carefully undermine conservative values. If Austen's novels were written with the same obvious didacticism of Jane West's texts, they would not be nearly as satisfying. Austen refuses to instruct her readers in the way that many conservative novelists and moralists did during her time—in the same manner that James Fordyce wrote *Sermons to Young Women*. She therefore counteracts their conservative principles not only through content, but method. Unlike the moralists and conservative writers who wrote instructional texts, Austen encourages the reader to be an active participant—to discover the true meaning behind her words and literary devices for themselves. It requires skills to write a novel in a conservative narrative framework like the marriage plot while also subtly expressing sympathy for women who are ostracized by society—the same compassion Austen demonstrates for Mary Queen of Scots in her unpublished work "The History of England." It is no coincidence that the reader is encouraged to dislike Sir Thomas—the man who abandons his daughter after she has an affair in *Mansfield Park*—but admire Lady Susan, from the unpublished "Lady Susan," who has multiple lovers without ever experiencing any serious retribution. The moral implications of Austen's texts are revealed through her use of irony to convey gender ideologies that are still not widely accepted—women still have to prove that they are just as capable as their male counterparts.

It seems that Austen's clever use of indirection is so effective that even brilliant authors have missed the ethical dimensions of her works. She has even tricked modern-day critics to believe that her novels are conservative. She has led some of the most distinguished authors to underestimate her talents and believe that her novels are nothing more than simple, foolish

marriage plots. Is this not, perhaps, the most ironic aspect of Austen? Her novels, in this way, universally remind us of the sexism inherent in our culture. We continue to underestimate women and assume that little lies beneath the surface. In the same way that Edmund dismisses Fanny's and Mary's true feelings and beliefs in *Mansfield Park*, many of us continue to ignore the brilliant use of wit and irony in Austen's novels.

This perhaps explains why *Pride and Prejudice* remains one of Austen's most popular texts—whether or not the reader recognizes its irony, it is a story in which an “impertinent” woman still finds true love. It is “shamelessly wish fulfilling” (Johnson 73) because it allows women to hope that they too can have a marriage and a life in which men respect them as equals. While I am sure many readers identify with Elizabeth Bennet—it is a cliché after all—perhaps they ought to identify with Georgiana and Kitty instead. The readers are encouraged to learn from Austen's novels, just as Georgiana and Kitty are invited to search for a congenial partnership that reflects Elizabeth and Darcy's marriage. *Pride and Prejudice* provides a similar hope to its readers that Elizabeth's marriage offers to Georgiana and Kitty: that a woman can be independent and also find true love—or even better, that her significant other will love her *because* of her “impertinence.” Perhaps this is another component that makes Austen's works still relevant to contemporary readers: whether it is family and love, or work and love, many women wish to have a romantic relationship that does not jeopardize their own independence. Women want what Elizabeth Bennet ultimately obtains, and what no man ever has to fight for.

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