

Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* [2nd Edn.] (Yale UP
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See Pt. II: Inside the House of Fiction: Jane Austen's Tenants of Possibility - (4. Shut up in Prose: Gender and Genre in Austen's Juvenalia [p.107]); (5. Jane Austen's Cover Story (and Its Secret Agents) [146-83].

Chapter 5: Jane Austen's Cover Story (and Its Secret Agents)

I am like the needy knife-grinder — I have no story to tell. — Maria Edgeworth

I dwell in Possibility — A fairer House than Prose — More numerous of Windows — Superior — for Doors — Emily Dickinson

... the modes of fainting should be all as different as possible and may be made very diverting. — The Girls' Book of Diversions (ca. 1840)

From Sappho to myself, consider the fate of women. How unwomanly to discuss it! — Carolyn Kizer

Jane Austen was not alone in experiencing the tensions inherent in being a “lady” writer, a fact that she herself seemed to stress when, in *Northanger Abbey*, she gently admonished literary women like Maria Edgeworth for being embarrassed about their status as novelists. Interestingly, Austen came close to analyzing a central problem for Edgeworth, who constantly judged and depreciated her own “feminine” fiction in terms of her father’s commitment to pedagogically sound moral instruction. Indeed, as our first epigraph is meant to suggest, Maria Edgeworth’s persistent belief that she had no story of her own reflects Catherine Morland’s initiation into her fallen female state as a person without a history, without a name of her own, without a story of significance which she could herself [147] author. Yet, because Edgeworth’s image of herself as a needy knife-grinder suggests a potential for cutting remarks not dissimilar from what Virginia Woolf called Austen’s delight in slicing her characters’ heads off, (1) and because her reaction against General Tilney — “quite outrageously out of drawing and out of nature” (2) — reflects Austen’s own discretion about male power in her later books, Maria Edgeworth’s career is worth considering as a preface to the achievement of Austen’s maturity.

Although she was possibly one of the most popular and influential novelists of her time, Maria Edgeworth’s personal reticence and modesty matched Austen’s, causing Byron, among others, to observe, “One would never have guessed she could write her name; whereas her father talked, not as if he could write nothing else, but as if nothing else was worth writing.” (3) Even to her most recent biographer, the name Edgeworth still means Richard Lovell Edgeworth, the father whose overbearing egotism amused or annoyed many of the people he met. And while Marilyn Butler explains that Richard Edgeworth must not be viewed as an unscrupulous Svengali operating on an unsuspecting child, (4) she does not seem to realize that his daughter’s voluntary devotion could also inhibit and circumscribe her talent, creating perhaps an even more complex problem for the emerging author than outright coercion would have spawned. The portrait of Richard Edgeworth as a scientific inventor and Enlightenment theorist who practiced his pedagogy at home for the greater intellectual development of his family must be balanced against his Rousseauistic experiment with his first son (whose erratic and uncontrollable spirits convinced him that Rousseau was wrong) and his fathering twenty-two children by four wives, more than one of whom was an object of his profound indifference.

As the third of twenty-two and the daughter of the wife most completely neglected, Maria Edgeworth seems to have used her writing to gain the attention and approval of her father. From the beginning of her career, by their common consent, he became the impresario and narrator of her life. He first set her to work on censorious Madame de Genlis’s *Adele et Theodore*, the work that would have launched her career, if his friend Thomas Day had not congratulated him when Maria’s translation was cancelled by the publishers. While Maria wrote her *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795) [148] as a response to the ensuing correspondence between Day and Richard Lovell Edgeworth about the issue of female authorship, it can hardly be viewed as an act of literary assertion.

For, far from defending female authority, this manuscript, which she described as “disfigured by all manner of crooked marks of papa’s critical indignation, besides various abusive marginal notes, (6) actually contains an attack on female flightiness and self-dramatization (in “Letters of Julia and Caroline”) and a satiric essay implying that feminine arguments for even the most minor sorts of self-determination are manipulative, hypocritical, self-congratulatory, and irrational (“Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification”). She does include an exchange of letters between a misogynist (presumably modelled on Day) who argues that “female prodigies ... are scarcely

less offensive to my taste than monsters” and a defender of female learning (presumably her father) who claims that

considering that the pen was to women a new instrument, I think they have made at least as good a use of it as learned men did of the needle some centuries ago, when they set themselves to determine how many spirits could stand upon its point, and were ready to tear one another to pieces in the discussion of this sublime question.

But this “defense,” which argues that women are no sillier than medieval theologians, is hardly a compliment, coming — as it does — from an enlightened philosopher, nor is the subsequent proposition that education is necessary to make women better wives and mothers, two roles Maria Edgeworth herself never undertook. Written for an audience composed of Days and Edgeworths, *Letters for Literary Ladies* helps us understand why Maria Edgeworth could not become an author without turning herself into a literary lady, a creature of her father’s imagination who was understandably anxious for and about her father’s control.

“Where should I be without my father? I should sink into that nothing from which he has raised me,” (7) Maria Edgeworth worried in an eerie adumbration of the fears expressed by George Eliot and a host of other dutiful daughter-writers. Because Richard Lovell Edgeworth “pointed out” to her that “to be a mere writer of pretty stories and novellettes would be unworthy of his partner, pupil & [149] daughter,” (8) Maria soon stopped writing the books which her early talent seemed to make so successful — not before, however, she wrote one novel without either his aid or his knowledge. Not only was *Castle Rackrent* (1800) one of her earliest and most popular productions, it contains a subversive critique of patriarchy surprisingly similar to what we found in *Northanger Abbey*.

As narrated by the trusty servant Thady Quirk, this history of an Irish ancestral mansion is told in terms of the succession of its owners, Irish aristocrats best characterized by their indolence, improvidence, and love for litigation, alcohol, and women. Sir Tallyhoos, Sir Patrick, Sir Murtagh, Sir Kit, and Sir Condry are praised and served by their loyal retainer, who nevertheless reveals their irresponsible abuse of their position in Irish society. *Castle Rackrent* also includes a particularly interesting episode about an imprisoned wife that further links it to the secret we discovered in the overlooked passageways of *Northanger*. All of the *Rackrent* landlords marry for money, but one of them, Sir Kit, brings back to Ireland a Jewish heiress as his wife. While Thady ostensibly bemoans what “this heretic Blackamore” (9) will bring down on the head of the estate, he actually describes the pathetic ignorance and vulnerability of the wealthy foreigner, who is completely at the mercy of her cruelly capricious husband. Her helplessness is dramatized, characteristically, in an argument over the food for their table, since Sir Kit insists on irritating her with the presence of sausages, bacon, and pork at every meal. Refusing to feed on forbidden, foreign foods, as so many later heroines will, she responds by shutting herself up in her room, a dangerous solution since Sir Kit then locks her up. “We none of us ever saw or heard her speak for seven years after that” (29), Thady calmly explains.

As if aware of the potential impact of this episode, the author affixes a long explanatory footnote attesting to the historical accuracy of what “can scarcely be thought credible” by citing “the celebrated Lady Cathcart’s conjugal imprisonment,” a case that might also have reminded Maria Edgeworth of the story of George I’s wife, who was shut up in Hanover when he left to ascend to the English throne, and who escaped only through her death thirty-two years later. (10) Sir Kit is shown to follow the example of Lady Cathcart’s husband when he drinks Lady *Rackrent*’s good health with his table [150]

companions, sending a servant on a sham errand to ask if “there was anything at table he might send her,” and accepting the sham answer returned by his servant that “she did not wish for anything, but drank the company’s health” (30-31). Starving inside the ancestral mansion, the literally imprisoned wife is also figuratively imprisoned within her husband’s fictions. Meanwhile, Thady loyally proclaims that Sir Kit was never cured of the gaming tricks that mortgaged his estate, but that this “was the only fault he had, God bless him!” (32).

When, after her husband’s death, Lady *Rackrent* recovers, fires the cook, and departs the country, Thady decides that “it was a shame for her, being his wife, not to show more duty,” specifically not to have saved him from financial ruin. But clearly the lady’s escape is a triumph that goes far in explaining why *Castle Rackrent* was scribbled fast, in secret, almost the only work of fiction Maria Edgeworth wrote without her father’s help. Indeed she insisted that the story spontaneously came to her when she heard an old steward’s voice, and that she simply recorded it. We will see other instances of such “trance” writing, especially with regard to the Brontes, but here it clearly helps explain why *Castle Rackrent* remained her book, why she steadily resisted her father’s encouragement to add “corrections” to it. (11)

Certainly, when viewed as a woman's creation, *Castle Rackrent* must be considered a critique of patriarchy, for the male aristocratic line is criticized because it exploits Ireland, that traditional old sow, leaving a peasantry starved and dispossessed. Rackrent means destructive rental, and *Castle Rackrent* is a protest against exploitative landlords. Furthermore, Thady Quirk enacts the typically powerless role of housekeeper with the same ambivalence that characterizes women like Elinor Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* and Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights*, both of whom identify with the male owner and enforce his will, although they see it as arbitrary and coercive. Yet, like Maria Edgeworth, the needy knife-grinder, even while Thady pretends to be of use by telling not his own story but his providers', his words are damaging, for he reveals the depravity of the very masters he seems to praise so loyally. And this steward who appears to serve his lords with such docility actually benefits from their decline, sets into motion the machinery that finishes them off, and [151] even contributes to the demise of their last representative. Whether consciously or unconsciously, (12) this "faithful family retainer" manages to get the big house. Exploiting the dissembling tactics of the powerless, Thady is an effective antagonist, and, at the end of the story, although he claims to despise him, it is his own son who has inherited the power of the Rackrent family.

Pursuing her career in her father's sitting room and writing primarily to please him, Maria Edgeworth managed in this early fiction to evade her father's control by dramatizing the retaliatory revenge of the seemingly dutiful and the apparently weak. But in spite of its success and the good reception accorded her romance *Belinda*, she turned away from her own "pretty stories and novellettes" as "unworthy" of her father's "partner, pupil & daughter," deciding to pursue instead her father's projects, for example his Professional Education, a study of vocational education for boys. Devoted until his death to writing Irish tales and children's stories which serve as a gloss on his political and educational theories, Maria Edgeworth went as far as she could in seeing herself and presenting herself as her father's secretary: "I have only repeated the same opinions [Edgeworth's] in other forms," she explained; "A certain quantity of bullion was given to me and I coined it into as many pieces as I thought would be convenient for popular use." (13) Admitting frequently that her "acting and most kind literary partner" made all the final decisions, she explained that "it was to please my father I first exerted myself to write, to please him I continued." But if "the first stone was thrown the first motion given by him," she understandably believed that "when there is no similar moving power the beautiful circles vanish and the water stagnates." (14)

Although she was clearly troubled that without her author she would cease to exist or create, Maria Edgeworth solved the problem of what we have been calling "the anxiety of female authorship" by writing as if she were her father's pen. Like so many of her successors — Mrs. Gaskell, Geraldine Jewsbury, George Eliot, Olive Schreiner — she was plagued by headaches that might have reflected the strain of this solution. She was also convinced that her father's skill in cutting, his criticism, and invention alone allowed her to write by relieving her from the vacillation and anxiety to which she was so much subject. (15) In this respect Maria Edgeworth resembles [152] Dorothea Brooke of *Middlemarch*, for "if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience" (chap. 10). Certainly we sense the strain in her biography, for example in the incident at Richard Lovell Edgeworth's deathbed: the day before he died, Marilyn Butler explains, Richard Edgeworth dictated to his daughter a letter for his publisher explaining that she would add (200 pages to his (480-page memoir within a month after his death. In the margin his secretary wrote what she apparently could not find the courage to say: "I never promised." (16) Like Dorothea Casaubon, who finally never promises to complete Casaubon's book and instead writes silently a message on his notes explaining why she cannot, Maria Edgeworth must have struggled with the conflict between her desire to fulfill her father's wishes by living out his plots and her need to assert her own talents. Unlike Dorothea, however, she finally wrote her father's book in spite of the pain doing so must have entailed.

Literally writing her father's book, however, was doing little more than what she did throughout her career when she wrote stories illustrating his theories and portraying the wise benevolence of male authority figures. At least one critic believes that she did manage to balance her father's standards with her personal allegiances. But even if she did covertly express her dissent from her father's values — by sustaining a dialogue in her fiction between moral surface and symbolic resistance (17) — what this rather schizophrenic solution earned her on the domestic front was her father's patronizing inscription on her writing desk:

On this humble desk were written all the numerous works of my daughter, Maria Edgeworth, in the common sitting-room of my family. In these works which were chiefly written to please me, she has never attacked the personal character of any human being or interfered with the opinions of any sect or party, religious or political ; ... she improved and amused her own mind, and gratified her heart, which I do believe is better than her head. (18)

Even as *Castle Rackrent* displays the same critique of patriarchy we traced in *Northanger Abbey*, then, Mr. Edgeworth's condescending praise of his daughter's desk in his sitting room reminds us that [153] Austen also worked in such a decorous space. Likewise, just as Richard Lovell Edgeworth perceives this space as a sign of Maria's ladylike submission to his domestic control, Virginia Woolf suggests that such a writing place can serve as an emblem of the confinement of the "lady" novelist:

If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room She was always interrupted Jane Austen wrote like that to the end of her days. "How she was able to effect all this," her nephew writes in his *Memoir*, "is surprising, for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants or visitors or any persons beyond her own family party." Jane Austen hid her manuscripts or covered them with a piece of blotting-paper... . [She] was glad that a hinge creaked, so that she might hide her manuscript before any one came in. (19)

Despite the odd contradiction we sense between Woolf's repeated assertions elsewhere in *A Room of One's Own* that Austen was unimpeded by her sex and her clear-sighted recognition in this passage of the limits placed on Austen because of it, the image of the lady writing in the common sitting room is especially useful in helping us understand both Austen's confinement and the fictional strategies she developed for coping with it. We have already seen that even in the juvenilia (which many critics consider her most conservative work) there are clues that Austen is hiding a distinctly unladylike outlook behind the "cover" or "blotter" of parody. But the blotting paper poised in anticipation of a forewarning creak can serve as an emblem of a far more organic camouflage existing within the mature novels, even as it calls to our attention the anxiety that authorship entailed for Austen.

We can see Austen struggling after *Northanger Abbey* to combine her implicitly rebellious vision with an explicitly decorous form as she follows Miss Edgeworth's example and writes in order to make herself useful, justifying her presumptuous attempts at the pen by inspiring other women with respect for the moral and social responsibilities of their domestic duties, and thereby allowing her surviving [154] relatives to make the same claims as Mr. Edgeworth. Yet the repressive implications of the story she tells — a story, invariably, of the need for women to renounce their claims to stories of their own — paradoxically allow her to escape the imprisonment she defines and defends as her heroines' fate so that, like Emily Dickinson, Austen herself can finally be said to "dwell in Possibility — / A fairer House than Prose—" (J. 657).

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Austen's propriety is most apparent in the overt lesson she sets out to teach in all of her mature novels. Aware that male superiority is far more than a fiction, she always defers to the economic, social, and political power of men as she dramatizes how and why female survival depends on gaining male approval and protection. All the heroines who reject inadequate fathers are engaged in a search for better, more sensitive men who are, nevertheless, still the representatives of authority. As in *Northanger Abbey*, the happy ending of an Austen novel occurs when the girl becomes a daughter to her husband, an older and wiser man who has been her teacher and her advisor, whose house can provide her with shelter and sustenance and at least derived status, reflected glory. Whether it be parsonage or ancestral mansion, the man's house is where the heroine can retreat from both her parents' inadequacies and the perils of the outside world: like Henry Tilney's Woodston, Delaford, Pemberley, Donwell, and Thornton Lacy are spacious, beautiful places almost always supplied with the loveliest fruit trees and the prettiest prospects. Whereas becoming a man means proving or testing oneself or earning a vocation, becoming a woman means relinquishing achievement and accommodating oneself to men and the spaces they provide.

Dramatizing the necessity of female submission for female survival, Austen's story is especially flattering to male readers because it describes the taming not just of any woman but specifically of a rebellious, imaginative girl who is amorously mastered by a sensible man. No less than the blotter literally held over the manuscript on her writing desk, Austen's cover story of the necessity for silence and submission reinforces women's subordinate position in patriarchal culture. Interestingly, what common law called "coverture" at this [155] time actually defined the married woman's status as suspended or "covered": "the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage," wrote Sir William Blackstone, "or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband under whose wing, protection and cover, she performs everything." (20) The happiest ending envisioned by Austen, at least until her very last novel, accepts the necessity of protection and cover for heroines who wish to perform anything at all.

At the same time, however, we shall see that Austen herself “performs everything” under this cover story. As Virginia Woolf noted, for all her “infallible discretion,” Austen always stimulates her readers “to supply what is not there.” (21) A story as sexist as that of the taming of the shrew, for example, provides her with a “blotter” or socially acceptable cover for expressing her own self-division. Undoubtedly a useful acknowledgment of her own ladylike submission and her acquiescence to masculine values, this plot also allows Austen to consider her own anxiety about female assertion and expression, to dramatize her doubts about the possibility of being both a woman and a writer. She describes both her own dilemma and, by extension, that of all women who experience themselves as divided, caught in the contradiction between their status as human beings and their vocation as females.

The impropriety of female creativity first emerges as a problem in *Lady Susan*, where Austen seems divided between her delight in the vitality of a talented libertine lady and her simultaneous rejection of the sexuality and selfishness of her heroine’s plots. In this first version of the taming of the shrew, Austen exposes the wicked wilfulness of Lady Susan, who gets her own way because of her “artful” (Letters (4, 13, and 17), “bewitching powers” (Letter 4), powers intimately related to her “clever” and “happy command of language” (Letter 8). Using “deep arts,” Lady Susan always has a “design” (Letter 4) or “artifice” that testifies to her great “talent” (Letters 16 and 36) as a “Mistress of Deceit” (Letter 23) who knows how to play a number of parts quite convincingly. She is the first of a series of heroines, of varying degrees of attractiveness, whose lively wit and energetic imagination make them both fascinating and frightening to their creator.

Several critics have explored how Lady Susan’s London ways are [156] contrasted to her daughter’s love of the country, how the mother’s talkative liveliness and sexuality are balanced against the daughter’s silence and chastity, how art is opposed to nature.** But, if Lady Susan is energetic in her pursuit of pleasure, her daughter is quite vapid and weak; indeed, she seems far more socialized into passivity than a fit representative of nature would be. Actually she is only necessary to emphasize Lady Susan’s unattractiveness — her cruelty to her daughter — which can best be viewed as Austen’s reflex to suppress her interest in such wilful sorts of women. For the relationship between Lady Susan and Frederica is not unlike that between the crafty Queen and her angelic step daughter, Snow White : Lady Susan seems almost obsessed with hatred of her daughter, who represents an extension of her own self, a projection of her own inescapable femininity which she tries to destroy or transcend even at the risk of the social ostracism she must inevitably incur at the end of the novel. These two, mother and daughter, reappear transformed in the mature novels into sisters, sometimes because Austen wishes to consider how they embody available options that are in some ways equally attractive yet mutually exclusive, sometimes because she seeks to illustrate how these two divided aspects of the self can be integrated.

In *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), as most readers of the novel have noted, Marianne Dashwood’s sensibility links her to the Romantic imagination. Repeatedly described as fanciful, imaginative, emotionally responsive, and receptive to the natural beauty of trees and the aesthetic beauties of Cowper, Marianne is extremely sensitive to language, repelled by clichés, and impatient with the polite lies of civility. Although quite different from Lady Susan, she too allows her lively affections to involve her in an improper amorous involvement, and her indiscreet behavior is contrasted with that of her sister Elinor, who is silent, reserved, and eminently proper. If the imagination is linked with Machiavellian evil in *Lady Susan*, it is closely associated with self-destruction in *Sense and Sensibility*: when Elinor and Marianne have to confront the same painful situation — betrayal by the men they deemed future husbands — Elinor’s stoical self-restraint is the strength born of her good sense while Marianne’s indulgence in sensibility almost causes her own death, the unfettered play of her imagination seeming to result in a terrible fever that [157] represents how imaginative women are infected and sickened by their dreams.

Marianne’s youthful enthusiasm is very attractive, and the reader, like Colonel Brandon, is tempted to find “something so amiable in the prejudices of a young mind, that one is sorry to see them give way to the reception of more general opinions” (I, chap. 11). But give way they apparently must and evidently do. Eagerness of fancy is a passion like any other, perhaps more imprudent because it is not recognized as such. As delightful as it might first seem, moreover, it is always shown to be a sign of immaturity, of a refusal to submit. Finally this is unbecoming and unproductive in women, who must exert their inner resources for pliancy, elasticity of spirit, and accommodation. *Sense and Sensibility* is an especially painful novel to read because Austen herself seems caught between her attraction to Marianne’s sincerity and spontaneity, while at the same identifying with the civil falsehoods and the reserved, polite silences of Elinor, whose art is fittingly portrayed as the painting of screens.

Pride and Prejudice (1813) continues to associate the perils of the imagination with the pitfalls of selfhood, sexuality, and assertion. Elizabeth Bennet is her father’s favorite daughter because she has inherited his wit. She is talkative, satirical, quick at interpreting appearances and articulating her judgments, and so she too is contrasted to a sensible silent sister, Jane, who is quiet, unwilling to express her needs or desires, supportive of all and critical of none. While moral Jane remains an invalid, captive at the Bingleys, her satirical sister Elizabeth walks two

miles along muddy roads to help nurse her. While Jane visits the Gardners only to remain inside their house waiting hopelessly for the visitors she wishes to receive, Elizabeth travels to the Collins' establishment where she visits Lady Catherine. While Jane remains at home, lovesick but uncomplaining, Elizabeth accompanies the Gardeners on a walking tour of Derbyshire. Jane's docility, gentleness, and benevolence are remarkable, for she suffers silently throughout the entire plot, until she is finally set free by her Prince Charming. In these respects, she adumbrates Jane Fairfax of Austen's *Emma* (1816), another Jane who is totally passive and quiet, despite the fact that she is repeatedly humiliated by her lover. Indeed, although Jane Fairfax is eventually driven to a gesture of revolt — the pathetic decision to endure the “slave-trade” of becoming [158] a governess rather than wait for Frank Churchill to become her husband — she is a paragon of submissive politeness and patience throughout her ordeal, so much so that, “wrapped up in a cloak of politeness,” she was to Emma and even to Mr. Knightley “disgustingly ... suspiciously, reserved” (II, chap. 2).

Just as Jane Bennet forecasts the role and character of Jane Fairfax, Elizabeth Bennet shares much with Emma who, perhaps more than all the others, demonstrates Austen's ambivalence about her imaginative powers, since she created in *Emma* a heroine whom she suspected no one but herself would like.* (8 A player of word games, a painter of portraits and a spinner of tales, Emma is clearly an avatar of Austen the artist. And more than all the other playful, lively girls, Emma reminds us that the witty woman is responding to her own confining situation with words that become her weapon, a defense against banality, a way of at least seeming to control her life. Like Austen, Emma has at her disposal worn-out, hackneyed stories of romance that she is smart enough to resist in her own life. If Emma is an artist who manipulates people as if they were characters in her own stories, Austen emphasizes not only the immorality of this activity, but its cause or motivation : except for placating her father, Emma has nothing to do. Given her intelligence and imagination, her impatient attempts to transform a mundane reality are completely understandable.

Emma and her friends believe her capable of answering questions which puzzle less quick and assured girls, an ability shown to be necessary in a world of professions and falsehoods, puzzles, charades, and riddles. But word games deceive especially those players who think they have discovered the hidden meanings, and Emma misinterprets every riddle. Most of the letters in the novel contain “nothing but truth, though there might be some truths not told” (II, chap. 2). Because readiness to talk frequently masks reticence to communicate, the vast majority of conversations involve characters who not only remain unaffected by dialogue, but barely hear each other talking: Isabella, Miss Bates and Mr. Woodhouse, Mrs. Elton and Mr. Weston are participating in simultaneous soliloquies. The civil falsehoods that keep society running make each character a riddle to the others, a polite puzzle. With professions of openness Frank Churchill has been keeping a secret that threatens to embarrass and [159] pain both Emma and Jane Fairfax. Emma discovers the ambiguous nature of discourse that mystifies, withholds, coerces, and lies as much as it reveals.

Yet Austen could not punish her more thoroughly than she does, and in this respect too Emma resembles the other imaginative girls. For all these heroines are mortified, humiliated, even bullied into sense. Austen's heavy attack on Emma, for instance, depends on the abject failure of the girl's wit. The very brilliant and assertive playfulness that initially marks her as a heroine is finally criticized on the grounds that it is self-deluding. Unable to imagine her visions into reality, she finds that she has all along been manipulated as a character in someone else's fiction. Through Emma, Austen is confronting the inadequacy of fiction and the pain of the “imaginist” who encounters the relentless recalcitrance of the world in which she lives, but she is also exposing the vulnerable delusions that Emma shares with Catherine Morland before the latter learns that she has no story to tell. Not only does the female artist fail, then, her efforts are condemned as tyrannical and coercive. Emma feels great self-loathing when she discovers how blind she has been : she is “ashamed of every sensation but the one revealed to her — her affection for Mr. Knightley — Every other part of her mind was disgusting” (III, chap. 2).

Although Emma is the center of Austen's fiction, what she has to learn is her commonality with Jane Fairfax, her vulnerability as a female. Like the antithetical sisters we have discussed, Jane Fairfax and Emma are doubles. Since they are the most accomplished girls in Highbury, exactly the same age, suitable companions, the fact that they are not friends is in itself quite significant. Emma even believes at times that her dislike for Jane is caused by her seeing in Jane “the really accomplished young woman which she wanted to be thought herself” (II, chap. 2). In fact, she has to succumb to Jane's fate, to become her double through the realization that she too has been manipulated as a pawn in Frank Churchill's game. The seriousness of Emma's assertive playfulness is made clear when she behaves rudely, making uncivil remarks at Box Hill, when she talks indiscreetly, unwittingly encouraging the advances of Mr. Elton, and when she allows her imagination to indulge in rather lewd suppositions about the possible sexual intrigues of Jane Fairfax and [160] a married man. In other words, Emma's imagination has led her to the sin of being unladylike, and her complete mortification is a prelude to submission

as she becomes a friend of Jane Fairfax, at one with her too in her realization of her own powerlessness. In this respect, Mr. Elton's recitation of a well-known riddle seems ominous:

My first doth affliction denote,
Which my second is destin'd to feel
And my whole is the best antidote
That affliction to soften and heal. — [I, chap. 9]

For if the answer is woe/man, then in the process of growing up female Emma must be initiated into a secondary role of service and silence.

Similarly, in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland experiences "the liberty which her imagination had dared to take" as a folly which makes her feel that "She hated herself more than she could express" (II, chap. 10) so that she too is reduced to "silence and sadness" (II, chap. 15). Although Marianne Dashwood's sister had admitted that "thirty-five and seventeen had better not have anything to do with matrimony together" (I, chap. 8), Marianne allows herself at the end to be given away to Colonel Brandon as a "reward" (III, chap. 14) for his virtuous constancy. At nineteen she finds herself "submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties" (III, chap. 14). "With such a confederacy against her," the narrator asks, "what else could she do?" Even Elizabeth Bennet, who had "prided" herself on her "discernment," finds that she had never known even herself (II, chap. 13). When "her anger was turned against herself" (II, chap. 14), Elizabeth realizes that "she had been blind, partial, prejudiced, absurd" (II, chap. 13). Significantly, "she was humbled, she was grieved; she repented, though she hardly knew of what" (III, chap. 8; italics ours).

All of these girls learn the necessity of curbing their tongues: Marianne is silent when she learns submission and even when "a thousand inquiries sprung up from her heart ... she dared not urge one" (III, chap. 10). When she finds that "For herself she was humbled; but she was proud of him" (III, chap. 10), Elizabeth Bennet displays her maturity by her modest reticence: not only does she refrain from telling both her parents about her feelings for Mr. [161] Darcy, she never tells Jane about Mrs. Gardiner's letter or about her lover's role in persuading Mr. Bingley not to propose. Whereas before she had scorned Mr. Collins's imputation that ladies never say what they mean, at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth refuses to answer Lady Catherine and lies to her mother about the motives for that lady's visit. Furthermore, Elizabeth checks herself with Mr. Darcy, remembering "that he had yet to learn to be laughed at, and it was rather too early to begin" (III, chap. 16).

Emma also refrains from communicating with both Mrs. Elton and Jane Fairfax when she learns to behave discreetly. She manages to keep Harriet's secret even when Mr. Knightley proposes to her. "What did she say?" the narrator coyly asks. "Just what she ought, of course. A lady always does" (III, chap. 13). And at this point the novelist indicates her own ladylike discretion as she too refrains from detailing the personal scene explicitly. The polite talk of ladies, as Robin Lakoff has shown, is devised "to prevent the expression of strong statements," ** but such politeness commits both author and heroine alike to their resolve "of being humble and discreet and repressing imagination" (I, chap. 17). The novelist who has been fascinated with double-talk from the very beginning of her writing career sees the silences, evasions, and lies of women as an inescapable sign of their requisite sense of doubleness.

Austen's self-division — her fascination with the imagination and her anxiety that it is unfeminine — is part of her consciousness of the unique dilemma of all women, who must acquiesce in their status as objects after an adolescence in which they experience themselves as free agents. Simone de Beauvoir expresses the question asked by all Austen's heroines: "if I can accomplish my destiny only as the Other, how shall I give up my Ego?"** Like Emma, Austen's heroines are made to view their adolescent eroticism, their imaginative and physical activity, as an outgrown vitality incompatible with womanly restraint and survival: "how improperly had she been acting How inconsiderate, how indelicate, how irrational, how unfeeling, had been her conduct! What blindness, what madness, had led her on!" (III, chap. 11). The initiation into conscious acceptance of powerlessness is always mortifying, for it involves the fall from authority into the acceptance of one's status as a mere character, as well as the humiliating acknowledgment on the part of the witty [162] sister that she must become her self-denying, quiet double. Assertion, imagination, and wit are tempting forms of self-definition which encourage each of the lively heroines to think that she can master or has mastered the world, but this is proven a dangerous illusion for women who must accept the fate of being mastered, and so the heroine learns the benefits of modesty, reticence, and patience.

If we recall Sophia's dying advice to Laura in *Love and Freindship* — "Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint" — it becomes clear that Austen is haunted by both these options and that she seems to feel that

fainting, even if it only means playing at being dead, is a more viable solution for women who are acceptable to men only when they inhabit the glass coffin of silence, stillness, secondariness. At the same time, however, Austen never renounces the subjectivity of what her heroines term their own “madness” until the end of each of their stories. The complementarity of the lively and the quiet sisters, moreover, suggests that these two inadequate responses to the female situation are inseparable. We have already seen that Marianne Dashwood’s situation when she is betrayed by the man she considers her fiancé is quite similar to her sister’s, and many critics have shown that Elinor has a great deal of sensibility, while Marianne has some sense.** Certainly Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, like Emma Woodhouse and Jane Fairfax, are confronted with similar dilemmas even as they eventually reach similar strategies for survival. In consistently drawing our attention to the friendship and reciprocity between sisters, Austen holds out the hope that maturity can bring women consciousness of self as subject and object.

Although all women may be, as she is, split between the conflicting desire for assertion in the world and retreat into the security of the home — speech and silence, independence and dependency — Austen implies that this psychic conflict can be resolved. Because the relationship between personal identity and social role is so problematic for women, the emerging self can only survive with a sustained double vision. As Austen’s admirers have always appreciated, she does write out accommodations, even when admitting their cost: since the polarities of fainting and going mad are extremes that tempt but destroy women, Austen describes how it is possible for a kind of dialectic of self-consciousness to emerge. While this aspect of female consciousness has driven many women to schizophrenia, [163] Austen’s heroines live and flourish because of their contradictory projections. When the heroines are able to live Christian lives, doing unto others as they would be done, the daughters are ready to become wives. Self-consciousness liberates them from the self, enabling them to be exquisitely sensitive to the needs and responses of others. This is what distinguishes them from the comic victims of Austen’s wit, who are either imprisoned in officious egoism or incapacitated by lethargic indolence: for Austen selfishness and selflessness are virtually interchangeable.

Only the mature heroines can sympathize and identify with the self-important meddlers and the somnambulant valetudinarians who abound in Austen’s novels. But their maturity implies a fallen world and the continual possibility, indeed the necessity, of self-division, duplicity, and double-talk. As the narrator of *Emma* explains, “Seldom, very seldom, does complete truth belong to any human disclosure; seldom can it happen that something is not a little disguised or a little mistaken” (III, chap. 13). Using silence as a means of manipulation, passivity as a tactic to gain power, submission as a means of attaining the only control available to them, the heroines seem to submit as they get what they both want and need. On the one hand, this process and its accompanying sense of doubleness is psychologically and ethically beneficial, even a boon to women who are raised by it to real heroism. On the other hand, it is a painful degradation for heroines immersed or immured in what de Beauvoir would call their own “alterity.”

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 Knightley never exist except in the slightly malevolent futurity of all happily-ever-afters, surely they would have learned the intricate gestures of subordination. And in *Mansfield Park* (1814), where Austen examines most carefully the price of doubleness, the mature author dramatizes how the psychic split so common in women can explode into full-scale fragmentation when reintegration becomes impossible. Nowhere in her fiction is the conflict between self and other portrayed with more sensitivity to the possibility of the personality fragmenting schizophrenically than in this novel in which Austen seems the most conflicted about her own talents. [164] Fanny Price and Mary Crawford enact what has developed into a familiar conflict in Austen’s fiction. Fanny loves the country, where she lives quietly and contentedly, conservative in her tastes, revering old buildings and trees, and acquiescent in her behavior, submitting to indignities from every member of the household with patient humility. But “what was tranquillity and comfort to Fanny was tediousness and vexation to Mary” (II, chap. 11), because differences of disposition, habit, and circumstance make the latter a talented and restless girl, a harpist, a superb card player, and a witty conversationalist capable of parody and puns. In the famous play episode the two are most obviously contrasted: exemplary Fanny refuses to play a part, deeming the theatrical improper in Sir Bertram’s absence, while Mary enters into the rehearsals with vivacity and anticipation of the performance precisely because it gives her the opportunity to dramatize, under the cover of the written script, her own amorous feelings toward Edmund. This use of art links Mary to Austen in a way further corroborated by biographical accounts of Austen’s delight as a girl in such home theatricals. While many critics agree that Austen sets out to celebrate Fanny’s responsiveness to nature,* (7 in fact it is Mary who most resembles her creator in seeing “inanimate nature, with little observation; her attention was all for men and women, her talents for the light and lively” (I, chap. 8).

In spite of their antithetical responses, Mary and Fanny, like the other “sisters” in Austen’s fiction, have much in common. Both are visitors in the country and virtually parentless outsiders at Mansfield Park. Both have disreputable family histories which they seek to escape in part through their contact with the Bertram household. Both are loving sisters to brothers very much in need of their counsel and support. Both are relatively poor, dependent on male relatives for financial security. While Mary rides Fanny’s horse, Fanny wears what she thinks is one of Mary’s necklaces. While Fanny loves to hear Mary’s music, Mary consistently seeks out Fanny’s advice. They are the only two young people aware that Henry is flirting outrageously with both Bertram sisters and thereby creating terrible jealousies. Both see Rushworth as the fool that he is, both are aware of the potential impropriety of the play, and both are in love with [165] Edmund Bertram. Indeed, each seems incomplete because she lacks precisely the qualities so fully embodied by the other: thus, Fanny seems constrained, lacking nerve and will, while Mary is insensitive to the needs and feelings of her friends; one is too silent, the other too talkative.

Perhaps Fanny does learn enough from Mary to become a true Austen heroine. Not only does she “come out” at a dance in her honor, but she does so in a state “nearly approaching high spirits” (II, chap. 10). She rejects the attempts at persuasion made by Sir Thomas and he accuses her of “wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and ... independence of spirit” (III, chap. I). In defending herself against the unwelcome addresses of Henry Crawford, Fanny also speaks more, and more angrily, than she ever has before. Finally, she does liberate herself from the need for Edmund’s approval, specifically when she questions his authority and becomes “vexed into displeasure, and anger, against Edmund” (III, chap. 8). Recently, two feminist critics have persuasively argued that, when Fanny refuses to marry for social advantage, she becomes the moral model for all the other characters, challenging their social system and exposing its flimsy values.* (8 And certainly Fanny does become a kind of authority figure for her younger sister Susan, whom she eventually liberates from the noisy confinement of the Portsmouth household.

Yet, trapped in angelic reserve, Fanny can never assert or enliven herself except in extreme situations where she only succeeds through passive resistance. A model of domestic virtue — “dependent, helpless, friendless, neglected, forgotten” (II, chap. 7) — she resembles Snow White not only in her passivity but in her invalid deathliness, her immobility, her pale purity. And Austen is careful to show us that Fanny can only assert herself through silence, reserve, recalcitrance, and even cunning. Since, as Leo Bersani has argued, “non-being is the ultimate prudence in the world of Mansfield Park,”** Fanny is destined to become the next Lady Bertram, following the example of Sir Thomas’s corpselike wife. With purity that seems prudish and reserve bordering on hypocrisy, Fanny is far less likeable than Austen’s other heroines : as Frank Churchill comments of Jane Fairfax, “There is safety in reserve, but no attraction” (II, chap. 6). [166] Obedience, tears, pallor, and martyrdom are effective but not especially endearing methods of survival, in part because one senses some pride in Fanny’s self-abasement.

If Fanny Price seems unable fully to actualize herself as an authentic subject, Mary Crawford fails to admit her contingency. Because of this, like the Queen who insists on telling and living her own lively stories, she is exorcised from Mansfield Park, both the place and the plot, in a manner that dramatizes Austen’s obsessive anxiety over Mary’s particular brand of impropriety — her audacious speech. When Mary’s liberty deteriorates into license and her self-actualization into selfishness, Edmund can only defend her by claiming that “She does not think evil, but she speaks it — speaks it in playfulness — “ and he admits this means “the mind itself was tainted” (II, chap. 9). Although Mary’s only crimes do, in fact, seem to be verbal, we are told repeatedly that her mind has been “led astray and bewildered, and without any suspicion of being so ; darkened, yet fancying itself light” (III, chap. 6). Because she would excuse as “folly” what both Fanny and Edmund term “evil,” her language gives away her immodesty, her “blunted delicacy” (III, chap. 16). Edmund says in horror, “No reluctance, no horror, no feminine — shall I say? no modest loathings!” (III, chap. 16). It is, significantly, “the manner in which she spoke” (III, chap. 16) that gives the greatest offense and determines Edmund’s final rejection.

When, during the episode of the theatricals, Fanny silently plays the role of the angel by refusing to play, Mary Crawford metamorphoses into a siren as she coquettishly persuades Edmund to participate in the very theatricals he initially condemned as improper. Fanny knows that in part her own reticence is caused by fear of exposing herself, but this does not stop her from feeling extremely jealous of Mary, not only because Mary is a fine actress but because she has chosen to play a part that allows her to express her otherwise silent opposition to Edmund’s choice of a clerical profession. Heretical, worldly, cynical in her disdain for the institutions of the Church, Mary is a damned Eve who offers to seduce prelapsarian Edmund Bertram in the garden of the green room, when the father is away on a business trip, and she almost succeeds, at least until the absent father reappears to burn all the scripts, to repress this libidinal outbreak in paradise and call for music which “helped conceal the [167] want of real harmony” (II, chap. 2). Since the rehearsals have brought nothing but restlessness, rivalry, vexation, pettiness,

and sexual license, *Lover's Vows* illustrates Austen's belief that self-expression and artistry are dangerously attractive precisely because they liberate actors from the rules, roles, social obligations, and familial bonds of every day life. (30)

Mary's seductive allure is the same as her brother Henry's. He is the best actor, both on and off the stage, because he has the ability to be "every thing to every body" (II, chap. 13). But he can "do nothing without a mixture of evil" (II, chap. 13). Attractive precisely because of his protean ability to change himself into a number of attractive personages, Henry is an impersonator who degenerates into an imposter, not unlike Frank Churchill, who is also "acting a part or making a parade of insincere professions" (*E*, II, chap. 6). Indeed, Henry is a good representative of the kind of young man with whom each of the heroines falls briefly in love before she is finally disillusioned: Willoughby, Wickham, Frank Churchill, Henry Crawford, and Mr. Elliot are eminently agreeable because they are self-changers, self-shapers. In many respects they are attractive to the heroines because somehow they act as doubles: younger men who must learn to please, narcissists, they experience traditionally "feminine" powerlessness and they are therefore especially interested in becoming the creators of themselves.

In *Mansfield Park*, however, Austen defines this self-creating spirit as a "bewitching" (II, chap. 13) "infection" (II, chap. 1), and the epidemic restlessness represented by the Crawfords is seen as far more dangerous than Fanny's invalid passivity. Fanny's rejection of Henry represents, then, her censure of his presumptuous attempt to author his own life, his past history, and his present fictional identities. Self-divided, indulging his passions, alienated from authority, full of ambition, and seeking revenge for past injuries, the false young man verges on the Satanic. While he manages to thrive in his own fashion, finding a suitable lover or wife and generally making his fortune in the process, his way cannot be the Austen heroine's. Although his crimes are real actions while hers are purely rhetorical, she is more completely censured because her liberties more seriously defy her social role.

When her Adam refuses to taste the fruit offered by Mary Crawford, [168] Austen follows the example of Samuel Richardson in her favorite of his novels, *Sir Charles Grandison*, where Harriet draws a complimentary analogy between Sir Charles and Adam: the former would not have been so compliant as to taste the forbidden fruit; instead he would have left it to God to annihilate the first Eve and supply a second. (81 Just as Fanny sees through the play actor, Henry Crawford, to the role-player and hypocrite, Edmund finally recognizes Mary's playfulness as her refusal to submit to the categories of her culture, a revolt that is both attractive and immoral because it gains her the freedom to become whatever she likes, even to choose not to submit to one identity but to try out a variety of voices. For all these reasons, she has to be annihilated. But, unlike Richardson, Austen in destroying this unrepentant, imaginative, and assertive girl is demonstrating her own self-division.

In all six of Austen's novels women who are refused the means of self-definition are shown to be fatally drawn to the dangerous delights of impersonation and pretense. But Austen's profession depends on just these disguises. What else, if not impersonation, is characterization? What is plot, if not pretense? In all the novels, the narrator's voice is witty, assertive, spirited, independent, even (as D. W. Harding has shown) arrogant and nasty. (3 * Poised between the subjectivity of lyric and the objectivity of drama, the novel furnishes Austen with a unique opportunity: she can create Mary Crawford's witty letters or Emma's brilliant retorts, even while rejecting them as improper; furthermore, she can reprove as indecent in a heroine what is necessary to an author. Authorship for Austen is an escape from the very restraints she imposes on her female characters. And in this respect she seems typical, for women may have contributed so significantly to narrative fiction precisely because it effectively objectifies, even as it sustains and hides, the subjectivity of the author. Put another way, in the novels Austen questions and criticizes her own aesthetic and ironic sensibilities, noting the limits and asserting the dangers of an imagination undisciplined by the rigors of art.

Using her characters to castigate the imaginative invention that informs her own novels, Austen is involved in a contradiction that, as we have seen, she approves as the only solution available to her heroines. Just as they manage to survive only by seeming to submit, she succeeds in maintaining her double consciousness in fiction that [169] proclaims its docility and restraint even as it uncovers the delights of assertion and rebellion. Indeed the comedy of Austen's novels explores the tensions between the freedom of her art and the dependency of her characters: while they stutter and sputter and lapse into silence and even hasten to perfect felicity, she attains a woman's language that is magnificently duplicitous. In this respect, Austen serves as a paradigm of the literary ladies who would emerge so successfully and plentifully in the mid-nineteenth century, popular lady novelists like Rhoda Broughton, Charlotte Mary Yonge, Home Lee, and Mrs. Craik (33 who strenuously suppressed awareness of how their own professional work called into question traditional female roles. Deeply conservative as their content appears to be, however, it frequently retains traces of the original duplicity so manifest in its origin, even as it demonstrates their own exuberant evasion of the inescapable limits they prescribe for their model heroines.

Although Austen clearly escapes the House of Prose that confines her heroines by making her story out of their renunciation of story-telling, she also dwells in the freer prospects of Emily Dickinson's "Possibility" by identifying not only with her model heroines, but also with less obvious, nastier, more resilient and energetic female characters who enact her rebellious dissent from her culture, a dissent, as we have seen, only partially obscured by the "blotter" of her plot. Many critics have already noticed duplicity in the "happy endings" of Austen's novels in which she brings her couples to the brink of bliss in such haste, or with such unlikely coincidences, or with such sarcasm that the entire message seems undercut (34 : the implication remains that a girl without the aid of a benevolent narrator would never find a way out of either her mortifications or her parents' house.

Perhaps less obvious instances of Austen's duplicity occur in her representation of a series of extremely powerful women each of whom acts out the rebellious anger so successfully repressed by the heroine and the author. Because they so rarely appear and so infrequently speak in their own voices, these furious females remain secret presences in the plots. Not only do they play a less prominent role in the novels than their function in the plot would seem to [170] require; buried or killed or banished at the end of the story, they seem to warrant this punishment by their very unattractiveness. Like Lady Susan, they are mothers or surrogate mothers who seek to destroy their docile children. Widows who are no longer defined by men simply because they have survived the male authorities in their lives, these women can exercise power even if they can never legitimize it; thus they seem both pushy and dangerous. Yet if their energy appears destructive and disagreeable, that is because this is the mechanism by which Austen disguises the most assertive aspect of herself as the Other. We shall see that these bitchy women enact impulses of revolt that make them doubles not only for the heroines but for their author as well.

We have seen Austen at her most conflicted in *Mansfield Park*, so perhaps it is here that we can begin to understand how she quietly yet forcefully undercuts her own moral. Probably the most obnoxious character in the book, Aunt Norris, is clearly meant to be a dark parody of Mary Crawford, revealing — as she does — how easily Mary's girlish liveliness and materialism could degenerate into meddlesome, officious penny-pinching. But, as nasty as she is repeatedly shown and said to be when she tries to manage and manipulate, to condescend to Fanny, to save herself some money, Aunt Norris is in some ways castigated for moral failures which are readily understandable, if not excusable. After all, she is living on a small, fixed income, and if she uses flattery to gain pecuniary help, her pleasures are dependent on receiving it. Like Fanny Price, Aunt Norris knows that she must please and placate Sir Thomas. Even when he gives "advice," both accept it as "the advice of absolute power" (II, chap. 18). Perhaps one reason for her implacable hatred of Fanny is that Aunt Norris sees in her a rival for Sir Thomas's protection, another helpless and useful dependent. Furthermore, like Fanny, Aunt Norris uses submission as a strategy to get her own way: acquiescing to the power in authority, she manages to talk her brother-in-law into all her schemes.

Unlike "good" Lady Bertram, Aunt Norris is an embittered, manipulative, pushy female who cannot allow other people to live their own lives. At least, this is how these sisters first strike us, until we remember that, for all her benign dignity, Lady Bertram does nothing but sit "nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long piece of [171] needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children" (I, chap. 2). Indeed, the contrast between her total passivity and Aunt Norris's indiscriminate exertions recalls again the options described by Sophia in *Love and Freindship* — fainting or running mad. Like all the other "good" mothers in Austen's fiction who are passive because dead, dying, or dumb, Lady Bertram teaches the necessity of submission, the all-importance of a financially sound marriage, and the empty-headedness that goes with these values. For all her noisy bustling, Aunt Norris is a much more loving mother to Lady Bertram's daughters. If she indulges them, it is in part out of genuine affection and loyalty. And as she herself actively lives her own life and pursues her own ends, Aunt Norris quite naturally identifies with her headstrong nieces. Unlike the figure of the "good" mother, the figure of bad Aunt Norris implies that female strength, exertion, and passion are necessary for survival and pleasure.

Instead of abandoning Maria after the social disgrace of the elopement and divorce, Aunt Norris goes off to live with her as her surrogate mother. Although she is thereby punished and driven from *Mansfield Park*, Aunt Norris (we cannot help suspecting) is probably as relieved to have escaped the dampening effect of Sir Thomas's sober rule as he is to have rid himself of the one person who has managed to assert herself against his wishes, to evade his control. This shrew is still talking at the end of the book, untamed and presumably untameable. As if to authenticate her completely unacceptable admiration for this kind of woman, Austen constructs a plot which quite consistently finds its impetus in Aunt Norris. It is she, for instance, who decides to take Fanny from her home and

bring her to Mansfield ; she places Fanny in Sir Thomas's household and allocates her inferior status ; she rules Mansfield in Sir Thomas's absence and allows the play to progress; she plans and executes the visit to Southerton that creates the marriage between Maria and Mr. Rushworth. Quite openly dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure and activity, especially the joy of controlling other people's lives, Aunt Norris is a parodic surrogate for the author, a suitable double whose manipulations match those of Aunt Jane.

As vilified as she is, Aunt Norris was the character most often praised and enjoyed by Jane Austen's contemporaries, to the author's [172] delight. (85 Hers is one of the most memorable voices in *Mansfield Park*. She resembles not only the hectic, scheming Queen, stepmother to Snow White, but also the Queen of the Night in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Actually, all the angry dowagers in Austen's novels represent a threat to the enlightened reason of the male god who eventually wins the heroine only by banishing the forces of female sexuality, capriciousness, and loquacity. But, as in *The Magic Flute*, where the Queen of the Night is carried offstage still singing her exuberantly strenuous resistance, women like Aunt Norris are never really completely stifled. The despised Mrs. Ferrars of *Sense and Sensibility*, for example, exacts the punishment which Elinor Dashwood could not help but wish on a man who has been selfishly deceiving her for the entire novel. By tampering with the patriarchal line of inheritance, Mrs. Ferrars proves that the very forms valued by Elinor are arbitrary. But even though *Sense and Sensibility* ends with the overt message that young women like Marianne and Elinor must submit to the powerful conventions of society by finding a male protector, Mrs. Ferrars and her scheming protégée Lucy Steele prove that women can themselves become agents of repression, manipulators of conventions, and survivors.

Most of these powerful widows would agree with Lady Catherine De Bourgh in seeing "no occasion for entailing estates from the female lines" (PP, II, (6). Opposed to the very basis of patriarchy, the exclusive right of male inheritance, Lady Catherine quite predictably earns the vilification always allotted by the author to the representatives of matriarchal power. She is shown to be arrogant, officious, egotistical, and rude as she patronizes all the other characters in the novel. Resembling Lady Susan in her disdain for her own pale, weak, passive daughter, Lady Catherine delights in managing the affairs of others. Probably most unpleasant when she opposes Elizabeth's right to marry Darcy, she questions Elizabeth's birth and breeding by admitting that Elizabeth is "a gentleman's daughter," but demanding, "who was your mother?" (III, chap. 14).

As dreadful as she seems to be, however, Lady Catherine is herself in some ways an appropriate mother to Elizabeth because the two women are surprisingly similar. Her ladyship points this out herself when she says to Elizabeth, "You give your opinion very decidedly [173] for so young a person" (II, chap. 6). Both speak authoritatively of matters on which neither is an authority. Both are sarcastic and certain in their assessment of people. Elizabeth describes herself to Darcy by asserting, "There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others" (II, chap. 8), and in this respect too she resembles Lady Catherine, whose courage is indomitable. Finally, these are the only two women in the novel capable of feeling and expressing genuine anger, although it is up to Lady Catherine to articulate the rage against entailment that Elizabeth must feel since it has so rigidly restricted her own and her sisters' lives. When Elizabeth and Lady Catherine meet in conflict, each retains her decided resolution of carrying her own purpose. In all her objections to Elizabeth's match with Darcy, Lady Catherine only articulates what Elizabeth has herself thought on the subject, that her mother is an unsuitable relation for him and her sister an even less appropriate connection. Highly incensed and unresponsive to advice, Elizabeth resembles her interlocutor; it is fitting not only that she takes the place meant for Lady Catherine's daughter when she marries Darcy, but that she also sees to it that her husband is persuaded to entertain his aunt at Pemberley. As Darcy and Elizabeth both realize, Lady Catherine has been the author of their marriage, bringing about the first proposal by furnishing the occasion and place for meetings, and the second by endeavoring to separate them when she actually communicates Elizabeth's renewed attraction to a suitor waiting for precisely such encouragement.

The vitriolic shrew is so discreetly hidden in Emma that she never appears at all, yet again she is the causal agent of the plot. Like her predecessors, Mrs. Churchill is a proud, arrogant, and capricious woman who uses all means, including reports of her poor health, to elicit attention and obedience from her family. In fact, only her death — which clears the way for the marriage of Frank Churchill to Jane Fairfax — convinces them that her nervous disorders were more than selfish, imaginary complaints. Actually Mrs. Churchill can be viewed as the cause of all the deceit practiced by the lovers inasmuch as their secret engagement is a response to her disapproval of the match. Thus this disagreeable woman with "no more heart than a stone to people in general, and the devil of a temper" (I, chap. 14) [174] is the "invisible presence" which, as W.J. Harvey explains, "enables Jane Austen to embody that aspect of our intuition of reality summed up by Auden — 'we are lived by powers we do not understand.' " as

But Mrs. Churchill is more than the representative of the unpredictable contingency of reality. On the one hand, she displays an uncanny and ominous resemblance to Jane Fairfax, who will also be a penniless upstart when she marries and who is also subject to nervous headaches and fevers. Mrs. Churchill, we are told by Mr. Weston, “is as thorough a fine lady as anybody ever beheld” (II, chap. 18), so it is quite fitting that polite Jane Fairfax becomes the next Mrs. Churchill and inherits that lady’s jewels. On the other hand, Mrs. Churchill seems much like Emma, who is also involved in becoming a pattern lady: selfish in their very imaginings, both have the power of having too much their own way, both are convinced of their superiority in talent, elegance of mind, fortune, and consequence, and both want to be first in society where they can enjoy assigning subservient parts to those in their company.

The model lady haunts all the characters of *Emma*, evoking “delicate plants” to Mr. Woodhouse (II, chap. 16) and the showy finery of Selena for Mrs. Elton. But it is Mrs. Churchill who illustrates the bankruptcy of the ideal, for she is not only a monitory image of what Austen’s heroines could be, she is also a double of what they are already fast becoming. If Mrs. Churchill represents Austen’s guilt at her own authorial control, she also reminds us that feminine propriety, reserve, and politeness can give way to bitchiness since the bitch is what the young lady’s role and values imply from the beginning, built — as we have seen them to be — out of complicity, manipulation, and deceit. At the same time, however, Mrs. Churchill is herself the victim of her own ladylike silences, evasions, and lies: no one takes seriously her accounts of her own ill health, no one believes that her final illness is more than a manipulative fiction, and her death — one of the few to occur in Austen’s mature fiction — is an ominous illustration of feminine vulnerability that Austen would more fully explore in her last novel.

§

It is not only Austen’s mad matriarchs who reflect her discomfort with the glass coffin of female submission. Her last completed novel, [175] *Persuasion* (1818), focuses on an angelically quiet heroine who has given up her search for a story and has thereby effectively killed herself off. Almost as if she were reviewing the implications of her own plots, Austen explores in *Persuasion* the effects on women of submission to authority and the renunciation of one’s life story. Eight years before the novel begins, Anne Elliot had been persuaded to renounce her romance with Captain Wentworth, but this decision sickened her by turning her into a nonentity. Forced into “knowing [her] own nothingness” (I, chap. 6), Anne is a “nobody with either father or sister” so her word has “no weight” (I, chap. 1). An invisible observer who tends to fade into the background, she is frequently afraid to move lest she should be seen. Having lost the “bloom” of her youth, she is but a pale vestige of what she had been and realizes that her lover “should not have known [her] again” (I, chap. 7), their relationship being “now nothing!” Anne Elliot is the ghost of her own dead self; through her, Austen presents a personality haunted with a sense of menace.

At least one reason why Anne has deteriorated into a ghostly insubstantiality is that she is a dependent female in a world symbolized by her vain and selfish aristocratic father, who inhabits the mirrored dressing room of Kellynch Hall. It is significant that *Persuasion* begins with her father’s book, the *Baronetage*, which is described as “the book of books” (I, chap. 1) because it symbolizes male authority, patriarchal history in general, and her father’s family history in particular. Existing in it as a first name and birth date in a family line that concludes with the male heir presumptive, William Walter Elliot, Esq., Anne has no reality until a husband’s name can be affixed to her own. But Anne’s name is a new one in the *Baronetage*: the history of this ancient, respectable line of heirs records “all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married” (I, chap. 1), as if calling our attention to the hopeful fact that, unlike her sisters Mary and Elizabeth, Anne may not be forced to remain a character within this “book of books.” And, in fact, Anne will reject the economic and social standards represented by the *Baronetage*, deciding, by the end of her process of personal development, that not she but the Dowager Viscountess Dalrymple and her daughter the Honourable Miss Carteret are “nothing” (II, chap. 4). She will also discover that Captain Wentworth is “no longer nobody” (II, chap. 12), and, even more significantly, [176] she will insist on her ability to seek and find “at least the comfort of telling the whole story her own way” (II, chap. 9).

But before Anne can become somebody, she must confront what being a nobody means: “I’m Nobody!” (J. 228), Emily Dickinson could occasionally avow, and certainly, by choosing not to have a story of her own, Anne seems to have decided to dwell in Dickinson’s realm of “Possibility,” for what Austen demonstrates through her is that the person who has not become anybody is haunted by everybody. Living in a world of her father’s mirrors, Anne confronts the several selves she might have become and discovers that they all reveal the same story of the female fall from authority and autonomy.

As a motherless girl, Anne is tempted to become her own mother, although she realizes that her mother lived invisibly, unloved, within Sir Walter's house. Since Anne could marry Mr. Elliot and become the future Lady Elliot, she has to confront her mother's unhappy marriage as a potential life story not very different from that of Catherine Morland's Mrs. who aspires to her mother's place in the family as her father's companion and her sister Elizabeth's intimate, Anne realizes that she could also become patient Penelope Clay, for she too understands "the art of pleasing" (I, chap. 2), of making herself useful. When Anne goes to Uppercross, moreover, she functions something like Mrs. Clay, "being too much in the secret of the complaints" of each of the tenants of both households (I, chap. 6), and trying to flatter or placate each and all into good humor. The danger exists, then, that Anne's sensitivity and selflessness could degenerate into Mrs. Clay's ingratiating, hypocritical service.

Of course, Mary Musgrove's situation is also a potential identity for Anne, since Charles had actually asked for Anne's hand in marriage before he settled on her younger sister, and since Mary resembles Anne in being one of Sir Walter's unfavored daughters. Indeed, Mary's complaint that she is "always the last of my family to be noticed" (II, chap. 6) could easily be voiced by Anne. Bitter about being nobody, Mary responds to domestic drudgery with "feminine" invalidism that is an extension of Anne's sickening self-doubt, as well as the only means at Mary's disposal of using her imagination to add some drama and importance to her life. Mary's [177] hypochondria reminds us that Louisa Musgrove provides a kind of paradigm for all these women when she literally falls from the Cobb and suffers from a head injury resulting in exceedingly weak nerves. Because incapacitated Louisa is first attracted to Captain Wentworth and finally marries Captain Benwick, whose first attentions had been given to Anne, she too is clearly an image of what Anne might have become.

Through both Mary and Louisa, then, Austen illustrates how growing up female constitutes a fall from freedom, autonomy, and strength into debilitating, degrading, ladylike dependency. In direct contradiction to Captain Wentworth's sermon in the hedgerow, Louisa discovers that even firmness cannot save her from such a fall. Indeed, it actually precipitates it, and she discovers that her fate is not to jump from the stiles down the steep flight of seaside stairs but to read love poetry quietly in the parlor with a suitor suitably solicitous for her sensitive nerves. While Louisa's physical fall and subsequent illness reinforce Anne's belief that female assertion and impetuosity must be fatal, they also return us to the elegiac autumnal landscape that reflects Anne's sense of her own diminishment, the loss she experiences since her story is "now nothing."

Anne lives in a world of mirrors both because she could have become most of the women in the novel and, as the title suggests, because all the characters present her with their personal preferences rationalized into principles by which they attempt to persuade her. She is surrounded by other people's versions of her story and offered coercive advice by Sir Walter, Captain Wentworth, Charles Musgrove, Mrs. Musgrove, Lady Russell, and Mrs. Smith. Eventually, indeed, the very presence of another person becomes oppressive for Anne, since everyone but she is convinced that his or her version of reality is the only valid one. Only Anne has a sense of the different, if equally valid, perspectives of the various families and individuals among which she moves. Like Catherine Morland, she struggles against other people's fictional use and image of her; and finally she penetrates to the secret of patriarchy through absolutely no skill of detection on her own part. Just as Catherine blunders on the secret of the ancestral mansion to understand the arbitrary power of General Tilney, who does not mean what he says, Anne stumbles fortuitously on the secret of the heir to Kellynch Hall, William Elliot, [178] who had married for money and was very unkind to his first wife. Mr. Elliot's "manoeuvres of selfishness and duplicity must ever be revolting" (II, chap. 7) to Anne, who comes to believe that "the evil" of this suitor could easily result in "irremediable mischief" (II, chap. 10).

For all of Austen's heroines, as Mr. Darcy explains, "detection could not be in [their] power, and suspicion certainly not in [their] inclination" (II, chap. 3). Yet Anne does quietly and attentively watch and listen and judge the members of her world and, as Stuart Tave has shown, she increasingly exerts herself to speak out, only gradually to discover that she is being heard.' (7 Furthermore, in her pilgrimage from Kellynch Hall to Upper Cross and Lyme to Bath, the landscapes she encounters function as a kind of psychic geography of her development so that, when the withered hedgerows and tawny autumnal meadows are replaced by the invigorating breezes and flowing tides of Lyme, we are hardly surprised that Anne's bloom is restored (I, chap. 12). Similarly, when Anne gets to Bath, this woman who has heard and overheard others has trouble listening because she is filled with her own feelings, and she decides that "one half of her should not be always so much wiser than the other half, or always suspecting the other half of being worse than it was" (II, chap. 7). Therefore, in a room crowded with talking people, Anne manages to signal to Captain Wentworth her lack of interest in Mr. Elliot through her assertion that she has no pleasure in parties at her father's house. "She had spoken it," the narrator emphasizes; if "she trembled when it was done, conscious that her words were listened to" (II, chap. 10), this is

because Anne has actually “never since the loss of her dear mother, known the happiness of being listened to, or encouraged” (I, chap. 6).

The fact that her mother’s loss initiated her invisibility and silence is important in a book that so closely associates the heroine’s felicity with her ability to articulate her sense of herself as a woman. Like Elinor Tilney, who feels that “A mother could have been always present. A mother would have been a constant friend ; her influence would have been beyond all others” (NA, II, chap. 7), Anne misses the support of a loving female influence. It is then fitting that the powerful whispers of well-meaning Mrs. Musgrove and Mrs. Croft furnish Anne with the cover — the opportunity and the encouragement [179] — to discuss with Captain Harville her sense of exclusion from patriarchal culture: “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story... . The pen has been in their hands” (II, chap. 11). Anne Elliot will “not allow books to prove anything” because they “were all written by men” (II, chap. 11); her contention that women love longest because their feelings are more tender directly contradicts the authorities on women’s “fickleness” that Captain Harville cites. As we have already seen, her speech reminds us that the male charge of “inconstancy” is an attack on the irrepressible interiority of women who cannot be contained within the images provided by patriarchal culture. Though Anne remains inalterably inhibited by these images since she cannot express her sense of herself by “saying what should not be said” (II, chap. 11) and though she can only replace the Baronetage with the Navy Lists — a book in which women are conspicuously absent — still she is the best example of her own belief in female subjectivity. She has both deconstructed the dead selves created by all her friends to remain true to her own feelings, and she has continually reexamined and reassessed herself and her past.

Finally, Anne’s fate seems to be a response to Austen’s earlier stories in which girls are forced to renounce their romantic ambitions : Anne “had been forced into prudence in her youth, she learned romance as she grew older — the natural sequel of an unnatural beginning” (I, chap. 4). It is she who teaches Captain Wentworth the limits of masculine assertiveness. Placed in Anne’s usual situation of silently overhearing, he discovers her true, strong feelings. Significantly, his first response is to drop his pen. Then, quietly, under the cover of doing some business for Captain Harville, Captain Wentworth writes her his proposal, which he can only silently hand to her before leaving the room. At work in the common sitting-room of the White Hart Inn, alert for inauspicious interruptions, using his other letter as a kind of blotter to camouflage his designs, Captain Wentworth reminds us of Austen herself. While Anne’s rebirth into “a second spring of youth and beauty” (II, chap. 1) takes place within the same corrupt city that fails to fulfill its baptismal promise of purification in Northanger Abbey, we are led to believe that her life with this man will escape the empty elegance of Bath society.

That the sea breezes of Lyme and the watery cures of Bath have revived Anne from her ghostly passivity furnishes some evidence that [180] naval life may be an alternative to and an escape from the corruption of the land so closely associated with patrilineal descent. Sir Walter Elliot dismisses the navy because it raises “men to honours which their fathers and grandfathers never dreamt of” (I, chap. 3). And certainly Captain Wentworth seems almost miraculously to evade the hypocrisies and inequities of a rigid class system by making money on the water. But it is also true that naval life seems to justify Sir Walter’s second objection that “it cuts up a man’s youth and vigour most horribly.” While he is thinking in his vanity only about the rapidity with which sailors lose their looks, we are given an instance of the sea cutting up a man’s youth, a singularly unprepossessing man at that: when worthless Dick Musgrove is created by Austen only to be destroyed at sea, we are further reminded of her trust in the beneficence of nature, for only her anger against the unjust adulation of sons (over daughters) can explain the otherwise gratuitous cruelty of her remarks about Mrs. Musgrove’s “large fat sighings over the destiny of a son, whom alive nobody had cared for” (I, chap. 8). Significantly, this happily lost son was recognized as a fool by Captain Wentworth, whose naval success closely associates him with a vocation that does not as entirely exclude women as most landlocked vocations do: his sister, Mrs. Croft, knows that the difference between “a fine gentleman” and a navy man is that the former treats women as if they were “all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures” (I, chap. 8). She herself believes that “any reasonable woman may be perfectly happy” on board ship, as she was when she crossed the Atlantic four times and travelled to and from the East Indies, more comfortably (she admits) than when she settled at Kellynch Hall, although her husband did take down Sir Walter’s mirrors.

Naval men like Captain Wentworth and Admiral Croft are also closely associated, as is Captain Harville, with the ability to create “ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements ... to turn the actual space to the best possible account” (I, chap. 1 (1), a skill not unrelated to a “profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtue than in its national importance” (II, chap. 12). While Austen’s dowagers try to gain power by exploiting traditionally male prerogatives, the heroine of the last novel discovers an egalitarian society in which men value and participate in domestic life, while women contribute to public events, a complementary ideal that [181] presages the emergence of an egalitarian sexual ideology. (38 No longer confined to a female community

of childbearing and childrearing, activities portrayed as dreary and dangerous in both Austen's novels and her letters,*⁷ Anne triumphs in a marriage that represents the union of traditionally male and female spheres. If such a consummation can only be envisioned in the future, on the water, amid imminent threats of war, Austen nonetheless celebrates friendship between the sexes as her lovers progress down Bath streets with "smiles reined in and spirits dancing in private rapture" (II, chap. 11).

When Captain Wentworth accepts Anne's account of their story, he agrees with her highly ambivalent assessment of the woman who advised her to break off their engagement. Lady Russell is one of Austen's last pushy widows, but, in this novel which revises Austen's earlier endorsement of the necessity of taming the shrew, the cautionary monster is one of effacement rather than assertion. If the powerful origin of *Emma* is the psychologically coercive model of the woman as lady, in *Persuasion* Austen describes a heroine who refuses to become a lady. Anne Elliot listened to the persuasions of the powerful, wealthy, proper Lady Russell when she refrained from marrying the man she loved. But finally she rejects Lady Russell, who is shown to value rank and class over the dictates of the heart, in part because her own heart is perverted, capable of revelling "in angry pleasure, in pleased contempt" (II, chap. 1) at events sure to hurt Anne. Anne replaces this cruel stepmother with a different kind of mother surrogate, another widow, Mrs. Smith. Poor, confined, crippled by rheumatic fever, Mrs. Smith serves as an emblem of the dispossession of women in a patriarchal society, and she is, as Paul Zietlow has shown, also the embodiment of what Anne's future could have been under less fortunate circumstances. (40

While Lady Russell persuaded Anne not to marry a poor man, Mrs. Smith explains why she should not marry a rich one. Robbed of all physical and economic liberty, with "no child ... no relatives ... no health ... no possibility of moving" (II, chap. 5), Mrs. Smith is paralyzed, and, although she exerts herself to maintain good humor in her tight place, she is also maddened. She expresses her rage at the false forms of civility, specifically at the corrupt and selfish double-dealings of Mr. Elliot, the heir apparent and the epitome of patriarchal [182] society. With fierce delight in her revengeful revelations, Mrs. Smith proclaims herself an "injured, angry woman" (II, chap. 9) and she articulates Anne's — and Austen's — unacknowledged fury at her own unnecessary and unrecognized paralysis and suffering. But although this widow is a voice of angry female revolt against the injustices of patriarchy, she is as much a resident of Bath as Lady Russell. This fashionable place for cures reminds us that society is sick. And Mrs. Smith participates in the moral degeneration of the place when she selfishly lies to Anne, placing her own advancement over Anne's potential marital happiness by withholding the truth about Mr. Elliot until she is quite sure Anne does not mean to marry him. Like Lady Russell, then, this other voice within Anne's psyche can also potentially victimize her.

It is Mrs. Smith's curious source of knowledge, her informant or her muse, who best reveals the corruption that has permeated and informs the social conventions of English society. A woman who nurses sick people back to health, wonderfully named nurse Rooke resembles in her absence from the novel many of Austen's most important avatars. Pictured perched on the side of a sickbed, nurse Rooke seems as much a vulture as a savior of the afflicted. Her freedom of movement in society resembles the movement of a chess piece which moves parallel to the edge of the board, thereby defining the limits of the game. And she "rooks" her patients, discovering their hidden hoards.

Providing ears and eyes for the confined Mrs. Smith, this seemingly ubiquitous, omniscient nurse is privy to all the secrets of the sickbed. She has taught Mrs. Smith how to knit, and she sells "little thread-cases, pin-cushions and cardracks" not unlike Austen's "little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory." What she brings as part of her services are volumes furnished from the sick chamber, stories of weakness and selfishness and impatience. A historian of private life, nurse Rooke communicates in typically female fashion as a gossip engaged in the seemingly trivial, charitable office of selling feminine handcrafts to the fashionable world. This and her gossip are, of course, a disguise for her subversive interest in uncovering the sordid realities behind the decorous appearances of high life. In this regard she is a wonderful portrait of Austen herself. While seemingly unreliable, dependent (as she is) for information upon many interactions which are subject [183] to errors of misconception and ignorance, this uniquely female historian turns out to be accurate and revolutionary as she reveals "the manoevers of selfishness and duplicity" (II, chap. 9) of one class to another. Finally, sensible nurse Rooke also resembles Austen in that, despite all her knowledge, she does not withdraw from society. Instead, acknowledging herself a member of the community she nurses, she is a "favourer of matrimony" who has her own "flying visions" of social success (II, chap. 9). Although many of Austen's female characters seem inalterably locked inside Mr. Elton's riddle, nurse Rooke resembles the successful heroines of the author's works in making the best of this tight place.

That Austen was fascinated with the sickness of her social world, especially its effect on people excluded from a life of active exertion, is probably last illustrated through the Parker sisters in Sanditon, where officious Diane supervises the application of six leeches a day for ten days and the extraction of a number of teeth in order to cure

her disabled sister Susan's poor health. One sister representing "activity run mad" (chap. 9), the other languishing on the sofa, the two remind us of lethargic Lady Bertram, crippled Mrs. Smith, ill Jane Fairfax, fever-stricken Marianne Dashwood, the infected Crawfords, hypochondriacal Mary Musgrove, ailing Louisa Musgrove, and pale, sickly Fanny Price. But, as nurse Rooke's healing arts imply, the diseased shrews and the dying fainters define the boundaries of the state in which Austen's most successful characters usually manage to settle. A few of her heroines do evade the culturally induced idiocy and impotence that domestic confinement and female socialization seem to breed. Neither fainting into silence nor self-destructing into verbosity, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, and Anne Elliot echo their creator in their duplicitous ability to speak with the tact that saves them from suicidal somnambulism on the one hand and contaminating vulgarity on the other, as they exploit the evasions and reservations of feminine gentility.

[Notes omitted.]