DEATH AND THE CONCEPT OF WOMAN'S VALUE
IN THE NOVELS OF JANE AUSTEN

DISSERTATION

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
University of North Texas in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By

Meg M. Moring, B.A., M.A.

Denton, Texas
December, 1996
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Jane Austen sprinkles deaths throughout her novels as plot devices and character indicators, but she does not tackle death directly. Yet death pervades her novels, in a subtle yet brutal way, in the lives of her female characters. Austen reveals that death was the definition and the destiny of women; it was the driving force behind the social and economic constructs that ruled the eighteenth-century woman's life, manifested in language, literature, religion, art, and even in a woman's doubts about herself.

In *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland discovers that women, like female characters in gothic texts, are written and rewritten by the men whose language dominates them. Catherine herself becomes an example of real gothic when she is silenced and her spirit murdered by Henry Tilney. Marianne Dashwood barely escapes the powerful male constructs of language and literature in *Sense and Sensibility*. Marianne finds that the literal, maternal, wordless language of women counts for nothing in the social world, where patriarchal, figurative language rules, and in her attempt to channel her literal language into the social language of sensibility, she is placed in a position of more deadly nothingness, cast by society as a scorned woman and expected to die. Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* is sacrificed as Eve, but in her death-like existence and in her rise to success she echoes Christ, who is ultimately a maternal figure that encapsulates the knowledge of the goddess, the knowledge that from death will come life. Emma
Woodhouse in *Emma* discovers that her perfection, sanctioned by artistic standards, is really a means by which society eases its fears about death by projecting death onto women as a beautiful ideal. In *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot finds that women endure death while men struggle against it, and this endurance requires more courage than most men possess or understand. Austen’s novels expose the undercurrent of death in women’s lives, yet hidden in her heroines is the maternal power of women—the power to bear children, to bear language and culture, to bear both life and death.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: JANE AUSTEN AND THE ABYSS OF WOMANHOOD

I believe that men are generally still a little afraid of the dark, though the witches are all hung, and Christianity and candles have been introduced. Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*

When Charlotte Bronte, exasperated that everyone around her extolled the talents of Jane Austen, finally read Austen herself, she confessed that she admired Austen’s “Chinese fidelity” in depicting the surface of genteel life, but she found nothing of depth or Truth in Austen’s writing:

Her business is not half so much with the human heart as with the human eyes, mouth, hands and feet. What sees keenly, speaks aptly, moves flexibly, it suits her to study; but what throbs fast and full, though hidden, what the blood rushes through, . . . what is the unseen seat of life and the sentient target of death--this Miss Austen ignores. She no more, with her mind’s eye, beholds the heart of her race than each man, with bodily vision, sees the heart in his heaving breast. Jane Austen was a complete and most sensible lady, but a very incomplete and rather insensible (not senseless) woman. If this is heresy, I cannot help it. (Gilbert and Gubar 112-3)

Bronte was joined in her assessment by such well-known writers as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Ralph Waldo Emerson, D. H. Lawrence, and Mark Twain, all of whom felt that Austen was a novelist of manners and not much more. From Barrett’s finding Austen
“narrow and cold” to Lawrence’s estimation of her as a mean “old maid” to E. M. Forster’s claim that “Jane Austen is feeble and ladylike. Except in her school-girl novels, she cannot stage a crash,” Bronte’s contemporaries and successors judged Austen as something of a coward, despite her talent (Mermin 186; Gilbert and Gubar 112-3; Forster 116). Over a hundred years after Bronte’s opinion of Austen, however, critics have agreed that Jane Austen was a great writer who wielded her pen with exquisite craftsmanship, hailing her as an impeccable realist, a superb ironist, “one of the unquestionable masters of the rhetoric of narration” (Booth 244). Jane Austen’s narrow shoulders and her comparatively slim volumes have stood the weight of her heavy successors: Dickens, George Eliot, Henry James, Virginia Woolf, Barbara Pym, Anita Brookner, and others. Her ability to expose the ruthless economic principles operating behind the civility of her world, and the difficulty of finding true love and happiness in such a world, is exquisite and timeless.

Yet Bronte’s troubling assertion has remained, echoed in L. P. Hartley’s question in 1966, of whether Jane Austen knew anything about the Abyss, that great mysterious void from which we all come and to which we all must return. And connected to this question is the more modern inquiry of feminists, who ask, like Bronte, just what truth about womanhood Austen reveals in her novels. Austen puzzles us, for she most certainly in her novels and her letters censures the narrowness of the eighteenth-century woman’s life and her dependence upon the odious marriage market and upon a husband for her future, yet none of her heroines revolts against this system, and Austen seems to condone it by ending each of her novels with a marriage between the heroine and often less than
perfect men. Not able to discern anything overtly Wollstonecraftian and rebellious in
Austen’s writing, feminist critics have instead detected a more subtle method of rebellion
in the novels, a rebellion cleverly signified by Austen’s silence and indirection. Beneath
Austen’s teacup world and her deflated endings, Austen has revealed the brutal truth
about womanhood. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar express it,

Although she has become a symbol of culture, it is shocking how persistently
Austen demonstrates her discomfort with her cultural inheritance, specifically her
dissatisfaction with the tight place assigned women in patriarchy and her analysis
of the economics of sexual exploitation. At the same time, however, she knows
from the beginning of her career that there is no other place for her but a tight one,
and her parodic strategy is itself a testimony to her struggle with inadequate but
inescapable structures. . . . Austen is centrally concerned with the impossibility of
women escaping the conventions and categories that, in every sense, belittle them.

(112-3)

I would like to rephrase this last sentence more forcefully: Austen is centrally
concerned with the impossibility of women escaping the conventions and categories that,
in every sense, bury them. At the core of Austen’s novels, thickly surrounded by social
conventions and economic categories, is the Abyss—the Abyss of womanhood, that is.
Austen uses the word “abyss” only once, in Northanger Abbey, in reference to the
“intellectual poverty” of Catherine’s life (Hartley 86), she “seldom—in Mansfield Park or
elsewhere—refers to God directly” (Willis 66-7) or deals with death and the afterlife in
more than a background way, yet the Abyss nevertheless pervades Austen’s silence about
Death is in fact the definition and the destiny of women; it is the driving force behind the social and economic constructs that rule the eighteenth-century woman's life. It is the undercurrent of Jane Austen's subtle, truth-revealing art.

Jane Austen knew plenty about the power of death. How could she not, living in a century that was only just beginning to get the better of death through widespread health reforms, medical advances, and overall better standards of living? Lawrence Stone writes in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* that “the most striking feature which distinguished the Early Modern family from that of today does not concern either marriage or birth; it was the constant presence of death. Death was at the centre of life, as the cemetery was at the centre of the village” (54). John McManners provides harrowing statistics of French life/death during the eighteenth century: one quarter of all babies died before the age of one, and another quarter died before they reached eight years of age (5). In England statistics were slightly better; at mid-century statistics show that around one quarter of English children died before the age of fifteen (Stone 55-6). The average, highly-hopeful life expectancy for those who did survive childhood was roughly 45 years old in 1775, the year Jane Austen was born (Stone 58).¹ Jane Austen herself died at the age of forty-one. Death lurked everywhere, in unsanitary living conditions, contaminated water supplies, disease and plague, medical ignorance, and poor parenting practices, as well as in accidents, executions, murder, and war. “The result,” Stone explains, was a population of which about half was under twenty and only a handful over

¹Stone provides this statistic for “sons of peers” only; we can assume the number was lower for peasants and women, who frequently died in childbirth.
sixty; in which marriage was delayed longer than in any other known society; in which so many infants died that they could only be regarded as expendable; and in which the family itself was a loose association of transients, constantly broken up by death of parents or children or the early departure of children from the home. It is impossible to stress too heavily the impermanence of the Early Modern family, whether from the point of view of husbands and wives, or parents and children. None could reasonably expect to remain together for very long, a fact which fundamentally affected all human relationships. Death was a part of life, and was realistically treated as such. (66)

And Jane Austen did treat death realistically, referring to its occurrence in her letters and matter-of-factly weaving it into the lives of her fictional characters. In her correspondence with her sister Cassandra, Austen can make a disturbingly light comment such as, “Mrs. Hall of Sherborne was brought to bed yesterday of a dead child some weeks before she expected, owing to a fright. I suppose she happened unawares to look at her husband,” (Cecil 83), yet she can also sincerely write in another letter, “You will be sorry to hear that Marianne Mapleton’s disorder has ended fatally: she was believed out of danger on Sunday, but a sudden relapse carried her off the next day. So affectionate a family must suffer severely; and many a girl on early death has been praised into an angel, I believe, on slighter pretensions to beauty, sense, and merit than Marianne” (Cecil 93). Such callousness juxtaposed with formal solemnity reveals the eighteenth-century attitude toward death and illness perfectly. The way to minimize the pain of loss was either, as the situation dictated, to make light of death or to retreat into a somber formality when a
loved one or acquaintance died.

Austen’s juvenilia are full of “drunkenness and childbirth and illegitimate children and deaths of all kinds, including murder and suicide” (Cecil 60), and her mature novels contain five actual deaths, fifteen deaths that occur prior to the novels’ action, eight scrapes with death, three anticipated deaths, three lying-ins, and thirteen cases of ill health, ranging from gout, colds, and debilitating fevers to war wounds and just plain puniness. There are also twenty-two widows in Austen’s novels, six full-fledged hypochondriacs, much talk about Bath or other health resorts, surgeons and doctors, draughts, warm clothing, fires, diets, exercise, lavender drops, vinegars, “bloom” and faded bloom.

Among her main male characters, eight have lost both parents: Darcy, Bingley, Willoughby, Colonel Brandon, Knightley, Henry Crawford, Wentworth, and William Elliot. Three have lost one parent: Henry Tilney, Edward Ferrars, and Frank Churchill. Jane Fairfax and Mary Crawford are both parentless, while Marianne and Elinor Dashwood, Eleanor Tilney, Emma Woodhouse, Miss Bates, and Anne Elliot have lost one parent. Although some characters are described as “old,” such as Colonel Brandon and Miss Bates, there are only two or three characters who are truly old: Mrs. Bates from *Emma*, and Mr. Woodhouse, and possibly Lady Dalrymple from *Persuasion*.

The awareness of life’s precariousness is very evident in the behavior and relationships of Austen’s characters, especially of her older characters, all of whom were reared firmly in the eighteenth century and its social attitudes. Many characters immerse themselves in those things that will insulate them from the reality of death and human weakness: wealth, status, and vanity. Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion* is a prime example
of an Austen character who clings to his title and his good looks, priding himself on looking young and judging others, including his own daughters, based on whether they look young or not. Mr. Bennet retreats to his inner sanctum in *Pride and Prejudice* to shut out the real world, and Mr. Woodhouse does just as his name suggests, hiding himself in his warm, comfortable, draft-free house without admitting the possibility that his house is a coffin of sorts, a man-made place that protects for a while, but that is ultimately going to disintegrate, too. Marianne Dashwood and Louisa Musgrove believe with the naive confidence of youth that they are invincible, until Marianne’s feverish brush with death and Louisa’s near-fatal, brain-rattling fall enlighten them. Mrs. Churchill’s hypochondria commands the attention of all of Highbury in *Emma*, and Mary Musgrove’s conveniently imagined illnesses in *Persuasion* are direct denials of what Anne Elliot so wisely accepts as “the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle” (*Persuasion* 44).²

The accidents, illnesses, and deaths that occur in Austen’s novels serve as plot devices that demonstrate the ever-present power of chance and death over human destiny (Steele 152). For example, If Jane Bennett had not caught cold in *Pride and Prejudice*, she and Bingley might never have been brought so closely together in the normal course of social events, and more importantly, Darcy might never have seen the attractively flushed face and muddied petticoats that belied Elizabeth’s genuine, caring heart when she came to nurse Jane. Without Jane’s cold, he would never have had the chance to fall in love with Elizabeth. Frank Churchill in *Emma* is virtually paralyzed until his rich aunt finally

²I will be citing Austen’s novels by title rather than by Austen’s name throughout this dissertation.
dies, at last allowing him the freedom, status, and money to choose a penniless girl like Jane Fairfax for a wife. Such incidents occur in all of the novels to advance the plot, but they also reveal human character. As Pamela Steele has shown, “Unbounded energy is linked with deficiency in character or understanding,” as is the case with Louisa Musgrove, and “fever [is linked] with learning,” as Marianne Dashwood demonstrates, while “debility [is linked] with wisdom and a tender conscience” as Fanny Price is made to show *Mansfield Park* (Steele 152). Loss, whether of home, status, beauty, health or youth, brings out resilience in characters like Anne Elliot and Mrs. Smith while sinking others, like Sir Walter and Elizabeth Elliot, into shallow, unproductive lives in *Persuasion*.

Austen’s novels show that death orchestrates the lives of her characters in numerous ways, determining personalities, motivating behavior, influencing events, molding relationships, and defining status. More profoundly, however, death envelopes the lives of Austen’s women and determines their value in a society that regarded marriage--with or without love--as the only business of a woman’s life. Without marriage, a woman was relegated to the purgatory of spinsterhood, a death-in-life existence in which the woman had no value beyond what her good nature might earn her among friends and relatives. “Young ladies,” explains Roy Porter, “were groomed with matrimony uppermost in view, and with reason. If a daughter failed to trap a husband, she might become an ‘old maid’, a burden on her family, forced into a frustrating post as lady’s companion or governess, with no independence and paltry wages, existing in a no-man’s land between family and servants” (40). The misery of the unmarried, dependent gentlewoman is poignantly revealed in Charlotte Bronte’s Lucy Snowe (*Villette*) and Jane
Eyre, who must fend for themselves in a world unkind to penniless, unprotected women, and is most brutally depicted by Anne Bronte in *Agnes Grey*, in which mental abuse is coupled with deprivations and insolence that are tantamount to physical abuse.

Jane Austen herself knew the powerlessness of being unmarried. Jan Fergus points out that after Austen produced *Lady Susan, First Impressions* (later called *Pride and Prejudice*), “Elinor and Marianne” (to become *Sense and Sensibility*), and *Susan* (later published as *Northanger Abbey*), Austen’s pen was “virtually silent” between the years 1800 and 1809. It was during this time that the unmarried Jane was forced to remove to Bath, a city she hated, for her parents’ health, and on her father’s death in 1805 she became “a poor dependent, rather than a clergyman’s daughter,” having to rely upon the generosity of her many brothers to support her mother, Cassandra, and herself and entirely dependent upon them for a home, shuffling here and there until finally settled at Chawton (Fergus 103-23). She was lucky, however, to have a loving, responsible family and to have her fame as a novelist to keep her from the loneliness and humiliation many old maids suffered. There are echoes of such humiliation in Miss Bates, who is condescended to as if she were a child, and in Jane Fairfax, who outwardly acknowledges that as a governess she will essentially be a slave. Miss Lee, the family governess never actually seen in the action of *Mansfield Park*, simply is dismissed when the spoiled Bertram girls (and Fanny) are grown, and old Sarah, who lives at Uppercross “in her deserted nursery” (*Persuasion* 116) is quite forgotten until pulled out of mothballs by Anne and sent to nurse Louisa after her fall. These women are like ghosts, with no presence about them, no substance, no value. The spinster was essentially a socially dead woman.
Marrying may have saved some women from social death, but it most certainly exposed her to a life bounded on all sides by physical death. A wife’s value was usually judged by her ability to produce a child or heir, and the childbirth process frequently ended in death for a woman. Many a woman was doomed to marry and risk such a death for a husband who did not love her or really value her as a person. A married woman “was an heir-producing machine,” contends Roy Porter. “Women’s letters harrowingly chronicle the fatigue, ill-health, and premature ageing they suffered as time after time they grew full-bellied. . . . there was, in general, a deep dread of the childbirth treadmill” (41). Lawrence Stone provides the chilling statistic that “from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, in three out of four cases of all first marriages among the squararchy that were broken by death within ten years, the cause was the death of the wife” (64). John McManners explains that “there were hardly any hygienic precautions, the technique for arresting haemorrhages was not yet developed, and the manipulation of forceps (supposed to be limited to qualified surgeons alone) was clumsy” (8). Whether undergoing a normal birth or a breach birth, in which a mid-wife might have had to cut the baby into pieces to remove it, a woman often succumbed to a puerperal infection that killed her (Stone 64). Sometimes a woman was simply worn out by birthing, becoming old and weak before her time. Jane Austen’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Austen, died shortly after giving birth to her eleventh child, and another sister-in-law, Fanny Palmer Austen, died after childbirth at the age of twenty four. Jan Fergus connects these sad losses to Austen’s decidedly angry tone when she writes of childbirth in her letters to her niece, Fanny Knight, advising her to preserve her “Constitution, spirits, figure & countenance” by “not beginning the business
of Mothering quite so early,” and she writes of her niece Anna Lefroy that “Anna has not a chance of escape . . . Poor Animal, she will be worn out before she is thirty”; the deaths of her sisters-in-law and the excruciating childbirth suffered by another sister-in-law clearly “brought home to Austen the dangers of motherhood,” Fergus concludes (123).

If she did survive childbirth, a wife then had to steel herself against the probable death of one or more of her children. Living with such a likelihood of death necessarily affected motherly affection; a mother could not let herself get too attached to her children because their deaths could certainly kill her emotionally. Dictatorial, distant fathers like Colonel Tilney in Northanger Abbey and Sir Walter Elliot in Persuasion bother us, but we do not find their lack of attachment highly unusual. Mrs. Bennet, however, and mothers like Mrs. Ferrars in Sense and Sensibility, Mrs. Morland in Northanger, and the lethargic Lady Bertram of Mansfield Park do bother us in their lack of emotional attachment to their children. Mothers are supposed to be highly attached to their offspring, we believe. “To understand the mentality of the eighteenth century,” John McManners reminds us, “the first step is to try to recapture the instinctive harshness, resignation, and fatalistic determination of people who saw their children born to die rather than to live” (66). A woman might go insane holding and loving children born from her own body time after time, only to have those children repeatedly, cruelly taken from her by death. We can better understand Mansfield Park’s Mrs. Price in her lack of attachment for the puny Fanny and her absent remorse for a daughter who died after Fanny was farmed out to the Bertrams when we realize that Mrs. Price seems to mirror many women who had not the time or the weakness to mourn. She echoes Mrs. Thrale, whose diary entries Lawrence
Stone uses to demonstrate the emotional distance necessary in motherhood. Mrs. Thrale writes, after the birth of a daughter, that "she is so very poor a creature I can scarce bear to look at her" and after the death of yet another daughter she says that "one cannot grieve after her much, and I have just now other things to think of" (57). Lack of attachment was a "defense mechanism" that made sanity possible (Porter 42).

Physical death certainly defined a woman's life, but it was of course not unique to women. Men, too, died early deaths from war, disease, and accidents, and fathers mourned their lost children. But death also defined a woman's mental existence in a way that it did not touch a man's. In Sex and Enlightenment: Women in Richardson and Diderot, Rita Goldberg writes that in the eighteenth century "we see that women's bodies both define and destroy them: they are made to suffer physically as well as mentally for their sins" (156). Eve, of course, was the instigator of all these sins, bringing pain and death into the world through her animal weakness and ignorance. Her descendants in the eighteenth century were thought to have fully inherited Eve's womanly inadequacies; women were looked upon as naturally weak, diseased beings. "Women," Goldberg demonstrates, were thought to be "formed and ruled by the sicknesses which define them: menstruation, childbirth, lactation, the menopause" (158). Never mind that only women, not men, can perform the miracle of birthing a child. The mystery of a woman's womb was explained away as a place of such "mystical experience" that it often overwhelmed women, making them "susceptible to madness." A woman's womb "is not only the passive receptacle for children and male lust. It is an internal principle of change, one which allows philosophers, doctors and men in general to explain female inconsistency,"
writes Goldberg (159).

The real inconsistency, however, lay not in women themselves. Women were scapegoats for society’s inconsistent view of them. No matter how patriarchal society rationalized women, no matter what scientific theories were applied to them, no matter what religious dogmas were imposed on them, women were (and still are) powerful and feared on a mythic level. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, sums up the mythos of woman:

There is no figurative image of woman which does not call up at once its opposite: she is Life and Death, Nature and Artifice, Daylight and Night. Under whatever aspect we consider her, we always find the same shifting back and forth, for the nonessential returns necessarily to the essential. In the figures of the Virgin Mary and Beatrice, Eve and Circe still exist. (186)

Woman is a walking icon for life and for death. Such power is awe-inspiring, and greatly frightening, and when turned back against women, it is deadly. Social mores, language, literature, art, religion—all are subtly, yet pervasively, turned against women in the eighteenth century, silencing them, depicting them as dead, sacrificing them—both literally and figuratively.

As this dissertation will show, Jane Austen was wise to these cleverly disguised, almost invisible attempts to strip women of their value and to murder them. Her novels expose this undercurrent of death in her heroine’s lives, and in her seemingly ordinary endings she speaks against this attempt to annihilate women physically and mentally. Her heroines come up against formidable prisons of language, religious dogma, physical and
artistic ideals, and their own doubts about themselves as women. Hidden in the storybook marriages of Austen's women, however, is the maternal power of women—the power to bear children, to bear language, to bear both life and death.
CHAPTER 2

DEATH BY THE BOOK IN *NORTHANGER ABBEY*

Pansy was really a blank page, a pure white surface, successfully kept so; she had neither art, nor guile, nor temper, nor talent—only two or three small exquisite instincts: for knowing a friend, for avoiding a mistake, for taking care of an old toy or a new frock.

She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. Between those four walls she had lived ever since; they were to surround her for the rest of her life. It was the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation. Osmond’s beautiful mind gave it neither light nor air; Osmond’s beautiful mind indeed seemed to peep down from a small high window and mock at her. Of course it had not been physical suffering; for physical suffering there might have been a remedy. Henry James in *The Portrait of a Lady*

There is an unforgettable scene in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* in which ten-year-old Jane simply and quietly expresses the truth about womanhood—expresses and challenges it. Summoned to appear before the imposing Mr. Brocklehurst, Jane approaches that “sable-clad,” grey-eyed man with an instinctual dread reminiscent of Red Riding Hood approaching the wolf impersonating her grandmother:

I stepped across the rug; he placed me square and straight before him. What a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! what a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!

“No sight so sad as that of a naughty child,” he began, “especially a naughty little girl. Do you know where the wicked go after death?”

“They go to hell,” was my ready and orthodox answer.

“And what is hell? Can you tell me that?”

“A pit full of fire.”
“And should you like to fall into that pit, and to be burning there for ever?”

“No, sir.”

“What must you do to avoid it?”

I deliberated a moment; my answer, when it did come, was objectionable: “I must keep in good health and not die.” (27)

Coming from a mere girl, Jane’s answer is astounding in its comprehension of womanhood. Brocklehurst stands before her representing the common view of women as inherently evil creatures, naturally “naughty” little girls, who must be taught and controlled and be “grateful for the inestimable privilege of [their] election” to such knowledge and guidance from society (Bronte 29). Before he leaves, Brocklehurst thrusts a conduct pamphlet into Jane’s hands and warns her to “read it with a prayer, especially that part containing ‘an account of the awfully sudden death of Martha G--, a naughty child addicted to falsehood and deceit’” (30). His warning is an attempt to scare Jane into obedience: essentially, little girls should do as they are told, or they will die. But Jane recognizes this patriarchal wolf in clerical clothing, this man who speaks of woman’s improvement with a man’s voice, and her answer has one up on Mr. Brocklehurst. We’ll die anyway, she knows, whether we play your game or not. The real trick, you see, is to play your game and not die.

What Jane seems to understand with a wisdom beyond her years is that women live in a world in which death is both their definition and their destiny. That is, a definition formulated by a patriarchal social machine and a destiny controlled by that machine, not by God. Brocklehurst threatens Jane with God’s hell, but Jane already knows that being a
dutiful woman is a kind of man-made, living hell, a live burial, “controlling your features, muffling your voice, restricting your limbs; and you fear in the presence of a man and a brother—or father, or master, or what you will—to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly . . .” (Bronte 122). Jane would rather stay “wicked” and in good health than be a walking corpse under Brocklehurst’s terms.

The truth about womanhood forced on the orphaned, friendless, penniless Jane Eyre at a tender age comes later, at the riper age of seventeen, for Catherine Morland. One of the youngest of Jane Austen’s heroines, Catherine in Northanger Abbey is on the threshold of womanhood—or rather, wifehood—and is searching for the meaning of womanhood. Although protected by relative comfort and by a functional, loving family, such sugar-coating does not keep her from learning that womanhood is intimately connected with death. There is no definitive guide to this truth; Catherine must glean what she can by observing the women around her, especially her mother, and by measuring these examples of womanhood against the examples offered in the gothic novels she reads. Catherine’s investigation turns up just how closely death lurks beneath the social surface of women’s lives.

Austen opens Northanger Abbey with a backward look at Catherine as a little girl of ten years old, “before the prison house of young adulthood closed over her” (Sulloway 190) and her search for the truth has begun. Mischievous, tomboyish, and unteachable, Catherine “was moreover noisy and wild, hated confinement and cleanliness, and loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house” (Northanger Abbey 2). She is “awkward” and “plain,” and Austen declares in the first
sentence of the novel that "no one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her born to be an heroine" (1). Indeed, "not less unpropitious for heroism seemed her mind" (1), for the child Catherine has no idea yet that she is supposed to become a woman, an object to be gazed at and assessed and appropriated, perhaps against her will, just like a heroine in the novel. That genre was exploding during the late eighteenth century,¹ and its principal focus was on woman, for the point of view of most of the popular novels of the day was that of presenting a heroine as a woman to be viewed, a narrative strategy that, as Dorothy Van Ghent points out in her examination of Richardson's *Clarissa,* was designed "to make of the reader a Peeping Tom, to make him share in the dubious delights of voyeurism" (49).² Catherine has no idea yet that she is supposed to echo that unfortunate heroine; while she may not assume the mythic proportions of a Clarissa, Catherine is nevertheless to be caught in the social myths of womanhood that destroyed Clarissa. Van Ghent explains that

*Clarissa* herself is offered as the ideal woman in her purity and debility—and these qualities, too, are extraordinarily limited abstractions from the complex qualities that might be conceived as making up complete womanhood; at the same time, 


²Claudia Johnson provides an excellent list of novels focusing on women heroines in her article "A 'Sweet Face as White as Death': Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility," *Novel* 22.2 (1989): 159-74. Also note the number of novels with a woman’s name as the sole title: Richardson's *Pamela,* Fielding's *Amelia,* Burney's *Evelina,* *Cecilia,* and *Camilla,* Edgeworth's *Belinda,* Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Heloise,* and many others, including Austen's own *Lady Susan* from her Juvenilia and *Emma.* And the gothic novel, of course, centered on the victimized heroine, which this chapter will discuss.
pure and debile as she is, paradoxically she offers an ideal of the sexual woman (in
the world of this book), the physically desirable woman. She is a kind of love
goddess, a Venus. . . . She is the love goddess of the Puritan middle class of the
English eighteenth century, of the bourgeois family, of the mercantile society. She
is pure (to be paraded for the sight as an expensive chattel—or, in later generations,
to show herself voluntarily as “career girl”), and yet to be violated (for in a society
that has desexualized its professed mores, sex is violation), but still to be seen
while she is being violated (for sex insists on perpetuating its attractions, but they
must be enjoyed by proxy, as in the movies, or sub rosa). The lover to whom she
deploys her attractions is the lover as narcissist, as voyeur, as sadist—all
abstractionists. (50)

Clarissa is at the center of a “cult of death,” Van Ghent asserts; unable to satisfy her
family’s and society’s lust for money by marrying, Clarissa is fair game, essentially stalked
by Lovelace (society) and devoured by him while her family peeps out of its supposedly
blind eye (60-1).

Catherine is no love goddess, but “from fifteen to seventeen she was in training for
a heroine,” the next best thing. As Diane Hoeveler suggests, “All women . . . are born the
heroines of their own rather inconspicuous lives, whether they look the part or not,” and
Catherine senses that womanhood has something to do with heroinism (123). Catherine’s
resistance to education has been overcome by an interest in literature, and “she read all
such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which
are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (Northanger
Abbey 3). She begins to understand that she must look womanly. She “began to curl her hair and long for balls,” and to have “an inclination for finery,” and as her body matures she becomes more attractive. She also begins to realize that she is looked at, for “she had now the pleasure of sometimes hearing her father and mother remark on her personal improvement. ‘Catherine grows quite a good-looking girl,—she is almost pretty to day,’ were words which caught her ears now and then; and how welcome were the sounds!”

(3). Catherine’s vanity is gratified by her parents’ comments, but such praise is spoken with more in mind than pleasing Catherine. Their compliment is also an assessment; with ten children to prepare for adulthood, they might well hope that their eldest daughter will prove pretty enough to tempt a man to marry her with the little dowry they can offer. They cannot dangle her before the highest bidders, as the Harlowes do with Clarissa, but they know Catherine will be appraised by more critical eyes than their own. Catherine, too, has learned that she is supposed to be viewed by others, especially by prospective suitors. She is frustrated, however, by the lack of “suitable” men for observing her:

She had reached the age of seventeen, without having seen one amiable youth who could call forth her sensibility; without having inspired one real passion, and without having excited even any admiration but what was very moderate and very transient. This was strange indeed! But strange things may be generally accounted for if their cause be fairly searched out. There was not one lord in the neighbourhood; no—not even a baronet. There was not one family among their acquaintance who had reared and supported a boy accidentally found at their door—not one young man whose origin was unknown. Her father had no ward,
and the squire of the parish no children.

But when a young lady is to be a heroine, the perverseness of forty surrounding families cannot prevent her. Something must and will happen to throw a hero in her way. (*Northanger Abbey* 4-5)

Catherine's need of a hero to notice her, fall in love with her, and marry her is treated comically here by Austen, but beneath this fun is a serious note. Catherine has somehow changed from an independent, even rebellious child to an incomplete young woman who needs a man to complete her, to write her story and furnish her with an ending, preferably a matrimonial ending. How has this change occurred? Catherine has been virtually isolated in a country village. Where has she learned to objectify herself?

Catherine's only example of womanhood has been her mother, an example straight from the conduct book model of womanhood. Mrs. Morland, despite Austen's irony in depicting her, is practically a perfect woman according to conduct book standards.

Catherine's "mother was a woman of useful plain sense, with a good temper, and what is more remarkable, with a good constitution. She had three sons before Catherine was born; and instead of dying in bringing the latter into the world, as any body might expect, she still lived on--lived to have six children more--to see them growing up around her, and to enjoy excellent health herself" (*Northanger Abbey* 1). She is the dutiful woman described in the many conduct books and pamphlets written by "orthodox men and their female imitators" as guides to educating girls toward proper womanhood (Sulloway 190). Alison Sulloway's excellent exploration of eighteenth-century conduct book literature in *Jane Austen and the Province of Womanhood* reveals that conduct book literature was
based on the idea that women are naturally ignorant, childish creatures who must be taught how to behave. They have weak minds, too weak for any real education, but such education as they can comprehend should stress the need for woman’s obedience and passivity. They have weak bodies, too, and must be kept from robust (male) activities that are unbecoming and dangerous to them. Woman belongs in the domestic sphere, where the properly brought up female will impart the moral, Christian, obedient lessons she has been taught.

Mrs. Morland is certainly obedient to her husband, producing ten children for him, and expending a good deal of time in bringing up those children according to what she has been taught. Austen says very little about Mrs. Morland herself, except that “Mrs. Morland was a very good woman, and wished to see her children every thing they ought to be; but her time was so much occupied in lying-in and teaching the little ones, that her elder daughters were inevitably left to shift for themselves,” (3), but this slight comment reveals much about Catherine’s mother and about her conduct-book view of Catherine. The education Catherine does receive consists of her mother’s making her learn morally edifying children’s texts like Beggar’s Petition and The Hare and Many Friends and forcing her to read appropriate texts of history, and trying to induce Catherine to learn the ladylike pursuits of speaking French, playing music and drawing. Catherine later refers to her education as a “torment” and especially refers to history, “real solemn history,” as something she hates:

“I read it a little as a duty, but it tells me nothing that does not either vex or weary me. The quarrels of popes and kings, with wars or pestilences, in every page, the
men all so good for nothing, and hardly any women at all—it is very tiresome: and yet I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention. The speeches that are put into the heroes’ mouths, their thoughts and designs—the chief of all this must be invention, and invention is what delights me in other books.” (84)

Catherine’s dislike for and her lack of mastery of her education does not indicate that Catherine is naturally stupid, as conduct books would suggest, but that the “appropriate” material offered to her is inappropriate to her needs. To be cramped into a schoolroom in order to make herself better (what, exactly, is wrong with her?) by learning to repeat moral texts and by reading histories written by and about men sends Catherine a powerful message about herself: she is faulty and needs correcting. Sulloway points out that “Catherine Morland’s description of male history and customs, and masculine assumptions about women” unwittingly echoes the protests of feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft who were writing in the 1790s, “yet [Catherine is] unaware . . . of the sinister implications behind her innocent speech” (Sulloway 37). Catherine does not know enough to protest against such an unpalatable and inadequate education, and when her mother, “who did not insist on her daughters being accomplished in spite of incapacity or distaste” (Northanger Abbey 2), stops bothering with her “sad little shatter-brained” daughter’s lessons, Catherine is glad to be released from such suffering (Northanger Abbey 190). She nevertheless has gotten the message: daughters aren’t worth educating anyway. Daughters are for marrying, for “lying-in and teaching little ones,” and don’t need much “real” knowledge.
Mrs. Morland stands before Catherine as a mute model, rather than a communicative guide, of wife- and motherhood, and Catherine must wonder whether her mother is hiding some unspoken truth about womanhood from her. In a world in which women’s deaths from childbirth or from its after effects were very common, Mrs. Morland seems too conduct-book perfect. The traces of weariness Catherine has noticed on her mother’s face after morning lessons with her children (Northanger Abbey 85) and her constant birthings (Catherine, as the fourth child, must have heard, if not witnessed, many of these births), suggest that some other reality lies beneath that exemplary facade of motherhood. Her mother is a passionless, automatic, created object—a mother rather than a woman; why doesn’t she warn Catherine about this objectification?

What Catherine cannot learn for the uncommunicative Mrs. Morland, she learns when she goes to Bath. Mr. and Mrs. Allen invite Catherine to go with them to Bath in order to cure Mr. Allen’s gout, and Mrs. Morland entrusts Catherine to Mrs. Allen, another conduct-book woman from whom Catherine will receive no real guidance. She is not the moral model of motherhood that Mrs. Morland is, but she is a perfect example of objectified womanhood. Like Lady Bertram in Mansfield Park, she is an adornment, a woman with “the air of a gentlewoman, a great deal of quiet, inactive good temper, and a trifling turn of mind” (Northanger Abbey 7). “Dress was her passion,” Austen reveals, and it soon becomes clear that Catherine will have no lessons from Mrs. Allen except in how to dress well, a lesson which nevertheless is important for a heroine/unmarried young lady to know if she is to survive in society (Hoeveler 120). On Catherine’s first night at a Bath ball, her hair and gown having been supervised by Mrs. Allen and her indispensable
maid, she is “in very good looks,” and is ready to be perused by men:

Every five minutes, by removing some of the crowd, gave greater openings for her charms. She was now seen by many young men who had not been near her before. Not one, however, started with rapturous wonder on beholding her, no whisper of eager inquiry ran round the room, nor was she once called a divinity by any body. Yet Catherine was in very good looks, and had the company only seen her three years before, they would now have thought her exceedingly handsome.

She was looked at however, and with some admiration, for, in her own hearing, two gentlemen pronounced her to be a pretty girl. (Northanger Abbey 10-11)

Catherine is in raptures that she has been noticed and estimated as pretty. That Catherine is supposed to view herself being viewed—a heroine is always conscious of herself—is further confirmed when she meets and dances with Henry Tilney the next evening. Tilney possesses “an archness and pleasantry in his manner which interested, though it was hardly understood by her” (11), and Catherine finds that he seems to know a great deal about the female mind. He amuses her by conversing with Mrs. Allen, who is perfectly serious, on the subject of muslin gowns, and he presumes to guess the contents of Catherine’s next journal entry:

“Yes, I know exactly what you will say: Friday, went to the Lower Rooms; wore my sprigged muslin robe with blue trimmings—plain black shoes—appeared to much advantage; but was strangely harassed by a queer, half-witted man, who would make me dance with him, and distressed me by his nonsense."

“Indeed I shall say no such thing.”
“Shall I tell you what you ought to say?”

“If you please.”

“I danced with a very agreeable young man, introduced by Mr. King; had a great deal of conversation with him—seems a most extraordinary genius—hope I may know more of him. That, madam, is what I wish you to say.” (12-3)

Catherine is not sophisticated enough to keep a journal in which to record herself, but Tilney’s knowing account of what is generally written gives her an idea that young ladies are supposed to do just what she has done: appearing to advantage, interesting a man, hoping to know him further.

Catherine soon comes to understand, however, that being an object of interest is a serious matter, especially in a place like Bath, where parading oneself in the Pump Room is a daily activity. It is during such a parade, which makes Catherine uncomfortably self-conscious, that she meets the Thorpes, a family that will initiate her into womanhood/heroinehood/objecthood with thoroughness. Isabella Thorpe is an accomplished heroine who well understands the mechanics of looking. When she notices “two odious young men who have been staring at me this half hour” (26), she insists that she and Catherine move elsewhere in the Pump Room, and she then asks Catherine to keep an eye on the men because she herself is “determined” not to look up. The minute they leave, however, she leads Catherine outside in the very direction of the men, where her plan is to nonchalantly pass them, let them see her again, but appear oblivious to them. Catherine doesn’t much understand it, but she has had a very fine lesson on being an object. Woman are supposed to protest while positioning themselves as objects of
Isabella’s most valuable contribution to Catherine’s education comes when she introduces Catherine to gothic novels. It is important to note here that the few novels Catherine has been exposed to at home are probably not gothic novels. In fact, when Austen writes that Catherine “read all such works as heroines must read to supply their memories with those quotations which are so serviceable and so soothing in the vicissitudes of their eventful lives” (3), she uses examples from poetry (Pope, Gray, Thompson and Shakespeare) rather than from novels. When Isabella thinks it “odd” that Catherine has never read Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Catherine explains that “new books do not fall in our way” (25) at the Morland household, where her parents are hardly literary types, “her father, at the utmost, being contented with a pun, and her mother with a proverb” (47), and such novels as they do possess are more along the lines of Richardson’s *Sir Charles Grandison*, which her mother “often” reads (25). Catherine’s novel-reading experience has likely been limited to “one branch of the [novel] genre, the polite novel, [which] was considered acceptable for young women” (Jerinic 145). Morally instructive romances like *Pamela* or *Clarissa* were probably the sort of novels found in the Morland library, and these novels portrayed the virtuous conduct book behavior Mrs. Morland approves, but they also relayed to Catherine the idea that women are to be watched, coveted, pursued, married, or taken by force. The stories of these beleaguered young ladies were enough to subtly feed the nagging worries about real womanhood that Catherine has in the back of her mind. In *Pamela’s* and *Clarissa’s* world, womanhood seems vulnerable and constantly threatened with danger, pain, and death. Men in these
novels appear more as torturers and death-bringers; even good men cannot always bring about an effective rescue of a distressed maiden.

Her mind already armed with vague hints of danger, and her experience as an object broadening every day at Bath, Catherine is easily sucked into the sinister world of the gothic novel, which provides “a definitive portrait of the subjective heroine for her day” (Butler, “Woman at Window” 140). Catherine can hardly look up from Udolpho, cannot wait to read The Italian, and she looks forward to the long list of gothic novels Isabella has listed for her: “Castle of Wolfenbach, Clermont, Mysterious Warnings, Necromancer of the Black Forest, Midnight Bell, Orphan of the Rhine, and Horrid Mysteries” (Northanger Abbey 24). In the gothic novel Catherine finds quite a different model of womanhood from that her mother exhibits, but she also finds that which she has suspected lies behind her mother’s facade. Claire Kahane explains in “The Gothic Mirror,” that “locked into the forbidden center of the Gothic . . . is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing, a ghost signifying the problematics of femininity which the heroine must confront” (336) And the problems are many, as Catherine will discover when she finds that the “moral and physical coercion of the powerless females which figures so predominantly in gothic fiction” is not so different from “the daytime world of drawing-room manners” in which she will find herself powerless and victimized (Johnson, Jane Austen 37).

What begins as a routine acquaintance, for example, soon spirals into a chain of events in which Catherine is inevitably and innocently caught by the various men who seek to manipulate her. As self-absorbed and calculating as his sister Isabella, John Thorpe
believes Catherine to be rich Mr. Allen’s heir because the Allens have no children of their own and she is “always very much with them” (*Northanger Abbey* 45). Isabella has engaged herself to Catherine’s brother, whom the Thorpes also believe will inherit a great deal from Mr. Morland (this is not the case), and so John Thorpe decides to marry Catherine. Thorpe cannot speak a word without puffing himself up—“his carriage [was] the neatest, his horse the best goer, and himself the best coachman” he blusters impressively to Catherine (46)—and in embellishing his own image he necessarily embellishes Catherine’s, too. He chances to speak to Henry Tilney’s father at a ball, and when General Tilney sees his son paying attention to Catherine, he asks what Thorpe knows of her.

Thorpe, most happy to be on speaking terms with a man of General Tilney’s importance, had been joyfully and proudly communicative;—and being at that time not only in daily expectation of Morland’s engaging Isabella, but likewise pretty well resolved upon marrying Catherine himself, his vanity induced him to represent the family as yet more wealthy than his vanity and avarice had made him believe them. With whomsoever he was, or was likely to be connected, his own consequence always required that theirs should be great, and as his intimacy with any acquaintance grew, so regularly did their fortune. The expectations of his friend Morland, therefore, from the first over-rated, had ever since his introduction to Isabella, been gradually increasing; and by merely adding twice as much for the granduer of the moment, by doubling what he chose to think the amount of Mr. Morland’s preferment, trebling his private fortune, bestowing a rich aunt, and
sinking half the children, he was able to represent the whole family to the General in a most respectable light. For Catherine, however, the peculiar object of the General's curiosity, and his own speculations, he had yet something more in reserve, and the ten or fifteen thousand pounds which her father could give her, would be a pretty addition to Mr. Allen's estate. Her intimacy there had made him seriously determine on her being handsomely legacied hereafter; and to speak of her therefore as the almost acknowledged future heiress of Fullerton naturally followed. (199)

Just as the heroine in Udolpho and other gothic novels is imprisoned and fought over by powerful males who want to marry or kill her for her fortune, Catherine becomes a heroine in the gothic texts formulated by the men she encounters (Mooneyham 10). John Thorpe has made Catherine the heroine of his ambitious daydreams about himself, and General Tilney makes Catherine the object of his plans for his son, whom he commands to do "everything in his power to attach her" (Northanger Abbey 200). Catherine is simply "a new source of income on the market" to these men, writes Diane Hoeveler, and their "discussing her supposed financial status would be little different in their minds from discussing the value of stocks and bonds and any other projected or potential investment."

Hoeveler continues, "Neither version [of theirs] is an accurate depiction of her financial standing. And yet both versions of Catherine reveal the woman as blank slate. For the Thorpes and Generals of this world, woman is only what the more powerful man says she is; she has no ontological reality in herself, only as much or as little as he assigns to her" (127). Claudia Johnson concurs, stating that "when one shows how father-surrogates like
Montoni [the villain of Udolpho] wield legal and religious authority over women in order to force marriages and thereby consolidate their own wealth, one is describing what patriarchal society daily permits as a matter of course, not what is an aberration from its softening and humanizing influences” (Jane Austen 33). The gothic is reality.

Catherine is oblivious to the fact that she is the heroine of someone’s text other than her own. She is only just figuring out that reality is heavily composed of fictions, and has yet to discover how very much fiction resembles reality. Bath has shown Catherine that people may say one thing yet be another; certainly, John Thorpe impresses her as being a boor rather than the beau he touts he is, and Isabella’s coy virtue and exaggerations puzzle her, while Mrs. Allen the chaperone refuses to guide her protégé properly. Little does she know that the even wilder fictions of the novels she shivers over each day will become to some extent her reality. Catherine has learned to read people, but she has not yet learned how to read a gothic novel. The assumption Austen expects her less astute readers to make here is that Catherine’s passion for gothics, her “craving to be frightened” (Northanger Abbey 166), is the result of her lack of education and her propensity for being gullible, but her trip to Northanger Abbey proves that she has a sharp, womanly instinct that is awakened by the gothic.

Catherine’s visit to Northanger Abbey is both a fiction and a reality. Her invitation to accompany the Tilneys to their home is itself a mix of fiction and reality; the General asks Catherine to keep his daughter Eleanor company, but his real purpose in inviting Catherine is to get Henry to court her. Catherine, on her side, immediately imagines the Abbey through the eyes of a gothic novel: “With all the chances against her of house, hall,
place, park, court, and cottage, Northanger turned up an abbey, and she was to be its inhabitant. Its long, damp passages, its narrow cells and ruined chapel, were to be within her daily reach, and she could not entirely subdue the hope of some traditional legends, some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (Northanger Abbey 110).

Henry Tilney, too, prepares her for Northanger as fiction. On their journey from Bath he teases her by telling a facetious gothic tale in which she is the heroine at Northanger Abbey:

“But you must be aware that when a young lady is (by whatever means) introduced into a dwelling of this kind, she is always lodged apart from the rest of the family. While they snugly repair to their own end of the house, she is formally conducted by Dorothy the ancient housekeeper up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before. Can you stand such a ceremony as this? Will not your mind misgive you, when you find yourself in this gloomy chamber—too lofty and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size—its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance. Will not your heart sink within you?” (124-5)

Catherine laughs at this description straight out of a novel, but Henry continues:

“How fearfully will you examine the furniture of your apartment!—And what will you discern?—Not tables, toilettes, wardrobes, or drawers, but on one side perhaps the remains of a broken lute, on the other a ponderous chest which no efforts can
open, and over the fire-place the portrait of some handsome warrior, whose features will so incomprehensibly strike you, that you will not be able to withdraw your eyes from it. Dorothy meanwhile, no less struck by your appearance, gazes at you in great agitation, and drops a few unintelligible hints. To raise your spirits, moreover, she gives you reason to suppose that the part of the abbey you inhabit is undoubtedly haunted, and informs you that you will not have a single domestic within call. With this parting cordial she curseys off--you listen to the sound of her receding footsteps as long as the last echo can reach you--and when, with fainting spirits, you attempt to fasten your door, you discover, with increased alarm, that it has no lock.” (125)

Henry Tilney’s mocking description of Catherine at Northanger Abbey may be harmless, but it still strikes a very real chord in Catherine because his description resonates with the feminine fear at the core of the gothic novel. Claire Kahane joins Leslie Fiedler in interpreting the haunted, ancient, enormous castle that figures in every gothic tale as a “maternal space” in which the dark, cavernous dungeon is representative of the “womb from whose darkness the ego first emerged, the tomb to which it knows it must return at last’” (Kahane 336). The gothic heroine is both drawn to this mother image as her heritage, yet she is repelled by the all or nothingness the image represents. “In this light,” says Kahane, “the heroine’s active exploration of the Gothic house in which she is trapped is also an exploration of her relation to the maternal body that she shares, with all its connotations of power over and vulnerability to forces within and without” (338). The image of Catherine that Henry Tilney’s story conjures presents a young woman alone
confronting, in virtual darkness, a bed that is both sensual (dark green or purple velvet) and funereal, while over the mantel a male portrait gazes down. The door to this suggestive chamber is penetrable; it has no lock to protect the heroine from intruders.

Henry goes on in his story to describe Catherine’s search of an “old-fashioned cabinet of ebony and gold,” which will yield a manuscript that she begins to read with trembling hands just as her candle goes out and leaves her in complete darkness (126). Catherine is highly amused by this thrilling story and declares, “‘Miss Tilney, she was sure, would never put her into such a chamber as he had described!—She was not at all afraid!’” (127), yet she strains to see the Abbey as they approach it, hoping it will look every bit as dreadful as Henry Tilney’s story suggests.

Reality, however, appears different. The Abbey has been renovated to modern tastes, and rather than a wide, “ponderous” fireplace, dramatically pointed gothic windows, “the heaviest stone-work, . . . painted glass, dirt and cobwebs,” Catherine is disappointed to find a modern Rumford fireplace, delicate English china, shining floors and staircases, and evidence of both cleanliness and comfort. Her room is prettily papered and carpeted and not at all gloomy. Catherine nevertheless cannot let go of the feeling of mystery and danger that intrigues her, and her imagination seizes on a large chest in her room. She approaches it, examines it, raises this heavy lid with shaking hands to discover “a white cotton counterpane, properly folded, reposing at one end of the chest in undisputed possession!” (Northanger Abbey 130). Reality has proved fiction wrong in this instance, for Catherine finds no blood-stained clothes or manuscripts, just a place for “holding hats and bonnets,” as Miss Tilney explains when she arrives to escort her friend.
to dinner. Miss Tilney seems uneasy and gently urges Catherine to hurry, and Catherine soon discovers the reason for Eleanor’s politely concealed anxiety, as they approach the dining room she sees that Eleanor’s nervousness was “not wholly unfounded, for General Tilney was pacing the drawing-room floor, his watch in his hand, and having, on the very instant of their entering, pulled the bell with violence, ordered ‘Dinner to be on table directly!’” (131). Catherine trembles at such behavior in the man who previously has appeared decorous and gentlemanly, if only a little stern, but the General soon “recovers” himself and presides over the dinner with smiles, especially querying Catherine with nonchalant questions about Mr. Allen’s house and comparing her description with the largeness and luxury of his own house. Although Catherine does not fully realize how she fits into the General’s plans, she nevertheless is starting to understand how dominating he is and how he dampens his children’s spirits with his presence. There is something of the cruel tyrant from the fictional world in this real man’s demeanor.

The feeling of oppression Catherine senses in General Tilney’s presence follows her to bed that evening. Unable to shake the frightening images from gothic novels that crowd her head, especially the ones conjured up by Henry’s story, Catherine notices a black cabinet in the room. “Henry’s words, his description of the ebony cabinet which was to escape her observation at first, immediately rushed across her; and though there could be nothing really in it, there was something whimsical, it was certainly a very remarkable coincidence!” (Northanger Abbey 133). The cabinet must contain something truly horrible, Catherine is sure, and she with great difficulty manages to unlock it and explore all its cavities until she discovers a locked one that seems as difficult to open as
the outer lock of the cabinet. Catherine persists and at last unlocks it:

... her quick eyes directly fell on a roll of paper pushed back into the further part of the cavity, apparently for concealment, and her feelings at that moment were indescribable. Her heart fluttered, her knees trembled, and her cheeks grew pale. She seized, with an unsteady hand, the precious manuscript, for half a glance sufficed to ascertain written characters; and while she acknowledged with awful sensations this striking exemplification of what Henry had foretold, resolved instantly to peruse every line before she attempted to rest. (135)

Catherine's candle goes out, however, before she can delve into the horrible story revealed by the manuscript, and she tosses and turns all night imagining ghostly sounds, the lock of her door being shaken, her curtains mysteriously moving, and other evidence that danger lurks in the Abbey, danger which she will surely be warned of in the manuscript. The light of day, however, reveals again that Catherine seems to have mixed up the doings of fiction with the apprehensions of reality. Instead of a woeful tale of wrongdoing, Catherine finds "an inventory of linen, in coarse and modern characters" in her hands:

Shirts, stockings, cravats and waistcoats faced her in each [sheet]. Two others, penned by the same hand, marked an expenditure scarcely more interesting, in letters, hair-powder, shoe-string and breeches-ball. And the larger sheet, which had inclosed the rest, seemed by its first cramp line, "To poultice chestnut mare,"—a farrier's bill! Such was the collection of papers, (left, perhaps, as she could then suppose, by the negligence of a servant in the place whence she had taken them,) which had filled her with expectation and alarm, and robbed her of half her
night's rest! (137)

Catherine is of course ashamed of letting her imagination get away from her, and
she chastizes herself for letting fiction color reality. What she does not actually realize,
though, is that reality colors fiction. The ordinariness of the things she has found in her
trembling explorations are testimony to the very oppression Catherine senses in both the
novels she reads and in the very real presence of General Tilney. According to Diane
Hoeverler,
The large and imposing cabinet with the visible key tropes the family's apparent
transparent status as an institution that is open to complete scrutiny and
understanding by all. A deeper examination of this episode suggests that in fact
women have not explored or analyzed the structure of the family. They have
accepted its bulk and its power to contain and define them. They have, in very real
senses, allowed themselves to be buried alive within all of the separate cabinets
that dot the landscape of England. The linen and the laundry list are the visible
residue of woman's lost and unpaid labor for the family. The domesticities, rather
than reassuring Catherine, should have horrified her. (131)

Part of Austen's brutal irony in this novel is that Catherine comes upon so many clues to
discovering the truth about womanhood yet does not have the education or discernment to
put all of these clues together into a definitive answer. She operates on instinct alone,
suspecting something is not right, but powerless to express her doubts. She knows that
truths are always buried in gothic stories and that women--martyred nuns, captive
heiresses, disobedient wives, etc.--are buried as well. What she cannot articulate is that
the buried truths and women are the same, that women are so carefully interred—in glass coffins as it were—with no traces of their murderers, that detection is virtually impossible.

Wordless she may be, but Catherine’s instinct persists until she comes actually to suspect the General of wrongdoing. Her second morning at the Abbey is spent in a guided tour by General Tilney, the tour beginning with the grounds of his estate. After taking Catherine through numerous gardens, all the while smugly urging her to compare Mr. Allen’s modest grounds with his own extensive ones, General Tilney stops at a path that leads into a grove with a “gloomy aspect,” a grove which Miss Tilney identifies as her favorite path. He wishes Catherine to walk another way, but he perceives her inclination for that path and agrees to meet the young ladies on the other side. Catherine is “shocked to find how much her spirits were relieved by the separation” (Northanger Abbey 143).

When Eleanor reveals that this path was also her mother’s favorite walk, Catherine immediately wonders why the General does not reverence it as much as his daughter does. She is consumed with curiousity about Eleanor’s mother and asks numerous questions about her as they walk:

“Was she a very charming woman? Was she handsome? Was there any picture of her in the Abbey? And why had she been partial to that grove? Was it from dejection of spirits?”—were questions now eagerly poured forth;—the first three received a ready affirmative, the two others were passed by; and Catherine’s interest in the deceased Mrs. Tilney augmented with every question, whether answered or not. Of her unhappiness in marriage, she felt persuaded. The General certainly had been an unkind husband. He did not love her walk;—could he
therefore have loved her? And besides, handsome as he was, there was a something
in the turn of his features which spoke his not having behaved well to her. (144)

Upon discovering that Mrs. Tilney’s picture hangs in Eleanor’s room rather than General
Tilney’s because he “was dissatisfied with the painting,” Catherine is convinced that he
must have been a very cruel husband to his wife. Her feelings of “terror and dislike” for
the General now turn to “absolute aversion,” and she feels more oppressed than ever when
they meet again and she is “obliged to walk with him, listen to him, and even to smile
when he smiled” (Northanger Abbey 144-5).

The rest of her tour consists of a fatiguing walk through the Abbey itself, and
Catherine is awed by its massiveness and its granduer, and she is irritated by the General’s
constant evidence that he has “improved” the ancient building with his modern
conveniences and luxurious taste. His powerful hand seems to touch everything and to
erode the venerability of the past. As Judith Wilt points out, General Tilney’s
ostentatious, avaricious attitudes testify to the general shift from religious to secular
values that occurred in the sixteenth century when the monasteries and convents of
England were obliterated. God has been displaced by possessions as an object of
veneration. Even the clergymen in Austen’s novels, Wilt adds, have no fervor to them;
Mr. Elton, Mr. Collins, even the more admirable Edmund Bertram and Edward Ferrars,
and Northanger Abbey’s own Henry Tilney, exhibit no passion for the Church—it is simply
a good, respectable living for them (Wilt 139-44). Diane Hoeveler goes even further to
suggest that it is not merely Christianity that has been wrested from Northanger Abbey, it
is also the spiritual women who have been wrested from their place. “The idea of the
Abbey as a female community of nuns, living in seclusion from men and escaping the demands of marriage and childbirth—this is what the General and his ancestors have usurped," Hoeveler contends. "There is no longer in England any form of communal escape for women. There is only the reality of women as property, sources of income, breeders of heirs—the sad and oft told tale of female disinherance, "buried nuns" (130).

Catherine comes to Northanger Abbey especially hoping to come across "some awful memorials of an injured and ill-fated nun" (Northanger Abbey 110), but she instead becomes obsessed with the buried wife, Mrs. Tilney. She is certain that the General's ill humors, his restlessness, his apparent lack of reverence for his wife's memory all indicate that he carries a guilty conscience concerning her death; Catherine even wonders if she is dead. She imagines Mrs. Tilney locked in some subterranean passage, meagerly fed by the General at night. She becomes determined to see for herself Mrs. Tilney's apartments, and when an attempt to visit them with Eleanor is foiled by the General's "loud" summons of his daughter, Catherine decides to visit the chambers alone that afternoon. Her surprise is great upon finding no cobweb-laden torture chamber, but instead finding a neat, sunny, peaceful room, a refuge rather than a cell of horror. Her discovery is actually more terrifying to her than if she had found an emaciated Mrs. Tilney. To have found Mrs. Tilney would have been to rescue her, like in a novel, or to at least expose the General's treachery. But Mrs. Tilney is really, normally, irrevocably dead, and Catherine is powerless against the domestic facade of that death. Catherine's viewing of Mrs. Tilney's ordered room is like "the slap of life across her face," bringing home the fact that while a heroine in a novel may have the moral fortitude and resilience to undergo great suffering
and then rise against the “evil and mortality” that threaten her, a real young lady has no such power (Brown, 55; Hoeveler 132). Mrs. Tilney’s room is no different from Mrs. Morland’s room or any other eighteenth-century lady’s room, a small cell within that all-encompassing, greater space of the domestic house. Like the room of the dead Mrs. Casaubon that Dorothea Brooke surveys in George Eliot’s Middlemarch, the room is “a room where one might fancy the ghost of a tight-laced lady revisiting the scene of her embroidery” (Eliot 50). The wardrobes and chests in the rooms of real women hide no ghosts or secrets, only linens, sewing needles, toiletries, duodecimo books, and bibles, testimonials of a domestic, diminished life. How is one to rescue someone or be rescued from such a glass-ceilinged prison?

The answer is that one is not rescued, one is absorbed. Moments later, when Catherine is discovered in her exploration by Henry Tilney, she receives a lecture that puts her in her proper place. Catherine confesses her suspicions that Mrs. Tilney’s sudden death and her impression that General Tilney “had not been very fond of her” have led her to believe the General capable of something dreadful (Northanger Abbey 158). Henry sets her straight:

“You have erred in supposing him not attached to her. He loved her, I am persuaded, as well as it was possible for him to—We have not all, you know, the same tenderness of disposition—and I will not pretend to say that while she lived, she might not often have had much to bear, but though his temper injured her, his judgement never did. His value of her was sincere; and, if not permanently, he was truly afflicted by her death.” (159)
Henry's lecture continues:

"If I understand rightly, you had formed a surmise of such horror as I have hardly
words to--Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you
have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and
the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians.
Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own
observation of what is passing around you--Does our education prepare us for such
atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetuated without
being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such
a footing; where every man is surrounded by a neighborhood of voluntary spies,
and where roads and newspapers lay every thing open? Dearest Miss Morland,
what ideas have you been admitting?" (159)

There is something Brocklehurst in this speech, despite Henry Tilney's firmly genteel
delivery of it. Rather than brandishing a Bible, which as a clergyman he is authorized to
do, Henry Tilney brandishes words, and he uses powerful images of words--education,
law, social intercourse (i.e. gossip), literature, road signs, and newspapers--all of which
are either man-made or man-dominated, to chastize Catherine for her fanciful imagination.
One hears another, future Austen heroine here complaining, "'Men have had every
advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a
degree; the pen has been in their hands'" (Persuasion 221). Laura Mooneyham points out
that Henry, even more than General Tilney or John Thorpe, has been the consummate storyteller of Catherine's life. He knows that she is no heiress and he still courts her, yet his
courtship involves a text for Catherine as dominating as that devised by the other men. “For Henry,” declares Mooneyham, “Catherine represents the promise of a Galatea, a blank personality than can be molded to his specifications. Her charm for him is her ignorance, and his love for her, as the narrator candidly admits, springs from his flattering conviction that she loves him, which is, at best, a suspiciously narcissistic beginning for romance” (17-8). Just as a heroine is created and entrapped in a novel by the words of an author, Henry’s words create and entrap Catherine.

From the first night of their meeting, Henry Tilney assumes a linguistic superiority over Catherine. Dictating what she should write in her journal, then commenting on ladies as letter-writers, Henry tells Catherine that his opinion of women’s writing boils down to “a general deficiency of subject, a total inattention to stops, and a very frequent ignorance of grammar” (Northanger Abbey 13). Catherine is both intrigued by Henry’s confident air and puzzled by the seriousness behind his debonair humor. He mocks and corrects Catherine when she uses a word she has picked up from Isabella, “amazingly,” and he pounces on her usage of the word “nice,” a word he disdainfully says is used for “every commendation on every subject” (84). When he has to clear up a misunderstanding between Catherine, whose obsession with gothic novels leads her to announce that “something very shocking indeed, will soon come out in London,” and Eleanor, who thinks Catherine must mean a riot, he does so condescendingly: “‘I will prove myself a man, no less by the generosity of my soul than the clearness of my head. I have no patience with such of my sex as disdain to let themselves sometimes down to the comprhension of yours. Perhaps the abilities of women are neither sound nor acute--
neither vigorous nor keen. Perhaps they may want observation, discernment, judgment, fire, genius, and wit" (88). Eleanor tells Catherine her brother is merely being sarcastic and does not mean what he says, but throughout the novel he continues to dominate and influence Catherine with words. He commences to teach her a thing or two about artistic taste during a walk, talking of "fore-grounds, distances, and second distances--side-screens and perspectives--lights and shades." Pleased by her willingness to be instructed, "and fearful of wearying her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject to decline, and... shortly found himself arrived at politics" (87). Henry may be more polished than John Thorpe and less ostentatious than General Tilney, but he is a tyrant nevertheless. His masterful use of words is little different from their mercantile gossip about Catherine and their inflated opinions of their possessions, for each man's words "are decreed as unanswerable facts, and the self-assurance of the promulgators enforces credence and silences dissent" (Johnson, Jane Austen 38). Catherine cannot hope to correct John Thorpe in his proud prattle about horses and carriages, she does not dare to contradict or question the General in his opinions of himself and Northanger Abbey, and she cannot stand up for herself when Henry presumes to remake her speech patterns and opinions. Catherine echoes the sorely-tried yet fairly judged Mrs. Tilney: "It was no effort to Catherine to believe that Henry Tilney could never be wrong. His manner might sometimes surprize, but his meaning must always be just:--and what she did not understand, she was almost as ready to admire, as what she did," Austen writes of her heroine (89). It is no wonder, then, that when Henry attacks Catherine for letting her gothic imagination get away from her, she responds only with speechless tears and by
running away from him in shame.

Henry's "astonishing generosity and nobleness of conduct, in never alluding in the slightest way to what had passed, was of greatest assistance" to Catherine in adjusting her mind to more sober, rational thought (Northanger Abbey 161). Is there not something rather satisfied, maybe even smirking, in this astonishing generosity and nobleness of conduct? One imagines Henry Tilney's manner here very close to that of a doctor who has cured his patient of some malady or removed some diseased part from her body, or even performed a lobotomy on the poor, hysterical creature. In fact, there is evidence that Henry Tilney encouraged Catherine's gothic tendencies only to obliterate them. Tilney seems to pride himself on understanding women, whether it is muslins, or their writing, their speech, or their friendships, and he openly admits to being an even more devoted reader of gothic novels than most women are. "I myself have read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas," he tells Catherine. "If we proceed to particulars, and engage in the never-ceasing inquiry of 'Have you read this?' and 'Have you read that?' I shall soon leave you as far behind me as--what shall I say?--as far as your friend Emily herself left poor Valencourt when she went with her aunt into Italy." Henry then adds, "Consider how many years I have had the start of you. I had entered on my studies at Oxford, while you were a good little girl working your sampler at home!" (83). If Henry Tilney understands the female psyche so well, then does not he also understand how that psyche is expressed in the gothic? With this understanding, cannot he manipulate that psyche by creating a gothic story for it?
This is just what Henry Tilney does, allege Judith Wilt and Maria Jerenic, when he makes up that gothic story for Catherine on their way to Northanger Abbey. Jerenic points out that "it is not until Henry taunts her with his own tale that Catherine begins to carve gothic fantasies out of her surroundings, that she is perplexed by the wood chest, or that she begins to fear the possible intrusions of 'midnight assassins or drunken gallants'." Judith Wilt likewise points out that when Henry browbeats Catherine for her wild imaginings, "he has lightly forgotten (putting the best face we can on this lapse) that the ideas she was admitting were his" (150). Henry's spooky tale and his later lecture are connected in their purposes. Henry knows how susceptible Catherine is to gothic suggestion, and he deliberately concocts a tale with all the key ingredients guaranteed to touch on Catherine's emerging anxieties about womanhood: darkness, an imposing building, an isolated room, a prominent bed, a handsome warrior, mysterious hints about her resemblance to this warrior, who may be a lost father, an undiscovered brother, or someone else with whom the heroine is intimately connected. The tale has its effect, for it brings out in Catherine her fears about sex. She cannot get into her bed without imagining someone prowling outside her door, someone stirring her curtains, someone moaning in pain or sorrow somewhere in the castle. She becomes acutely aware of the General as a dominating and admittedly handsome man, and her fantasies about him escalate into visions of nightly torture and perhaps murder. Diane Hoeveler interprets Catherine's fears about the General as "a child's imaginings about what her parents do at night when they are no longer under her watchful gaze. The notion that the mother is secretly imprisoned, 'shut up for causes unknown,' and fed only at night by the father--this is a crude version of a
child’s sense of sex as a violation and a physical assault. We need not ponder too long to realize that Catherine fears marriage as much as she claims to desire it” (132).

When Henry comes upon Catherine outside his mother’s room, he seems to have expected to find her there, and his manner is that of an adult questioning a guilty child. Upon her admitting that she was there to see Mrs. Tilney’s room, he remarks, “‘My mother’s room!—Is there any thing extraordinary to be seen there?’” Catherine changes the subject, but he adeptly draws her back to it by asking if Eleanor has neglected her by leaving her to explore the house all alone. Catherine falls into his trap.

“Oh! No; she shewed me over the greatest part on Saturday—and we were coming here to these rooms—but only—(dropping her voice)—Your father was with us.”

“And that prevented you,” said Henry, earnestly regarding her.—“have you looked into all the rooms in that passage?”

“No, I only wanted to see—Is not it very late? I must go and dress.”

“It is only a quarter past four, (shewing his watch) and you are not now in Bath. No theatre, no rooms to prepare for. Half an hour at Northanger must be enough.”

She could not contradict it, and therefore suffered herself to be detained, though her dread of further questions made her, for the first time in their acquaintance, wish to leave him. (157)

They walk on, talking of why she has received no letter from Isabella, and then Henry abruptly turns the conversation back to Catherine’s trespassing: “‘My mother’s room is
very commodious, is not it? Large and cheerful-looking, and the dressing closets so well disposed! It always strikes me as the most comfortable apartment in the house, and I rather wonder that Eleanor should not take it for her own. She sent you to look at it, I suppose?” (157). When Catherine denies this, he continues, determined to get her to admit her motives:

“It has been your own doing entirely?”—Catherine said nothing—After a short silence, during which he had closely observed her, he added, “As there is nothing in the room in itself to raise curiosity, this must have proceeded from a sentiment of respect for my mother’s character, as described by Eleanor, which does honour to her memory. The world, I believe, never saw a better woman. But it is not often that virtue can boast an interest such as this. The domestic, unpretending merits of a person never known, do not often create that kind of fervent, venerating tenderness which would prompt a visit like yours. Eleanor, I suppose, has talked of her a great deal?” (157-8).

Catherine then is led into confessing her suspicions about Mrs. Tilney’s death and the General’s part in it, and she then receives the lecture that puts her in her place—the exact place where Henry Tilney wants her. His previous story left off just at the point in which the curious heroine receives “unintelligible hints” about her connection to the past and her possible connection to the future, and any “normal” gothic heroine would of course intrepidly investigate those hints to find out the truth in following chapters. Catherine has done just this, inquiring into the life and death of a married woman, a mother, a woman with whom she feels a strange curiosity and connection. But she is cut off, chastized, the
book closed in her face, for continuing on her own the story Henry has started for her. The message is clear: women do not write their own stories. Catherine must not question or struggle against woman’s past, but obey the present as it is set up for her. And poor, frightened Catherine surrenders easily to this demand. She takes to her room after Henry’s humiliating lecture, determined to obliterate the very imagination that makes her who she is: “The liberty which her imagination had dared to take with the character of his father, could he ever forgive her? The absurdity of her curiosity and her fears, could they ever be forgotten? She hated herself more than she could express” (*Northanger Abbey* 159-60). There are echoes here of the Red Riding Hood image associated with Brocklehurst at the beginning of this chapter. “What good stories you tell, Mr. Tilney,” says Catherine, ignoring her instincts and naively edging closer; “Only the better to destroy your spirit with, my dear,” he replies.

Destroying Catherine’s womanly, inquiring spirit is necessary in order to make her a good wife, a wife such as Mrs. Tilney or Mrs. Morland, and this destruction is tantamount to murder. Of course, this sort of murder leaves no evidence recognizable by the laws of organized, enlightened society which Henry so proudly touts; it is a murder that takes place within, inside the castle/home and inside a heroine/wife, leaving only an empty woman, an empty cabinet, an empty room. The idea that marriage and murder are one and the same is intimately connected with the gothic, demonstrates Judith Wilt in *Ghosts of the Gothic: Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence*. The erosion of the Church in England, Wilt explains, resulted not only in a land filled with empty abbeys but also in a land filled with spiritually empty men, men such as the shallow, passionless clerics so
brilliantly depicted in Austen’s novels. Huge edifices originally built to signify inward, soul-searching activity and to keep out the corruptions of the world, the abbeys taken over by the likes of General Tilney are “hollow at the inward prospect,” offering nothing but modernized furnishings and possessions in place of the soul. Looking inward to find nothing of essence, men find they are essentially nothing themselves. This feeling of nothingness is at the heart of the gothic novel, Wilt contends:

The Church in English Gothic fiction is solid and massive, casting vivid shadows over the nation, an entity so weighty that it continually twists characters out of their personal orbits. As a result, the dread that is being exposed and explored in this fiction is the fear of being crushed. By contrast, the Church in Austen, Eliot, and Lawrence’s novels is dissolving, becoming transparent. The dread is of becoming invisible, of being unable to “distinguish” oneself, of casting no shadow, of existing without “consequence.” Blacked out or whited out, the dilemma of personality is the same—“Gothic,” as I have tried to define that word in earlier chapters. (144)

In a world of men clinging desperately to crumbling abbeys and shining coins to anchor their “consequence,” women necessarily become scapegoats for their fear of nothingness. To “create” a woman—or to do essentially the same thing in “murdering her”—offers an incredible feeling of power. If such power cannot any longer be accessed by sacraments and chants, it surely can be accessed by marriage vows. Refering to C. L. Pitt’s facetious recommendations for transforming a gothic romance into a novel by simply substituting a house for a castle, a father for a giant, a young man for a knight, and a marriage for a
murder, Wilt suggests that there is something uncannily true about this formula:

For marriage is the feared and wished-for catharsis of the serious English novel as death is of the Gothic: the great tradition novel reinforced, perhaps even helped establish, a secular mythos of marriage as the gateway to reality in the same manner as the Christian mythos established death as the gateway to the fullness of life. And of course one can't get through either gateway alone: a mate, or a murderer, is necessary. (144)

And Henry Tilney is the consumate, humane murderer, taking Catherine's spirit from her and replacing it with the promise of a comfortable life at Woodston, where he lives in gentlemanly ease with a pretty, modern house, a sizeable piece of land, and a curate. That Catherine is so delighted with Henry's house when she first visits it is indication that her inner perceptions have changed with her outer ones. The Abbey, once the symbol of her intuition and moral sense, is now a mere building to her, a coffin in which her shameful imagination is buried:

She was tired of the woods and shrubberies—always so smooth and so dry; and the Abbey in itself was no more to her now than any other house. The painful remembrance of the folly it had helped to nourish and perfect, was the only emotion which could spring from a consideration of the building. What a revolution in her ideas! she, who had so longed to be in an abbey! Now, there was nothing so charming to her imagination as the unpretending comfort of a well-connected Parsonage, something like Fullerton, but better: Fullerton had its faults, but Woodston probably had none. (Northanger Abbey 171)
The life Catherine now projects for herself is the life of her mother. She will marry a man just like her father, a "respectable," good man with "a considerable independence," and "not in the least addicted to locking up his daughters" (*Northanger Abbey* 1).

Just when Catherine seems nulled and lulled into safe and sanctioned life, Austen injects a reminder of the gothic undertones of that life. The General escorts Catherine and Eleanor from Woodston back to Northanger Abbey with an air of satisfaction that leads Catherine to understand that he does indeed expect her to marry Henry. She merely awaits Henry's proposal. When General Tilney departs for a trip to London, Catherine is left comfortably alone to deepen her friendship with Eleanor and muse on Henry's undeclared yet apparent love for her. She is quite unprepared for the General's sudden return and his shocking demand that she leave his house immediately. When Eleanor brings this horrible news to her, it is evident that General Tilney acts out of malice towards Catherine. "'But--how can I tell you?"' Eleanor stammers, "'To-morrow morning is fixed for your leaving us, and not even the hour is left to your choice; the very carriage is ordered, and will be here at seven o'clock, and no servant will be offered you'" (181). She continues,

"Good God! what will your father and mother say! After courting you from the protection of real friends to this--almost double the distance from your home, to have you driven out of the house, without the considerations even of decent civility! Dear, dear Catherine, in being the bearer of such a message, I seem guilty myself of all its insult; yet, I trust you will acquit me, for you must have been long enough in this house to see that I am but a nominal mistress of it, that my real
power is nothing” (182).

Catherine, as it turns out, has been murdered in one of the other texts of her life. In London, General Tilney once again rubbed elbows with John Thorpe, who while enlightening the General as to the Morlands’ real situation in life cannot help but throw in a few embellishments of the opposite kind from his previous ones. Catherine is reduced from being an heiress to being a member of a “necessitous family; numerous too almost beyond example; by no means respected in their own neighborhood, as he had lately had particular opportunities of discovering; aiming at a style of living which their fortune could not warrant; seeking to better themselves by wealthy connexions; a forward, bragging, scheming race” (201). If Thorpe’s heroine must be sunk, so too must the General’s, and he rushes home to eradicate Catherine from his fantasies of enrichment. With no more compunction than an author who merely scratches a character from his manuscript, General Tilney voids Catherine from his--and Henry’s-life, not even acknowledging her humaness by offering an escort or inquiring whether she has the means to make such an unexpected and potentially perilous (for a young lady alone) journey. He has murdered her in his mind and must dispose of the body quickly, leaving no evidence to trace.

And so Catherine is buried at Fullerton, from whence she came, and is a despondent, silent shadow of her former self. With her spirit effectively exorcized and now with no man to fill the void with duties for her, Catherine is indeed a corpse. Like a true heroine, “she is forced through circumstance merely to await rescue, a rescue she has little hope will materialize” (Mooneyham 23). When Henry does finally arrive to uncover her and make her his wife, Catherine is naturally restored to life with “glowing cheek and
brightened eye” (Northanger Abbey 197), and she does have enough spark of her former self left to “feel, that in suspecting General Tilney of either murdering or shutting up his wife, she had scarcely sinned against his character, or magnified his cruelty” (201). These feelings are kept to herself, however, and after waiting several months for the General to cool off and sanction their marriage, Catherine is wed to Henry Tilney amidst ringing bells and smiles. This is, of course, the proper ending for a heroine, and if this ending rings a little hollow in the case of Catherine, this, too, is proper. Austen has not written a gothic novel, she has written a serious novel, “where King Marriage, like King Death, exists as both a fate and a choice, wearing its eternal corona of dread but provoking in the encounter a sufficient measure of courage” (Wilt 172). Rather than our mourning Catherine for having been murdered in an abbey, we must mourn Catherine for being wed in a country church, and we must hope this death will lead her to heaven, one way or another.
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE AND LITERALITY: THE LANGUAGE

OF MARIANNE DASHWOOD IN

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

For men have marble, women waxen, minds,
And therefore are they form'd as marble will.
The weak oppress'd, the impression of strange kinds
Is form'd in them by force, by fraud, or skill.
Then call them not the authors of their ill,
No more than wax shall be accounted evil
      Wherin is stamp'd the semblance of a devil. (ll.1240-46)
From Shakespeare's The Rape of Lucrece

"I cannot speak well enough to be unintelligible," Catherine Morland tells Henry Tilney in what he laughs off as an "excellent satire on modern language" unwittingly made by an ingenuous, gullible girl (Northanger Abbey 103). But Catherine has produced an excellent satire, one that goes to the heart not merely of modern language but of male language. Henry Tilney's fussy, self-serving attempts to correct and direct Catherine's language—in short, to remake her after his own ideas—appear as unintelligible to Catherine, and in a world where "a woman especially, if she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can" (86), Tilney's sarcastic and pompous speeches seem supremely authoritative to Catherine. By the end of the novel she is silenced and obedient in the presence of Henry's linguistic superiority. Yet Catherine has a means of communicating that does not require words, especially not the precise and acceptable usage Tilney advocates. Upon hearing of her brother's
engagement, for example, “Catherine wished to congratulate him, but knew not what to say, and her eloquence was only in her eyes. From them however the eight parts of speech shone out most expressively, and James could combine them with ease” (95). Catherine communicates pure feeling, while it is her brother who needs to translate Catherine’s expressive silence into words of approbation for his actions.

Men in *Northanger Abbey* need language for expression of themselves, and they control language for that purpose, creating social personas of themselves and defining women according to the words they choose to apply to them, and forcing women into silence by ridiculing their supposed inability to properly use such a sophisticated method of communicating. Women in *Northanger Abbey* are silent under this linguistic dominance, merely regurgitating male constructs, as Mrs. Morland does when she refers to her indispensable conduct essays, or babbling like nervous prisoners hoping to talk themselves out of execution, throwing out words carelessly, as Isabella Thorpe does in her attempts to secure the husband who will save her from being unmarried and poor.

Catherine’s exploration of Gothic novels mirrors an underlying exploration of language in which she discovers that women’s lack of a language of their own is both natural and forced. The moment when she “speaks” to her brother James with only her eyes is an instance of natural, womanly, wordless communication, an expression of the internal instincts that make Catherine so attractive to us and to Henry Tilney. But this same natural wordlessness, when forced into a tangible form dominated by men, appears weak and insipid rather than admirable. “How nice that you are engaged! I am monstrous happy for you!” Catherine might have said, provoking Henry Tilney to pounce on her
womanly, Isabella-like usage/misusage of language. Women are therefore to be silent, as 
befits their natural state, and speak only when they can precisely parrot a patriarchally-
constructed language. Women are essentially damned if they do, and damned if they 
don’t speak.

This double-damning standard takes on deadly implications in Sense and 
Sensibility, the novel Austen composed just before Northanger Abbey.¹ In this novel 
Austen makes clear how difficult it is for women to maintain a noble, natural silence 
without being condemned for being obstinate or imprudent. The very society that 
demands their silence also demands that they speak if they are to have any semblance of 
life in such a world. Marianne Dashwood’s refusal to speak social language results from 
her devotion to what she believes is a more sincere form of expression, the expression of 
sensibility, which appears to spring from inside a person, where feeling is pure and 
untouched by social tropes. What she doesn’t realize, however, is that the sensibility she 
so espouses is not pure (like Catherine Morland’s fleeting, wordless feelings) but is a 
patriarchal construct that snares her so thoroughly in its trap that it almost kills her and, 
falling that, renders her with “neither spirits nor language” in the end (Sense and 
Sensibility 318). Mrs. Dashwood, in encouraging and herself maintaining a silence of 
sensibility, learns along with Marianne that womanly silence (a means of communicating 
not dependent on language for expression) can be as deadly as woman’s silence (that

¹According to Jan Fergus in Jane Austen: A Literary Life, Austen wrote “Elinor and 
Marianne” about 1795, and began rewriting it as Sense and Sensibility in November 1797. She 
wrote Susan between 1798-99, and this book became Northanger Abbey, which was published 
with Persuasion in 1818, after Austen’s death in 1817.
silence imposed on women by society); only in speaking can she save Marianne's life.

The concept that womanly silence, as opposed to woman's silence, is a natural state is explained in the theories of such psycholinguists as Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, whose studies of language reveal that utterance is gender based and closely connected to Freud's oedipal theories. In *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing*, Margaret Homans sums up these complex theories:

In the Lacanian myth, language and gender are connected in such a way as to privilege implicitly the masculine and the figurative. At first, according to Lacan, all children, irrespective of gender, are engaged in a dyadic relation with the mother in which they find themselves to be whole and unitary, even if that sense of wholeness is "imaginary" or founded on an illusion. During this period, before language as we know it has begun, the period that corresponds to Freud's preoedipal stage, the child shares with the mother what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic, consisting of body language and nonrepresentational sounds. During this time, to quote from Terry Eagleton's useful paraphrase of Lacan, "no gap has yet opened up between signifier and signified" because the child communicates with the mother's presence without mediation, as in the "mute dialogues" Wordsworth says he "held" with his mother's heart as an infant. At about the age of eighteen months, however, two changes occur simultaneously: the child begins to acquire language, and he (I use the pronoun advisedly here) becomes aware of sexual difference. (Actually, the timing of these events, as of some important sequels,
may very widely, but Lacan and Lacanians are engaged in cultural mythmaking.
This Lacanian stage is the mythic equivalent of Freud’s oedipal crisis, both its onset and its resolution. The father, who is discovered to have all along been in possession of the mother, intervenes in the potentially incestuous dyad of mother and child. Because what marks the father is his possession of the phallus, the phallus becomes the mark of sexual difference, that is, of difference from the mother.

The phallus becomes the mark of language’s difference as well, which becomes equivalent to sexual difference. Whereas in the preoedipal relation to the mother, communication required no distance or difference, now with the intrusive entry of the phallus, “the child unconsciously learns that a sign has meaning only by dint of its difference from other signs, and learns also that a sign presupposes the absence of the object it signifies.” (6-7)

Language, then, because it is based upon signs and is figurative, is based on presence, and because presence is associated with the phallus, language is accordingly a male construct. “For the same reason that women are identified with nature and matter in any traditional thematics of gender,” Homans further explains, “women are also identified with the literal, the absent referent in our predominant myth of language” (4). The literal makes possible the figurative, and at the same time the literal threatens the figurative, for there would be no need for signs if the literal were constantly and dominantly present. Because women are identified with the literal, they are both necessary and threatening, and it becomes necessary for a society that depends upon language, a male construct, to preserve the
literal as well as dominate it. As Homans words it,

What the son searches for, in searching for substitutes for the mother’s forbidden body, is a series of figures: “someone like his mother.” At the same time, language is structured as the substitution for the (female) object of signifiers that both require the absence of the object and also permits its controlled return, something like the lost object. Figuration, then, and the definition of all language as figuration gain their hyperbolical cultural valuation from a specifically male standpoint because they allow the son, both as erotic being and as speaker, to flee from the mother as well as the lost referent with which she is primordially identified. Women must remain the literal in order to ground the figurative substitutions sons generate and privilege. (9)

Language, with its web of laws, education, gossip, and literature, thus insists that physical woman be a silent background figure, a sign for nothingness, a figure much like a puppet to be moved about and to be given words by the patriarchal puppeteer. 2

Austen makes it clear that the Dashwood women are caught in this web from the beginning of the novel. It was the death and consequent absence of a woman, the elderly Miss Dashwood, which prompted old Mr. Dashwood to invite Henry Dashwood, Marianne and Elinor’s father, to live at the family estate of Norland, which he was to inherit. Henry Dashwood does inherit, but the language of Mr. Dashwood’s will makes that inheritance such that it excludes the Dashwood women from getting anything of real

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2Once again the image of Little Red Riding Hood confronting a figure that looks like her grandmother but that speaks ominous words with a male accent comes to mind.
value. Elinor, Marianne, and Margaret Dashwood are given only a thousand pounds each, while the whole of the estate is designated for Henry Dashwood, and thereafter for his son from a previous marriage, John Dashwood, and for John Dashwood’s son, a “child of four years old” (Sense and Sensibility 2). Austen makes it clear that this child, by virtue of his gender and his language, has more value than his female cousins: “The whole was tied up for the benefit of this child, who, in occasional visits with his father and mother at Norland, had so far gained on the affections of his uncle, by such attractions as are by no means unusual in children of two or three years old; an imperfect articulation, an earnest desire of having his own way, many cunning tricks, and a great deal of noise, as to outweigh all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters” (2). The boy shows the promise of his race—language, dominance, and noise—and therefore is rewarded with all that will insure that dominance. The attentions of the Dashwood women, which no doubt included entertaining conversation, reading aloud, playing music, and perhaps writing letters for the old man, count for nothing. When Henry Dashwood dies shortly after the old man, the Dashwood women are left with very little to support themselves, almost nothing to attract marriages for the girls, and no home, for the John Dashwoods take over Norland with all possible speed.

Forced out by language for the sake of language, the Dashwood women are left in the curious position of being an isolated mini-community of women who must at the same time exist in the larger social, male dominated community. Their reactions to their change in circumstances hinge upon their use of language, and this usage varies among the women. Immediately after Henry Dashwood’s death, Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne bind
themselves together in a grief that refuses to acknowledge the language of the male world. Each is intensely emotional, clinging to one another, crying together with such force that Elinor is concerned by the “excess of sensibility” each seeks in the other:

They encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking an increase of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future. Elinor, too, was deeply afflicted; but still she could struggle, she could exert herself. She could consult with her brother, could receive her sister-in-law on her arrival, and treat her with proper attention; and could strive to rouse her mother to similar exertion, and encourage her to similar forbearance. (Sense and Sensibility 5)

The language of tears and moans that Marianne and her mother share is one that binds them together separate from the world of language that Elinor feels must be acknowledged. Their communication is what Margaret Homans identifies as “literal” language, as only women can produce it. It is not so much the words Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne might use as they reminisce, but their togetherness and the sounds of their shared tears and heaving bosoms that connects them to one another, sounds that need no concrete language for meaning. Their communication is “a literal language shared by mother and daughter: a language of presence, in which the presence or absence of referents in the ordinary sense is quite unimportant” (Homans 18). Just being in one another’s presence is enough for communication between them. Mothers and daughters
can share this silent language of presence because the daughter, unlike the son, does not have a phallus and therefore does not need to separate from the mother and see her as absent in order to exist. "Because she does not perceive the mother as lost or renounced, she does not need the compensation of the father’s law offers as much as does the son,” Homans contends, using Nancy Chodorow’s feminist revision of the oedipal myth. She continues, “Furthermore, she has the positive experience of never having given up entirely the presymbolic communication that carries over, with the bond to the mother, beyond the preoedipal period. The daughter therefore speaks two languages at once. Along with the symbolic language, she retains the literal or presymbolic language that the son represses at the time of his renunciation of his mother. Just as there is for the daughter no oedipal ‘crisis,’ her entry into the symbolic order is only a gradual shift of emphasis” (13).

For Marianne, however, there is not a gradual shift of emphasis; there is a deliberate attempt not to participate in social, symbolic language and instead to cling to the presymbolic language she shares with her mother. Mrs. Dashwood makes no effort to check this clinging, and it is her lack of linguistic guidance which sets Marianne on a course for disaster. Marianne desires to retain and nurture the special, emotion-based world that she shares with her mother, yet she must live in a language-based world, and in her attempt to reconcile the two she latches on to the language and literature of sensibility. In Sensibility: An Introduction, Janet Todd defines the term that became so popular during the eighteenth century that it constituted a cult following. The term “sensibility,” Todd demonstrates, was associated with “the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering,” and sensibility was
thought to come from "an innate sensitiveness or susceptibility revealing itself in a variety
of spontaneous activities such as crying, swooning, kneeling" (Todd 7). Marianne easily
channels the emotions and innate sensitiveness she shares with Mrs. Dashwood into the
literature of sensibility that she reads and into the emotional music that she loves to play,
thinking that these provide an acceptable sign for the literal, for pure feeling. Her mistake
is in not recognizing that sensibility is just another male construct, a construct that through
its language and its literature makes woman a figure of death.

Marianne values only language and people who exhibit feeling, and she disdains
social intercourse that does not involve true feeling. She proudly tells Elinor and Edward
Ferrars that "'I detest jargon of every kind, and sometimes I have kept my feelings to
myself, because I could find no language to describe them in but what was worn and
hackneyed out of all sense and meaning'" (83). She is intentionally rude and cold to
anyone who does not appear to have her delicacy of feeling, acting moody around the
loquacious Sir John Middleton (to whom the Dashwood ladies owe their new home at
Barton Cottage) and his insipid wife, barely speaking to Sir John's equally garrulous
mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings, and snubbing the Middleton's guests, Anne and Lucy
Steele. Edward teases her for her literary fastidiousness, joking that if she were rich she
would buy "'books!--Thomson, Cowper, Scott--she would buy them all over and over
again; she would buy up every copy, I believe, to prevent their falling into unworthy
hands; and she would have every book that tells her how to admire an old twisted tree.
Should not you, Marianne?'" (79). She frets that Edward, whom Elinor loves, should be
so lacking in sensibility. His passionless reading aloud of Cowper jars her nerves and leads
her to regret that Elinor should choose to love someone so "spiritless" and "tame," someone who reads "'those beautiful lines which have frequently almost driven me wild'" with "'such impenetrable calmness, such dreadful indifference!'" (14). She complains to her mother,

"Elinor has not my feelings, and therefore she may overlook it, and be happy with him. But it would have broke my heart had I loved him, to hear him read with so little sensibility. Mama, the more I know of the world, the more am I convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much! He must have all Edward's virtues, and his person and manners must ornament his goodness with every possible charm." (15)

Mrs. Dashwood does not discourage such an unrealistic prediction; she rather encourages it, wishing Marianne to be just like her. "'Remember, my love, that you are not seventeen,'" she tells Marianne. "'It is yet too early in life to despair of such an happiness. Why should you be less fortunate than your mother? In one circumstance, only, my Marianne, may your destiny be different from her's!'" (15). Mrs. Dashwood implies that her own husband was such a man as Marianne envisions for herself, but he was older than she and died when she was "hardly forty" (8), leaving her sadly deprived of both his love and his support. Seek a man of sensibility, she advises Marianne, but make sure he is young or at least wealthy enough to leave you secure if he does die.

Marianne's search for the man of sensibility leads her to scorn the attentions of Colonel Brandon, who very much admires her. "Silent and grave," like Edward, Colonel Brandon strikes Marianne as incapable of feeling, for he is "'on the wrong side of five and
thirty” and has, Marianne supposes, “‘well outlived all acuteness of feeling and every exquisite power of enjoyment’” (29-30). She reacts with disdain to the thought that he would wish to marry her, pointing out that he is old enough to be her father and “‘if he were animated enough to be in love, must have long outlived every sensation of the kind’” (31). Such a man would not be vibrant enough to please a demanding young wife, Marianne thinks, and if she did marry such an “old and feeble” man even his death would not please her as being what it ought. Elinor teases her by saying “‘Had he been only in a violent fever, you would not have despised him half so much. Confess Marianne, is not there something interesting to you in the flushed cheek, hollow eye, and quick pulse of fever?’” (33). If Marianne is to have a true man of sensibility, he must by definition be young, for only youth, stricken down by fever or accident, can make dying poignant enough to be appreciated by a woman of sensibility. Colonel Brandon’s seemingly passionless demeanor and the certainty that he will die unromantically do not suit Marianne’s ideas of manhood.

The man who does suit Marianne’s ideas soon comes along, however. Rescuing Marianne after a rainy tumble on a hill disables her ankle, John Willoughby strides into the Dashwood circle of women as the hero par excellence. He has “‘youth, beauty, and elegance,’” and even more importantly, he behaves exactly like Marianne thinks a man should. “‘This is what I like,’” Marianne declares to her family, “‘that is what a young man out to be. Whatever his pursuits, his eagerness in them should know no moderation, and leave him no sense of fatigue’” (38). Willoughby hunts, he dances, he dashes about on horseback and in a curricle, and his taste in books and music exactly matches
Marianne's. Willoughby and Marianne soon become an inseparable pair, and Marianne, who "abhorrned all concealment where no real disgrace could attend unreserve" (45) lets herself get so caught up in the feeling of love that she disregards Elinor's gentle warnings that such abandon is improper. Mrs. Dashwood, however, does nothing to check Marianne's relationship with Willoughby: "Mrs. Dashwood entered into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking this excessive display of them. To her it was but the natural consequence of a strong affection in a young and ardent mind" (Sense and Sensibility 46). In Mrs. Dashwood's eyes, "he was as faultless as in Marianne's" (41).

Elinor, however, is uneasy about Marianne's open devotion to a man who seems to take pleasure "in slighting too easily the forms of worldly propriety" (41). When Marianne accepts the gift of a horse from Willoughby without thinking whether her mother, in such reduced circumstances, can afford to keep and feed this gift, Elinor cautions her to use some sense in this affair with Willoughby. Marianne agrees to refuse the horse, but Elinor overhears her acquiescing to Willoughby's insistence that "Queen Mab" will be held for Marianne until the time "'when you leave Barton to form your own establishment in a more lasting home'" (50). Willoughby is undeniably suggesting that the lasting establishment will be his home, and Elinor hopes this means he has engaged Marianne to marry him. When Margaret tells Elinor of further evidence, she is even more convinced. "'Last night after tea,'" Margaret reveals, "'when you and mama went out of the room, they were whispering and talking together as fast as could be, and he seemed to be begging something of her, and presently he took up her scissors [sic] and cut off a long
lock of her hair, for it was all tumbled down her back; and he kissed it, and folded it up in a piece of white paper, and put it into his pocket-book” (51). Soon after this, Elinor discovers that Marianne has flaunted propriety and toured Allenham, the home Willoughby is to inherit from his rich aunt, without any chaperone. Elinor hopes her sister is not being as improper as it appears; she hopes she is indeed engaged to Willoughby, but Marianne’s silence on the subject puzzles her. When Marianne contrives to stay behind from visiting in order to see Willoughby the next day, things look promising for a forthcoming engagement announcement.

Elinor’s puzzlement turns to alarm, however, when the Dashwood ladies return to find not a radiant Marianne, but a distraught Marianne and an ill-at-ease Willoughby. Blurting out a story about his aunt wishing him to go to London on business, he avoids giving Mrs. Dashwood a promise that he will return soon to see them and abruptly drives off in his carriage. Elinor is astonished and suspicious, but Mrs. Dashwood insists that there must be a reasonable explanation—perhaps Willoughby’s aunt disapproves of his marrying Marianne and an argument with her has sent Willoughby away for a while—and she contents herself that Willoughby is honorable and too much in love with Marianne to give her up. Elinor remarks that even with these possible obstacles Marianne and Willoughby should not be concealing their engagement from herself and Mrs. Dashwood.

“‘Concealing it from us! my dear child, do you accuse Willoughby and Marianne of concealment? This is strange indeed, when your eyes have been reproaching them every day for incautiousness,’” Mrs. Dashwood responds with surprise, and she and Elinor argue over the reality of Marianne’s engagement:
“I want no proof of their affection,” said Elinor, “but of their engagement I do.”

“I am perfectly satisfied of both.”

“Yet not a syllable has been said to you on the subject, by either of them.”

“I have not wanted syllables where actions have spoken so plainly. Has not his behaviour to Marianne and to all of us, for at least the last fortnight, declared that he loved and considered her as his future wife, and that he felt for us the attachment of the nearest relation? Have we not perfectly understood each other? Has not my consent been daily asked by his looks, his manner, his attentive and affectionate respect? My Elinor, is it possible to doubt their engagement? How could such a thought occur to you? How is it to be supposed that Willoughby, persuaded as he must be of your sister’s love, should leave her, and leave her perhaps for months, without telling her of his affection;--that they should part without a mutual exchange of confidence?”

“I confess,” replied Elinor, “that every circumstance except one is in favour of their engagement; but that one is the total silence of both on the subject, and with me it almost outweighs every other.” (68-9).

Elinor’s argument with her mother touches on the heart of Marianne’s problem: in a world of language, love must be acknowledged with language. Like Marianne, Mrs. Dashwood scoffs at the need for language when “actions” and behavior, looks and manners “declare” love. Willoughby seems to be communicating with the same pure, nonverbal language that Marianne and her mother experience so strongly. Mrs. Dashwood needs no words to label their affection, and she refuses to ask Marianne whether she is engaged or not, for
such a question would violate the spirit of the bond she and Marianne share. Elinor, however, sees the need for words. Although beloved by her sister and her mother, Elinor does not share their literal language; instead, she often operates as their voice in the social, figurative world, filling in Marianne’s rude silences and prompting her mother to converse with her hated daughter-in-law, Mrs. John (Fanny) Dashwood. She sees the need for getting along in the social world, and she realizes the dangers inherent in deliberately refusing to acknowledge the rules of that world, as Marianne has done. The figurative, powerful word “engagement” would represent everything honorable love should entail. It would make Marianne secure from heartbreak, and it would vanquish the growing gossip about Marianne and Willoughby.

That gossip grows more serious when Marianne mopes around in company, looking dejected and refusing to participate in cards and conversation at Barton Park. Sir John and Mrs. Jennings joke about Marianne’s pining heart, but when Mrs. Jennings’s other daughter, Charlotte Palmer, arrives fresh from London, Elinor begins to understand that Marianne is more than just an amusing piece of gossip for the neighbors; she is becoming a story that is spreading beyond the neighborhood. Charlotte tells Elinor that she knows that “your sister is to marry [Willoughby]. I am monstrous glad of it, for then I shall have her for a neighbor you know” (99), and Elinor finds that the love story of the handsome Marianne Dashwood and the rich John Willoughby has reached even London, where Charlotte has revealed the “news” to Colonel Brandon, not knowing his interest in Marianne. Elinor can well imagine that the talkative, silly Mrs. Palmer has spread the story of Marianne’s affair elsewhere as well.
It is worth pausing here to examine Charlotte Palmer a moment, for she is much more than a minor character intended for ridicule in this novel. In fact, her relationship with her mother is a caricature of Mrs. Dashwood's relationship with Marianne. Mrs. Palmer chatters and laughs incessantly, speaking whatever she feels at any moment, oblivious to whether her comments offend anyone or not. Her manners magnify Marianne's practice of giving feeling—even if hers is not of the same delicacy as Marianne's—precedence over politeness. Charlotte is her mother's favorite, and she is a copy of her mother, just as Marianne is a cherished version of Mrs. Dashwood. While Mrs. Jennings keeps her distance from her "elevated" eldest daughter, she is perfectly in tune with Charlotte and solicitous for her comfort. Upon Charlotte's unexpected arrival at Barton Park, Mrs. Jennings declares, "I can't help wishing they had not travelled quite so fast, nor made such a long journey of it, for they came all round by London on account of some business, for you know (nodding significantly and pointing to her daughter) it was wrong in her situation. I wanted her to stay at home and rest this morning, but she would come with us; she longed so much to see you all!" (93). Here is a mother not unlike Mrs. Dashwood in indulging her daughter's wishes, despite those wishes being improper or even dangerous. Mrs. Dashwood's indulgence of Marianne's passion for Willoughby, however, turns out to be much more life-threatening than Mrs. Palmer's parading about the countryside two months' before her child is to be born.

Charlotte Palmer also resembles Marianne in another important respect. Her husband does not "hear" her, and when he does listen to her his response is to criticize her use of language. When she asks whether he would love to have a cottage like the
Dashwoods', he "made her no answer, and did not even raise his eyes from the newspaper." Charlotte explains, "Mr. Palmer does not hear me . . . . He never does sometimes. It is so ridiculous!" (92). A few minutes later she asks, "My love, have you been asleep?" and he again does not answer her. The next time the Dashwood sisters see them, Mrs. Palmer cries out to her husband, "Oh! my love. . . . You must help me persuade the Miss Dashwoods to go to town this winter." Again, "Her love made no answer" (95). When Mrs. Palmer declares Allenham is ten miles from their home at Cleveland, Mr. Palmer corrects her that it is thirty. She says Allenham is a "sweet pretty place"; he protests that it is "vile" (96). She laughs that her husband hates to write; he counters with "I never said any thing so irrational. Don't palm all your abuses of language upon me" (98). Mrs. Palmer and her mother simply laugh at Mr. Palmer's rudeness to his wife, but when Marianne finds herself in the position of not being heard by Willoughby, his rudeness almost kills her.

Having heard no word from Willoughby, Marianne leaps at the chance to go to London with Mrs. Jennings, hoping that in London she will at last see him again. Mrs. Dashwood shares this hope and insists, against Elinor's better judgment, that Elinor and Marianne engage to stay several weeks with Mrs. Jennings. Marianne's first task upon arrival in London is to write a message to Willoughby, and when this message gets no response, she writes again after discovering several days later that Willoughby has avoided attending the Middleton's party, to which he and the Dashwoods had been invited. Elinor grows uneasy at Marianne's increasingly frantic manners and haggard appearance; she writes to urge her mother again to speak, to demand of Marianne whether she is engaged
or not. Before she can receive Mrs. Dashwood's answer, however, Elinor is given proof beyond a doubt that Willoughby is not engaged to her sister. When Elinor and Marianne do run into Willoughby at a party, he is not at all like the lover he had been before. His attempt not to give any real notice to Marianne, and his obvious unwillingness to hear her, cut Marianne far worse than Mr. Palmer's ignoring his wife. He sees Elinor first and "immediately bowed, but without attempting to speak to her" (152). When Marianne catches sight of him her feelings bubble out into a cry: "'Good heavens!' she exclaimed, 'he is there—he is there—Oh! why does he not look at me! why cannot I speak to him?'") Elinor implores her to be patient and not "'betray what you feel to every body present,'" but Marianne's face reveals her "agony." Willoughby at last makes a polite sweep at them, but his words are only for Elinor, and he ignores Marianne until she "exclaimed in a voice of the greatest emotion, 'Good God! Willoughby, what is the meaning of this? Have you not received my letters? Will you not shake hands with me?'") Elinor observes that Willoughby is "struggling for composure" of his feelings, but his "countenance and... its expression becoming more tranquil," he responds with polite, empty words. "'But have you not received my notes?' cried Marianne in the wildest anxiety. 'Here is some mistake I am sure--some dreadful mistake. What can be the meaning of it? Tell me, Willoughby; for heaven's sake tell me, what is the matter?'" Willoughby "made no reply" and on catching the eye of his fiancé, "he recovered himself again, and after saying, 'Yes I had the pleasure of receiving the information of your arrival in town, which you were so good as to send me,' turned hastily away with a slight bow and joined his friend" (153). Marianne's words, like Mrs. Palmer's, are simply ignored or rephrased for her in
“rational” language; her heartfelt letters become “information” and her emotional pleas fall on deaf ears.

When Marianne makes once last attempt for an explanation in a letter the next day, the result is a cold reply from Willoughby and acquiescence to her request that he return her lock of hair and her letters. Willoughby’s letter is not written by himself—his fiancé has done that honor—but the wording is such that it goes to the heart of the matter, turning Marianne’s feelings and Willoughby’s supposed return of those feelings into the powerful, figurative word “mistake”:

“I shall never reflect on my former acquaintance with your family in Devonshire without the most grateful pleasure, and flatter myself it will not be broken by any mistake or misapprehension of my actions. My esteem for your whole family is very sincere; but if I have been so unfortunate as to give rise to a belief of more than I felt, or meant to express, I shall reproach myself for not having been more guarded in my professions of that esteem. That I should ever have meant more you will allow to be impossible, when you understand that my affections have long been engaged elsewhere, and it will not be many weeks, I believe, before this engagement is fulfilled.” (158)

Here is the needed word, “engagement,” applied to another woman, and the word “mistake” applied to Marianne. Marianne’s feelings, her trust in a wordless commitment, are labeled “misapprehensions” and Willoughby’s wordless (in the sense of never speaking the words “marriage” and “engagement”) responses are termed as mere “professions of esteem.” The language of this letter so brutally places Marianne’s literal language into
figurative language that even Elinor, who all along has wished for some figurative term to define their relationship, cannot believe “such language could be suffered to announce [a break]; nor could she have supposed Willoughby capable of departing so far from the appearance of every honorable and delicate feeling. . . .” (159). She is partly right; the wording is especially vindictive because it comes from Willoughby’s fiancé, but the truth behind the wording still remains--Willoughby has essentially ceased to hear Marianne, both her literal communications of feeling and her spoken professions of love. Elinor is even more surprised when Marianne confesses the worst: Willoughby never did engage her, after all. “‘It was every day implied,’” Marianne explains, “‘but never professedly declared. Sometimes I thought it had been—but it never was’” (161). Here is the danger of women’s literal language: what is not given the tangible form of a word can be said never to have existed at all, to be nothing at all. Marianne Dashwood, like Charlotte Palmer, is conveniently not heard.

Not only does Marianne’s literal language reflect back to her as nothing, but her own body must reflect her as nothing. She is unable to clear up her confusion between her literal language and the language of sensibility through which she channels her feelings. She finds that both languages drive her into nothingness. Society (through Willoughby) has forced on her the fact that literal language counts for nothing in the world, and the figurative language of sensibility requires that she become literally nothing, i.e. that she die. She has been caught in a linguistic catch-22, finding that the feelings she silently shares with her mother have no weight in the world without the words necessary to express them “because the articulation of the nonsymbolic depends upon the symbolic”
Marianne is, for example, forced to use words to tell Elinor and Edward Ferrars why she adores autumn leaves, especially at Norland:

"Oh!" cried Marianne, "with what transporting sensations have I formerly seen them fall! How have I delighted, as I walked, to see them driven in showers about me by the wind. What feelings have they, the season, the air altogether inspired! Now there is no one to regard them. They are seen only as a nuisance, swept hastily off, and driven as much as possible from sight."

"It is not every one," said Elinor, "who has your passion for dead leaves." (76)

Marianne’s passion for a season that signals a return to the mother (nature) is perhaps appropriate given her bond of literality that she shares with her mother, yet her passion must be expressed in the language of sensibility, and this sensibility turns out to be a formidable figurative construct. Like the dead leaves, women who have failed in love and consequently lost their bloom or their use are "seen only as a nuisance, swept hastily off, and driven as much as possible from sight." And women of sensibility, especially, are expected to die and be removed from sight. Margaret Higonnet appropriately calls the suicidal reaction of the scorned woman "a development of the Ophelia complex" in which "the abandoned woman drowns, as it were, in her own emotions" (71). Significantly, Marianne and Willoughby were reading Hamlet together before his abrupt exit. Like the mad and rejected Ophelia, bedecked with "picked" and withering flowers, Marianne essentially drowns herself in her emotions and steers herself on a course for literal suicide. And like Clarissa, another woman "drowned" by her own mind, Marianne’s personal dying becomes a public text in which society watches her die, making no attempt to throw
her an emotional life-preserver.

Claudia Johnson explains in “A ‘Sweet Face as White as Death’: Jane Austen and the Politics of Female Sensibility” that “in ‘the age of sensibility,’ the dementia and decay of the wronged woman was a commonplace upheld in such firmly canonized British novels as

Clarissa (1747-8), Sentimental Journey (1768), Vicar of Wakefield ((1766), and the Man of Feeling (1771), and of course in a vast number of then-popular novels which have since fallen into relative obscurity, such as Elizabeth Griffith’s The History of Lady Barton (1771), Frances Sheridan’s Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph (1761), Charlotte Brooke’s The History of Lady Julia Mandeville (1763), Mackenzie’s Julia de Roubigne (1777), Inchbald’s A Simple Story (1791) and Nature and Art (1796), Opie’s Adeline Mowbray (1805) and Father and Daughter (1801), and Susanna Rowson’s Charlotte Temple (1791). (160)

These novels reflected and perpetuated eighteenth-century social perceptions of women as weak and ill creatures whose susceptibility to their feelings made them mad and hysterical; their deaths and suicides were seen as “surrender to an illness” (Higonnet 71). In Clarissa’s case especially, the self-commanded wasting away of an “ill” young lady is a public spectacle, a fascinating display for all to watch with horror and pleasure.

Onlookers feel fear in the presence of death, but they are drawn to the mysterious workings of death on the body and are relieved that it is someone else who is doing the dying (Bronfen 84).

Well-steeped in sensibility, Marianne not only surrenders to her overpowering
feelings, she surrenders herself to being viewed in her misery by those around her. She
tells Elinor, "I care not who knows that I am wretched. The triumph of seeing me so may
be open to all the world. . . . I must feel--I must be wretched--and they are welcome to
enjoy the consciousness of it that can'" (164). Marianne lapses into a withdrawn,
abstracted silence, refusing food and conversation and letting her appearance deteriorate.
As she withers away, those around her watch with relative complacency. Lady Middleton
demonstrates "calm and polite unconcern" (*Sense and Sensibility* 187), while Sir John,
Mrs. Palmer, and the Steele sisters express pity for Marianne but nevertheless gossip
mercilessly about the affair. When her half-brother, John Dashwood, sees her in a shop,
he expresses dismay that "she looks very unwell, has lost her colour, and is grown quite
thin'" (198). His concern is not for Marianne's health, however, but for her value. She is
not a woman but a figure of womanhood, a commodity in his eyes. In language touching
on those two nuisances, faded leaves and faded women, John Dashwood solemnly
discusses Marianne's fate with Elinor:

"At her time of life, any thin of an illness destroys the bloom for ever! Her's has
been a very short one! She was as handsome a girl last September, as any I ever
saw; and as likely to attract the men. There was something in her style of beauty,
to please them particularly. I remember Fanny used to say that she would marry
sooner and better than you did; not but what she is exceedingly fond of you, but so
it happened to strike her. She will be mistaken, however. I question whether
Marianne now, will marry a man worth more than five or six hundred a-year, at the
utmost, and I am very much deceived if you do not do better." (198-9)
Claudia Johnson explains that eighteenth-century society regarded the rejected woman as “useless” and as a shame to a society in which marriage is everything. Marianne has failed her family in her inability to capture a man of standing and money, and because she has begun to lose her looks, John Dashwood believes she will likely make a “bad” (in monetary terms) marriage or become a spinster, both of which make her a burden on the family (Johnson, “Sweet Face” 165). In addition, Marianne has exposed herself in society, flaunting conventions in order to show her love and desire for Willoughby. Taking unchaperoned drives, allowing Willoughby to have a snip of her hair, behaving as if engaged, openly writing letters to him, and confronting him in a public place—such passionate behavior is unbecoming in a virtuous young lady, especially if it all comes to nothing. Better that Marianne should die than become a burden or a shame to her family (Johnson, “Sweet Face” 166).

Marianne seems ready to comply with society’s expectation that she go back to the literal nothingness she came from, and as Johnson further explains, Marianne’s impending death furnishes society with “a good story,” with a figurative narrative generated by her anticipated demise. Marianne’s disregard for her health soon turns into a terrible cold, and her refusal to nurse her cold leads to an “infection” with a “putrid tendency” while she is at Cleveland, the Palmers’ home (Sense and Sensibility 268). Alarmed that the infection could reach their new baby son, the Palmers vacate the premises, and the news of Marianne Dashwood’s dying of course travels with Mrs. Palmer and eventually reaches Willoughby. Willoughby, as it turns out, did love Marianne before he was forced by his monetary circumstances to marry a rich woman, and in a burst of sentiment he rides hell
for leather to Cleveland. He does not come, however, because he hears Marianne is dying and he wishes to see her one last time, but because he cannot stand the thought that she might die without forgiving him. Johnson explains that in *Sense and Sensibility*—just as in *Northanger Abbey*—"male characters, not Austen’s narrator, are the tellers of heroines’ sad stories,” and because of such narration, the heroine of the stories “is not the principal character” (“Sweet Face” 166). Willoughby sees himself as a hero in Marianne’s story, a hero who wields great power over women, even if it destroys them. He has already been the hero of another girl’s story, as Elinor learns from Colonel Brandon, whose ward, Eliza Williams, has been seduced and left pregnant by Willoughby, and now he arrives to provide a hero for “a detailed death-bed scene starring himself” (Johnson, “Sweet Face” 167-8). “I mean to offer some kind of explanation, some kind of apology, for the past; to open my whole heart to you, and by convincing you, that though I have been always a blockhead, I have not always been a rascal, to obtain something like forgiveness from Ma-

--from your sister’” he tells Elinor when she comes down to meet him at Cleveland. He relates his side of the story—his debt, his rich aunt’s threats to disininherit him for his part in Miss Williams’ distress, his decision to marry for money—and then begs Elinor to press this story on Marianne:

“Will you repeat to your sister when she is recovered, what I have been telling you?—Let me be a little lightened too in her opinion as well as in yours. You tell me that she has forgiven me already. Let me be able to fancy that a better knowledge of my heart, and of my present feelings, will draw from her a more spontaneous, more natural, more gentle, less dignified, forgiveness. Tell her of my
misery and my penitence—tell her that my heart was never inconstant to her, and if you will, that at this moment she is dearer to me than ever." (289)

Willoughby’s relief that Marianne is going to recover is outstripped by his concern that he will appear too villainous in this story; his withholding of words almost killed Marianne, and he must now provide the right words to write her story his way. Willoughby has already “written” Eliza William’s story, his phallus has literally turned her into an unwed mother, and this act has turned her into a figure for storytelling—the tragic story of a ruined young lady—as Mrs. Jennings’s juicy gossip about Eliza demonstrates. Even Colonel Brandon uses Eliza’s story to warn Elinor about Willoughby and to save Marianne from mourning her loss of him too long. Marianne’s story by Willoughby’s “pen” becomes another tale in the book of Willoughby; Marianne becomes a figure rather than a real woman.

“Marianne Dashwood,” Austen tells us, “was born to an extraordinary fate. She was born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions, and to counteract, by her conduct, her most favourite maxims” (333). The story Willoughby has written for Marianne has to be amended somewhat when Marianne does not die and instead lives to love and marry another man, but more importantly, Marianne’s own story of herself turns out to be a narrow escape from deadly figuration and a return to womanly literality. Even though Marianne submitted to being the figure in a good story for society, Marianne was at the same time writing her own story by her attempted death. Elisabeth Bronfen explains that dying is a text generated when the proximity of death provokes in the dying person a succession of images from
that life which is about to end, along with one's interpretation of past occurrences, one's convictions, one's advice to posterity. In this final confrontation with the past events of one's life, the dying person not only reduplicates herself or himself but also senses the unforgettable or eternal quality of these "remembered" events. All s/he has to tell is imbued with authority and it is this "authority", arising from the aporia of speaking or writing in the shadow of death and against it, that lives at the origin of all narratives. Death is the sanction for all that a storyteller might relate. She or he borrows authority from death. (80)

What Marianne sees of her life while she is delirious and near death is her mother. Elinor notes that in her sister's delirium "frequent but inarticulate sounds of complaint . . . passed her lips." When a noise startles her, Marianne cries out for her mother:

"Is mama coming?--"

"Not yet," replied the other, concealing her terror, and assisting Marianne to lie down again, "but she will be here, I hope, before it is long. It is a great way, you know, from hence to Barton."

"But she must not go round by London," cried Marianne, in the same hurried manner, "I shall never see her, if she goes by London."

Elinor perceived with alarm that she was not quite herself, and while attempting to soothe her, eagerly felt her pulse. It was lower and quicker than ever! and Marianne, still talking wildly of mama, her alarm increased so rapidly, as to determine her on sending instantly for Mr. Harris, and dispatching a messenger to Barton for her mother. (271-2).
Marianne’s inarticulate and articulate yearnings for her mother express her awareness that in dying she needs her mother, that one person who can ease her back into the nothingness from which she was produced. She repeats words she has heard before—“she must not go round by London”—and these words show that the mother-daughter bond is strong in her mind. It was Mrs. Jennings, concerned about Charlotte’s life as she approaches childbirth and possible death, who first spoke of being reunited with her daughter after Charlotte “went round by London” on her way to Barton and her mother. Silly as they may be, Mrs. Jennings and her daughter share the same bond as Mrs. Dashwood and Marianne. Both mothers are needed to attend their daughters in a possible transition from life to death, the one presiding at a childbed and the other to preside at a deathbed. Marianne does have the strength, however, to pull herself back from death and to try life again, this time unfettered by illusions of sensibility. She does not wish, as she later reveals to Elinor, to have her death and her story be one of shameful weakness. She lives so that she can amend the past and write a new story for herself:

“Long before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect. I considered the past; I saw in my own behaviour since the beginning of our acquaintance with him last autumn, nothing but a series of imprudence towards myself, and want of kindness to others. I saw that my own feelings had prepared my sufferings, and that my want of fortitude under them had almost led me to the

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3In his article “‘Beckoning Death’: Daniel Deronda and the Plotting of a Reading,” Garrett Stewart comments that death beds and marriage beds are “interchangeable” in Victorian fiction. Here we might add that death beds, marriage beds, and childbeds are interchangeable. See Regina Barreca, ed., Sex and Death in Victorian Literature (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990).
grave. My illness, I well knew, had been entirely brought on by myself, by such negligence of my own health, as I had felt even at the time to be wrong. Had I died,--it would have been self-destruction. I did not know my danger till the danger was removed; but with such feelings as these reflections gave me, I wonder at my recovery,--wonder at the very eagerness of my desire to live, to have time for atonement to my God, and to you all, did not kill me at once. Had I died,--in what peculiar misery should I have left you, my nurse, my friend, my sister!--You, who had seen all the fretful selfishness of my latter days; who had known all the murmurings of my heart!--How should I have lived in your remembrance!--My mother too! How could you have consoled her!--I cannot express my own abhorrence of myself.” (303)

Marianne realizes how easily she was sucked into the cult of feeling and almost convinced to kill herself. Had she died, she would merely have been a figure in a story authored by society, and it would have been a sad story to inflict on her family. She vows to take charge of her life, and her story, and to endeavor to preserve the literal presence she shares with her mother (and to some extent with her sisters) without confusing it with the figurative, false feelings to which she fell prey. “I shall now live solely for my family,” she swears to Elinor. “You, my mother, and Margaret, must henceforth be all the world to me; you will share my affections entirely between you. From you, from my home, I shall never again have the smallest incitement to move; and if I do mix in other society it will be only to shew that my spirit is humbled, my heart amended, and that I can practise the civilities, the lesser duties of life, with gentleness, and forbearance” (304-5). Marianne has
learned that she must take part in the figurative world, as Elinor does, but that it need not rule her.

Mrs. Dashwood, as well, has learned the dangers of isolating oneself in a literal bond and ignoring the power of the figurative world. When she learns that Marianne is out of danger from the fever, she is "unable to speak" and can only cling to Elinor and "press Colonel Brandon's hand, with a look which spoke at once her gratitude, and her conviction of his sharing with herself in the bliss of the moment" (Sense and Sensibility 293). Her reunion with Marianne at what was almost her child's deathbed is marked by the literal language they share: "... Marianne, satisfied in knowing her mother was near her, and conscious of being too weak for conversation, submitted readily to the silence and quiet prescribed by every nurse around her" (293). Although she still fosters their literal mother-daughter bond, Mrs. Dashwood has found a voice for the other world, and at last she speaks and acts as a mother should in guiding her daughter's survival in that world. "Marianne was restored to her from a danger in which, as she now began to feel, her own mistaken judgment in encouraging the unfortunate attachment to Willoughby, had contributed to place her" (294). She had assumed, like Marianne, that Willoughby spoke their language, and her assumption rendered her trusting and silent when she should have been speaking and questioning. She assumed as well that Marianne, being like herself, would find the same happiness as she did in marriage, simply being like her mother seemed an adequate guide to finding happiness. Her mistake realized, she takes a more active and more vocal role in promoting Marianne's happiness.

Like a good eighteenth-century mother, she looks about for the right man for her
daughter and quickly--actually, on the night he brings her to Marianne’s sickbed--lights on Colonel Brandon as her choice. She tells Elinor that she has discussed Marianne with Colonel Brandon, and has found him to be a man of true sensibility, not the fashionable kind that Willoughby carefully fostered. His silence and gravity bespeak deep feelings, Mrs. Dashwood discovers, and his “earnest, tender, constant, affection for Marianne” makes her certain he is the man for her daughter. He seems to be a man who does speak their language, at least as much as a man can without faking it, as Willoughby does. Colonel Brandon understands the importance of the mother-daughter bond, and ironically, it is another story of Colonel Brandon’s that underlines just how important that literal bond is. He relates to Elinor, who later tells Mrs. Dashwood, the story of Eliza William’s mother, Eliza Brandon. He had once loved this lady, who resembled Marianne in exuberance and feeling, but had to stand by and watch her married against her will to his elder brother, who mistreated her so much that she pleaded for a divorce. Once divorced, she fell into the hands of one man after another and when Colonel Brandon finally found her years later, she was destitute and near death. He nursed her while she died and took charge of her illegitimate child, Eliza. This story reveals Colonel Brandon as a caring man, but it also reveals an important example of how the mother-daughter bond is sorely tried by society. When Mrs. Brandon gave her daughter her own name, she was essentially making her like herself, yet her early death prevented her from guiding that mirror image in the patriarchal world, where she is not “Eliza” but is “Williams,” the social, fatherly name that designates her as illegitimate. Eliza Brandon gave her daughter her presence in her name, but did not live to speak the words her Eliza needed to survive well beyond that
presence. Her silence is echoed in Mrs. Dashwood’s silence in guiding Marianne in the figurative world, where Eliza Williams is branded as a fallen woman and Marianne as a failed beauty. What the patriarchal world sees is not Eliza and Marianne, but lost reputation and lost money. Unfortunately, Mrs. Brandon’s silence led her daughter to share her fate as a fallen woman, but Mrs. Dashwood has a chance to talk her daughter into a happiness that mirrors her own.

With “all the encouragement of her mother’s language” (Sense and Sensibility 325), Colonel Brandon begins court Marianne, and Mrs. Dashwood’s “darling object” is fulfilled when Marianne returns his regard. Austen tells us that “instead of falling sacrifice to an irresistible passion as once she had fondly flattered herself with expecting,--instead of remaining even for ever with her mother, and finding her only pleasures in retirement and study, as afterwards in her more calm and sober judgment she had determined on,--she found herself at nineteen, submitting to new attachments, entering on new duties, placed in a new home, a wife, the mistress of a family, and the patroness of a village” (333). This new Marianne, wiser and carefully absorbed into society’s only niche for women, disturbs those readers who feel she has given up and settled for second best in marrying the tame Colonel Brandon. She seems thoroughly absorbed into the figurative culture that seeks to silence her.

She is not really silenced, however, if we consider that in marrying Brandon and becoming a mother of a family she is still strong in the literal language of women. Only this time she is the mother. Margaret Homans writes that a woman’s wish for a child is not, as the Freudian myth posits, a jealous wish for some sort of powerful phallus, but is a
wish "for how the mother felt as a child"; a woman longs for presence, for the literal bond she shared with her own mother. "The reproduction of mothering," Homans explains, is thus "the reproduction of a presymbolic communicativeness, a literal language" (24-5). Childbearing, then, is a literal reproduction of literal language. Not only does Marianne find happiness with an older man, as her mother did, she finds a way to reduplicate her mother's language in her own cooing and singing, murmuring, looking at, and crying with her children, perhaps even with a daughter who will in turn reproduce that literal language as a mother. In bearing her children, Marianne bears language as only a woman can.

In bearing her novels, Austen bears language as only a woman can as well. Jan Fergus remarks that "although in her works Austen employs similes and metaphors sparingly," she does consistently refer "to her novels as her children" in her correspondence (133). For example, Austen assures Cassandra Austen that "I am never too busy to think of S & S. I can no more forget it, than a mother can forget her sucking child," and she describes Elinor as "my Elinor." Fergus cites further examples, such as Austen's calling *Pride and Prejudice* "my own darling child" and her telling a newly-delivered friend, "As I wish very much to see your Jemima, I am sure you will like to see *my* Emma." Even Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is termed "my Fanny" (Fergus 134). It is interesting that a woman who abhorred childbearing (see Fergus 123-4) should refer to her novels as children she has birthed, and that she should have every one of her heroines marry, given that marriage inevitably meant childbirth.

The answer to Austen's apparent contradiction of herself lies in Marianne's marriage. Motherhood, like women's literal language, may be a state appropriated by
patriarchal culture in order to assure its survival, even if this cultural survival means the
annihilation of a woman in childbirth or the annihilation of her language. But motherhood
is also a state of power, a power understood only by women. As a woman seeking to
voice herself in the patriarchal world, Austen tried to acknowledge both of these truths.
She, like other women writers after her, had to deal with the fact that a woman's power in
giving birth to language will be commandeered by society and made to seem no power at
all; the woman writer becomes a transgressor, a freak of sorts, in trying to write in a
language that refuses to acknowledge its roots in woman. Margaret Homans writes of the
peculiar situation of the woman writer:

These women writers may value a specifically maternal language either because of
cultural pressures or out of their own interests, and yet whichever their reason,
they also always mythologize the subordination of this language to the demands of
the culture that defined women as mothers in the first place. These writers see that
maternal language will always be put to the use of promulgating androcentric
culture, with its paternal metaphors, flight from the mother, and all the rest. (28)

In her writing, Austen acknowledges a woman's subservience to the world, she
quietly demonstrates how brutal that world can be, yet she does not let herself or her
heroines (perhaps with the exception of Catherine Morland) be totally dictated by that
world. Austen's does not use figurative constructions like similes and metaphors often,
she never resorts to overt symbolism, she frequently refuses to supply words of
explanation where they are expected, and her irony and indirection force the reader to
supply meaning. She is as silent as she possibly can be and still be an author. Likewise,
her heroines acknowledge that marriage is their story, but it is through motherhood that they truly may write themselves. Austen is as literal as she can be, and her heroines are all given the chance, in the end, to be literal as well by passing on woman's silent language to their daughters.
CHAPTER 4

ECHOES FROM THE CAVE: THE MATERNAL POWER OF FANNY PRICE

Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centering in some long-recognizable deed. George Eliot in *Middlemarch*

“It’s a curious story; it carries us back to medieval times, when faith was a living thing.” Angel Clare in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

At the end of *Middlemarch*, George Eliot mourns the fact that her heroine, Dorothea, and other women like her, will never be able to live the epic lives of a Saint Theresa or an Antigone because “the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone” (577). Dorothea’s struggles to make a difference in the world end as most women’s struggles do, in her being “only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother” (576), yet even in this restricted life Dorothea does make a difference, however unrecognized it is:

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive; for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” (Eliot 578)
And so it is with Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. One imagines this slight, nervous, yet staunchly moral heroine living out her life as a devoted clergyman's wife and the mother of his children, and ending her days as a “good” woman buried peacefully in the Mansfield churchyard, with no indication at all upon her epitaph that she once in a manner exposed the moral decrepitude of Mansfield Park, defied the social and economic pressures that would suck her into such decrepitude, and then spiritually restored and inherited Mansfield Park. One does not put such things on a wife/mother’s tombstone; one does not, more simply, put such things on a woman’s tombstone. Like Dorothea Brooke, Fanny Price was fated to rest in an unremarkable grave.

Yet, like Dorothea Brooke, Fanny Price has haunted the imaginations and intellects of countless readers because she seems to reach beyond the grave, speaking to the spiritual questions of subsequent generations. Both casual readers and literary critics have reacted strongly to Fanny Price, feeling much as the characters in *Mansfield Park* do in seeing her alternately as sweet as an angel and as chilling as a ghost. In the novel, Sir Thomas Bertram and Edmund Bertram, and to some extent Henry and Mary Crawford, see “touches of the angel” in Fanny, “beyond what—not merely beyond what one sees, because one never sees anything like it—but beyond what one fancies might be” (*Mansfield Park* 312), and critics such as Lionel Trilling and David Monaghan likewise acknowledge that Fanny’s unpretentious, gentle beauty and her sterling moral fiber make her something of a saving angel to ailing Mansfield Park. Other critics join the novel’s waspish Mrs. Norris in seeing Fanny as “the daemon of the piece” (*Mansfield Park* 409),
an absolute "monster," as Nina Auerbach calls her, whose moral power has a killing, sterilizing, avenging effect that leaves Mansfield a purged but joyless place. Avrom Fleishman associates Fanny Price with mythic qualities, suggesting that Fanny is like the woman in the third casket in Freud's famous essay, "The Theme of the Three Caskets." The woman in the third casket is the most beautiful, but she also is the Goddess of Death, so in choosing her one chooses death. "Fanny may not be an acceptable symbol of death itself," Fleishman explains, "but it is her role to deny the pleasures of life in favor of the pleasures of principle, which feel like death" (64). Just as the choice of the third woman in the casket is the choice of death, "one who loves Fanny is ready to embrace death, too," and this is what makes Fanny, "at once the most attractive and the most repulsive character in the novel, and the only appropriate response to her is a deeply ambivalent one" (Fleishman 63).¹

To top the question of whether Fanny Price's power is that of an angel or a devil is the question of whether Fanny has any power at all. Why, with all her supposed power, does Fanny Price end the novel as all other heroines do, with the ordinary undertaking of marriage and motherhood? Has Austen played a trick upon us, making us believe we've seen an epic woman when all along she was really just what she looked like, timid little Fanny Price, the most unlikely of Austen's heroines to be the least bit epic?

The answer is both yes and no. Yes, Fanny has the power of both life and death

about her, yet no, Fanny is not a god-like personage. She is simply a woman, but all
women possess and emanate a powerful knowledge about life and death. It is a maternal
power portrayed in myth by such creation figures as Mother Earth, Gaia, Demeter, Isis,
Ishtar, and others (Stone 4), a power to both give and refuse life, to nourish or to
vanquish. In the depths of her life-bringing, "womb-shaped cave" woman has the
goddess’s knowledge of the tomb as well, and this knowledge makes woman a being to be
feared and revered (Gilbert and Gubar 95). Merlin Stone explains in When God was a
Woman that the earliest creation deities were female, but Christian myth, written by men,
erased the female essence of god and instituted a male god as creator of the universe. In
Christian myth women are acknowledged as vessels for life (the Virgin Mary), but their
power is annihilated by their identification with Eve, that first mother who is blamed for
bringing misery and death into the world (Stone 1-8). Christian myth defined woman
once and for all (this definition still pervades the world today) as ignorant, evil, child-like
creatures that must be guided, watched, even bound and imprisoned for their own—and
humankind’s--good. Such a definition of woman as an evil, death-bringing Eve was
especially prevalent in the eighteenth century.

Fanny Price is an ordinary girl coming of age in such Christian world, accepting by
rote that she is the daughter of Eve and willing to pay the religious, economic, and social
tolls that such a world requires of a woman in exchange for her existence. She willingly
takes her place in the patriarchal womb of Mansfield, where under the guise of being
nurtured she is prepared for sacrifice and for burial in the socially-sanctified tombs of
either marriage or spinsterhood. But Fanny is resurrected and in rising cleanses Mansfield
of its evil elements and restores it to life. She is, we discover, not an echo of Eve but an echo of Christ, a figure whose experience of life, death, and resurrection was a feminine, maternal experience, an experience that preceded Christian stories that made a savior like Christ male rather than female. “Souls,” claims George Eliot, “live on in perpetual echoes, and to all fine expression there goes somewhere an originating activity, if it be only that of an interpreter” (*Middlemarch* 110). Fanny Price is a woman whose being possesses the ancient knowledge of woman, the knowledge of the cave, as caught in the echo of a Christian, patriarchal time.

Before Fanny is even thought of at Mansfield Park she has the black mark of Eve’s sins against her because she is the eldest daughter and namesake of a woman who, it is made quite clear, is regarded as a true descendent of Eve. While her sisters made socially approved, economically advantageous matches with proper men, Miss Frances Ward “married, in the common phrase, to disoblige her family, and by fixing on a Lieutenant of Marines, without education, fortune, or connections, did it very thoroughly” (*Mansfield Park* 2). Implied in Austen’s careful wording here is the reason why a young lady of good family would make such an imprudent match: sexual attraction. Although we only meet Mr. Price twenty years later as a loud, rough man inclined to drink, we are given a glimpse of what he might have been earlier when Fanny introduces him to her suitor, Henry Crawford. Fanny observes with surprise that her father was a very different man, a very different Mr. Price in his behaviour to this most highly-respected stranger, from what he was in his own family at home. His manners now, though not polished, were more than passable; they were
grateful, animated, manly; his expressions were those of an attached father, and a sensible man;—his loud tones did very well in the open air, and there was not a single oath to be heard. Such was his instinctive compliment to the good manners of Mr. Crawford; and be the consequence what it might, Fanny's immediate feelings were infinitely smoothed. (367)

The mature Mr. Price is reminiscent of what Captain Wentworth from *Persuasion* might have been like if Lady Russell’s predictions had come true and he had *not* made his fortune at sea. Like the young, dashing, confident Captain Wentworth, the younger Lieutenant Price must have been very attractive to handsome Miss Ward in order for her to cast her lot with him, knowing he had no fortune.

In the eyes of her sisters at least, Francis Price is appropriately punished for her sexual appetite with the pain and despair Eve supposedly caused to be woman’s lot. The childless Mrs. Norris’s angry—and perhaps unconsciously jealous?—announcements that “Fanny had got another child” (*Mansfield Park* 2) places Francis Price in the light of an ignorant, breeding animal, and it is with little pity and great satisfaction that her sisters receive Francis’s letter of “much contrition and despondence” (3) as she prepares to birth her ninth child. The least the family can do is take one of the kittens from the cat, and so the Bertrams and Mrs. Norris decide to take on the rearing of one of Mrs. Price’s children, selecting “her eldest daughter, a girl now nine years old, of an age to require more attention than her poor mother could possibly give” (*Mansfield Park* 3). Mrs. Price is surprised that Sir Thomas and her sisters choose a girl rather than one of her “many fine boys” (7), but of course she accepts the offer and willingly gives up Fanny.
At this point we as readers also, if only in passing, ask the same question. Why would a well-to-do family choose a value-less girl when they might choose a valuable, promising boy from whom they could mold a man who could contribute to society? What economic return could there possibly be on a girl, who necessitates the expensive undertakings of finding a husband for her or giving her “the provision of a gentlewoman” (5) if she fails to marry? The answer lies in the fact that Fanny may not provide the Bertrams and Mrs. Norris with any “economic” satisfaction, but she will provide them immense moral satisfaction. Through Fanny they will have a way to punish Francis Price; the daughter must be made to pay for and erase the mother’s sins.

That Fanny takes after her mother is one of the first concerns of Sir Thomas, who immediately worries that the girl will tempt his sons, Tom and Edmund, to fall in love with her and thus ruin their lives. Mrs. Norris rationalizes Sir Thomas’s qualms:

“You are thinking of your sons—but do not you know that of all things upon earth that is the least likely to happen; brought up as they would be, always together like brothers and sisters? It is morally impossible. I never knew such an instance of it. It is, in fact, the only sure way of providing against the connection. Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmund for the first time seven years hence, and I dare say there would be mischief. The very idea of her having been suffered to grow up at a distance from us all in poverty and neglect, would be enough to make either of the dear sweet-tempered boys in love with her. But breed her up with them from this time, and suppose her even to have the beauty of an angel, and she will never be more to either than a sister.” (5)
Fanny’s alluring power is to be nipped in the bud, for she will be “bred” to be sexless and sisterly rather than womanly. As for any vulgar influence she may have on the Bertram girls, Maria and Julia, Sir Thomas consoles himself with the idea that Fanny is younger than they, or else he “should have considered the introduction of such a companion, as a serious moment, but as it is, I hope there can be nothing to fear for them, and everything to hope for her, from the association” (8). Fanny will see how virtuous young ladies are made, and the example cannot fail to make her virtuous and proper, too. There must be no chance that Fanny will exercise the wanton tendencies she surely has inherited from her mother. She must never be allowed to tempt her cousins to eat of the forbidden fruits of sex or rebellion against authority.

To make sure the cousins will be safe from Fanny, she is virtually buried by Mrs. Norris and the Bertrams. Mrs. Norris decides before Fanny ever arrives that she must be hidden away in the barest, coldest room possible (she is to have no fires) and that she need not be touched or cared for except by the socially invisible governess or by the lower servants:

“I suppose, sister, you will put the child in the little white attic, near the old nurseries. It will be much the best place for her, so near Miss Lee, and not far from the girls, and close by the housemaids, who could either of them help dress her you know, and take care of her clothes, for I suppose you would not think it fair to expect Ellis to wait on her as well as the others. Indeed, I do not see that you could possibly place her any where else.” (7)

Fanny’s mind must be buried as well. When Maria and Julia sneer at their newly-
arrived cousin’s ignorance, Mrs. Norris tells them that although she is to be educated with them, “it is not at all necessary that she should be as accomplished as you are; on the contrary, it is much more desirable that there should be a difference” (16). “A difference” essentially means that Fanny will need no education at all. Maria and Julia Bertram may be lovely, “accomplished” girls, but they have received a girls’ education, which according to Alison G. Sulloway, is no real education at all.

In *Jane Austen and the Province of Woman* Sulloway looks at eighteenth-century conduct books for females, women’s and men’s correspondence, and eighteenth-century fiction, all of which portray a disturbing picture of attitudes towards women’s education. Sulloway found a pervasive belief that because women were descended from that naturally ignorant and therefore dangerous woman, Eve, their “education should therefore never rigorously emphasize intellectual subjects and techniques for their own sake, the ‘singular activity’ of the male ‘mind and body’ equips men to address themselves to all the ‘splendid and envied’ intellectual ‘spheres’ from which ‘providence’ itself has ‘debarred’ all women” (114). Sulloway looks particularly at Maria and Julia Bertram as prime examples of “educated” young ladies. The Bertram girls, she says, are

satirical stereotypes of such women who have been carefully taught to respect rote learning and to despise the capacity for “human understanding,” in Locke’s and Astell’s terms. They jumble “all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets and distinguished philosophers,” as well as “the Roman emperors as low as Severus, besides a great deal of heathen Mythology” all together in their minds, and they are unable to compare one fact with another so as to distinguish the most important.
As to intellectual and moral ideas, they cannot compare and thus judge any, since they are taught none. (118)

Significantly, Austen’s sly irony works in Mrs. Norris’s compliments to her nieces for their “wonderful memories” when “your poor cousin has probably none at all. There is a vast deal of difference in memories, as well as in everything else, and therefore you must make allowances for your cousin, and pity her deficiency” (Mansfield Park 16). Fanny’s “deficient” memory has no trouble, however, lapping up the tutoring in fine literature, philosophy, and astronomy that she receives from her cousin Edmund, and as a result she does indeed have a “different” memory than her cousins. Fanny’s memory has a moral dimension that shines through when she tells the “untouched and inattentive” Mary Crawford,

“If any one faculty of our nature may be called more wonderful than the rest, I do think it is memory. There seems something more speakingly incomprehensible in the powers, the failures, the inequalities of memory, than in any other of our intelligences. The memory is sometimes so retentive, so serviceable, so obedient— at others, so bewildered and so weak—and at others again, so tyrannic, so beyond controul!—We are to be sure a miracle every way—but our powers of recollecting and of forgetting, do seem particularly past finding out.” (188)

Fanny’s memory has real substance and knowledge in it—something women must not possess lest they use it dangerously—and it is this intelligent, moral quality that will set Fanny above her cousins at the end of the novel.

In addition to undernourishing girls in their education, “Providence” apparently
also decreed women unfit for more physical pursuits, seeking to make sure women had both “sluggish minds and quiescent bodies” (192). Sulloway points out that often a woman’s only arena for what could be called exercise was the garden, that boundary-laden, carefully patterned, semi-private place where she could take a walk. A woman was not supposed to be strong and robust. In fact, Sulloway points out, historians have stressed the morbid and sometimes even lethal consequences of the attempt to force upon growing girls the look of innate feebleness. Girls were starved and purged in order to reproduce a characteristic pale, feminine languor and a quiet passivity that paradoxically enough were traits totally at variance with other traits also presumed to be innate, such as sprightliness, a restless, imaginative vivacity, quickness of intuition to male needs, and a constant and vigorous attention to their Christian duties to others. (194)

The ideal look and lifestyle for a young lady, then, is that of being barely alive, and this is exactly what Fanny’s guardians hope to achieve with her. Fanny comes to them already a puny, naturally delicate child, and it is relatively easy to keep her in the position of a ghost rather than a true, active member of the family. Relegated to the colorless attic room next to the eventually abandoned schoolroom, unvisited and never taken for visits, Fanny exists like a quiet, harmless spirit that haunts the family only as a useful person for fetching and sewing. When the newly-introduced neighbor, Mary Crawford, asks whether Fanny is socially “out” or not, she does so with good reason, puzzled by Fanny’s peripheral position in the family. Fanny is old enough to be “out,” but she clearly is not out, and not only does her family seem to make no effort to bring her “out,” they appear
to be intent on keeping her "in"--invisible and entombed.

Under the guise of improving Fanny's health and helping her become a gentlewoman, for example, Sir Thomas allows Fanny to learn to ride, but this kind gesture proves to be a hollow one dependent only upon the convenience of the family. When her "old grey pony" dies, Fanny finds that "in spite of the acknowledged importance of her riding on horseback, no measures were taken for mounting her again, 'because,' as it was observed by her aunts, 'she might ride one of her cousins' horses at any time when they did not want them'" (Mansfield Park 31). Maria and Julia, of course, want their horses every day and do not think of their cousin's needs at all. Edmund, the only family member who does think and care about Fanny, at last remedies the situation by loaning Fanny one of his mares, but even this thoughtfulness is tainted by his selfishness. The witty, delightful Mary Crawford expresses a wish to learn to ride, and Edmund persuades Fanny to lend "her" horse for that purpose. One riding lesson turns into another and another as Edmund, beguiled by Mary Crawford's charm, forgets Fanny altogether. He eventually realizes how his neglect has harmed Fanny and is chagrined at how easily he, like the others, could forget Fanny's presence:

Vexed as Edmund was with his mother and aunt, he was still more angry with himself. His own forgetfulness of her was worse than any thing which they had done. Nothing of this would have happened had she been properly considered; but she had been left four days together without any choice of companions or exercise, and without any excuse for avoiding whatever her unreasonable aunts might require. He was ashamed to think that for four days together she had not had the
power of riding, and very seriously resolved, however unwilling he must be to
check a pleasure of Miss Crawford's, that it should never happen again. (67)

But it does happen again; Edmund tries to soften Fanny's neglect by the family, yet
he lapses into the same selfish forgetfulness over and over. When the young people form
a scheme to visit Sotherton, the seat of Maria's fiancé Mr. Rushworth, no one thinks of
inviting Fanny until Edmund remembers that she has never really been anywhere and
would probably enjoy such an excursion. Edmund overcomes all of Mrs. Norris's and his
mother's objections to freeing Fanny for a day, but once at Sotherton his kindness
disappears in his attentions to Mary Crawford. Walking about the grounds with Miss
Crawford and Fanny, Edmund forgets that Fanny is quickly taxed by such exertion, and
when he does see that she is fatigued, he insists that she sit down for a rest while he and
Miss Crawford explore a few minutes more. Fanny watches Edmund retreat arm in arm
with Mary Crawford, and waits . . . and waits. Others pass by--Maria, Henry Crawford,
Mr. Rushworth, Julia--but each is so wrapped up in his or her own aims that no one cares
whether Fanny is comfortable or not. At last Edmund and Mary Crawford return to Fanny
a whole hour later, and "it was evident that they had been spending their time pleasantly,
and were not aware of the length of their absence" (93). Edmund finds it just as easy to
forget Fanny's mental presence as he does her physical one when, on another occasion
with the Crawfords, Edmund drifts away from Fanny once again. Standing at the window
admiring a starry night, Edmund compliments Fanny for her sensitivity to nature and says
that "they are much to be pitied who have not been taught to feel in some degree as you
do--who have not at least been given a taste for nature in early life. They lose a great
deal"" (102). He refers here to Mary Crawford, whose lack of appreciation for nature has bothered Edmund somewhat, yet just as he asks Fanny if she’d like to go outside to look at the stars, he turns his attention to a glee Miss Crawford has instigated in another part of the room: "‘We will stay till this is finished, Fanny,’ said he, turning his back on the window; and as it advanced, she had the mortification of seeing him advance too, moving forward by gentle degrees towards the instrument, and when it ceased, he was close by the singers, among the most urgent in requesting to hear the glee again” (102).

Such instances of Edmund’s neglect pain Fanny exceedingly, but she is most hurt when Edmund betrays himself, and in doing so betrays the moral sense that she and Edmund share, by taking part in the acting scheme that the others have planned. Edmund condemns the idea of putting on a play because in Sir Thomas’s absence, an absence fraught with dangers in a foreign land, such frivolity is disrespectful. In addition, the chosen play, *Lover’s Vows*, requires rather daring speeches from the female characters, making such parts entirely improper for Julia and for Maria, who as a conditionally engaged woman (Sir Thomas has yet to meet Rushworth and give final approval to the match) must be careful of her reputation. Fanny seconds Edmund’s objections wholeheartedly, though silently, but she is able to speak up when the acting party insists that she, too, take part in the play. In an entreaty that makes clear that Fanny is needed merely as a body and not as Fanny herself, Tom Bertram attacks Fanny’s refusal to act, telling her that “‘it is a nothing of a part, a mere nothing, not above half a dozen speeches altogether, and it will not much signify if nobody hears a word you say, so you may be as creepmouse as you like, but we must have you to look at’” (131). The actors assume
Fanny is just being shy, not realizing that her real reason for declining is the moral disapproval she shares with Edmund. Tom persists in his attack, bringing Fanny to tears, and Mrs. Norris finishes off the attack with an insult that clearly puts Fanny in her place as a nobody: "I am not going to urge her . . . but I shall think her a very obstinate, ungrateful girl, if she does not do what her aunt and cousins wish her--very ungrateful indeed, considering who and what she is" (133). Even the sophisticated, hard-shelled Mary Crawford is taken aback at such a blatant, public statement of Fanny's lack of status in the household. She comforts Fanny, but her solace is like salt in a wound to Fanny, for Edmund decides that he will act because he wishes to save Miss Crawford from the awkward position of performing certain delicate scenes opposite a stranger; once again, Miss Crawford's siren song has drawn Edmund away into a world where Fanny may not follow. Like a mournful ghost that has died for a moral cause, she haunts the play rehearsals:

She could not feel that she had done wrong herself [in refusing to act], but she was disquieted in every other way. Her heart and her judgement were equally against Edmund's decision; she could not acquit his unsteadiness; and his happiness under it made her wretched. She was full of jealousy and agitation. Miss Crawford came with looks of gaiety which seemed an insult, with friendly expressions towards herself which she could hardly answer calmly. Every body around her was gay and busy, prosperous and important, each had their object of interest, their part, their dress, their favourite scene, their friends and confederates, all were finding employment in consultations and comparisons, or diversion in the playful conceits
they suggested. She alone was sad and insignificant; she had no share in any thing; she might go or stay, she might be in the midst of their noise, or retreat from it to the solitude of the East room, without being seen or missed. She could almost think any thing would have been preferable to this. (143)

Lonely as she is, Fanny does not waver in her moral judgment about the acting. She comforts herself with the thought that "she could never be easy in joining a scheme which, considering only her uncle, she must condemn altogether" (143). She may be invisible, but her moral sense is very visible, and it is vindicated when Sir Thomas unexpectedly returns and finds that Fanny has been the only one of the whole family who "acted" with a sense of right.

Sir Thomas's reappearance at Mansfield is extremely significant, for it is a turning point in Fanny's life. Seeing Fanny again, Sir Thomas's first remarks are about Fanny's appearance and "how much she was grown.... He lead her nearer the light and looked at her again--inquired particularly after her health, and then correcting himself, observed, that he need not inquire, for her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point. A fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face, he was justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty" (Mansfield Park 160). Fanny is taken aback by this sudden notice from the stern Sir Thomas and is further uncomfortable when his kind attention to her continues after the bustle of arrival has died down and Mansfield has returned to the quiet, secluded place it was before Sir Thomas went away. Edmund teases Fanny about his father's marked change of attitude toward her, telling her that "'the truth is, your uncle never did admire you till now--and now he does. Your complexion is so
improved—and you have gained so much countenance!—and your figure. ... You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at.—you must try not to mind growing up into a pretty woman" (Mansfield Park 178). Suddenly, the ghostlike Fanny has become "worth" looking at, has grown and even bloomed, and must "harden" herself into being a real, in-the-flesh woman. Sir Thomas’s return seems to have given Fanny a corporeality that she never had before; his notice gives evidence that she is alive, that she has managed to survive all the attempts to make her seem dead.

With Sir Thomas’s reaction to Fanny, we begin to see that Fanny has something significant about her, something life-affirming rather than life-denying. In *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse declares that "‘young ladies are delicate plants’” that are “‘sure to be cared for,’” (265), but Fanny is more like a pitiful, neglected plant stuck in a sunny window yet seldom tended, and miraculously she has flowered, having nurtured and watered herself. In all the attempts by the others to mortify Fanny, to bury her, Fanny’s body nevertheless shows discreet signs of life. She is still alive under her pale exterior. Tears overflow from this tender plant that is never watered, except occasionally by Edmund, and blood frequently colors her face, testimony to the heart beating strongly within her frail body.

While being sentenced to death as Eve, Fanny has sustained herself with a moral sensibility that makes her akin to a more powerful maternal figure than Eve. Her sensibility and her experience are reminiscent of Christ’s life of love and suffering, a life that reveals a feminine experience rather than a strictly male one. Like Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, Fanny is an echo from the past. Her experience is the experience of Christ as filtered through the experiences of women saints and filtered again through the
experiences of the eighteenth-century woman.

The view that Christ’s experience was a feminine, maternal one was especially prevalent during the Middle Ages, when religious devotion centered on the crucifixion of Christ. Scholars such as Caroline Walker Bynum and Jennifer Ash have examined the religious writings not only of medieval women, but also of men, and discovered that Christ’s crucified body was seen by religious devotees of both sexes as distinctively feminine. In particular, Christ is looked upon as a mother figure and his body associated with maternal functions. Ash explains that in many medieval writings and in art, “the bleeding wound in Christ’s side functions as a lactating breast,” for in the medieval view “bleeding is lactation.” Essentially,

This maternal functioning of Christ’s body is metaphorically constructed in visual texts with eucharistic significance. Here Christ’s naked, wounded torso bleeds profusely; the blood spurts from His side wound (=breast)—and in some texts, from all His wounds—into the chalice (of the Eucharist). According to scientific theorizing in the Middle Ages, breast milk was actually blood; the blood of the mother which was used to nourish the unborn child in the uterus was, after the child’s birth, converted into breast milk. (Ash 86)

Ash further explains that “The bleeding (side) wound as a source of nourishment is a lactating breast; but it is more than this, it is also a womb. The agonizing pain of the crucifixion, the suffering of Christ in His passion, was the suffering, the ‘passion’ of a woman giving birth” (86).

Not only was Christ’s experience a feminine one, but his body was literally
feminine. Medieval theorists reasoned that “Christ’s flesh was Mary’s flesh, was quite literally feminine fleshliness; for Christ’s conception was without the participation of earthly paternity: in the bodily being of Christ, the Divine met with woman without masculine mediation. And in its bleeding and feeding the male body of Christ participated in the bodily functioning of the feminine and the maternal” (Ash 90).

In studying the writings of such women as St. Catherine of Siena, Mary of Oignies, Angela of Foligno, Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe and others, Ash also found that women worshipers were particularly and alarmingly fanatical in their devotion to Christ because they “could identify with Divine immanence, the fleshly substantiality inherited directly from the maternal body. And they could identify with the crucified body in its capacity to bleed and feed—for these are the functions of a woman’s body. That is, these women recognised something of themselves, their bodily experience in the body of the crucified Christ” (91). Female worshipers sought to replicate Christ’s experience in their own bodies, seeking “a lifestyle with an emphasis on passivity, patience, pain and suffering” (Ash 92). According to Caroline W. Bynum, women sought the penitential practices of “food deprivation, self-inflicted suffering, and an interpretation of illness as religious experience” (259).

This focus on the crucified body of Christ may have waned by Austen’s time, but its echoes were still felt in women’s lives. Literary examples such as Clarissa Harlowe and, later, Dorothea Brooke and Tess d’Urberville immediately come to mind. Clarissa’s self-willed death after Lovelace rapes her is highly charged with tones of Christ’s suffering on the cross. Dorothea’s ascetic denial of worldly pleasures and her devotion to the
undeserving Casaubon, along with her desire to better the lives of those around her, are conscious attempts to mortify her human flesh and mind in order to reach a higher state of being. And Tess d’Urberville, a woman whose pure soul “carries us back to medieval times, when faith was a living thing” (Hardy 94), wanders the countryside in misery, purposely desecrating her beautiful face and hands, and at last dons the ultimate hair shirt by becoming Alec’s mistress in order to feed her starving family—all in penitential devotion to the cold, hollow, male Christ figure of Angel Clare. In *Woman and the Demon*, Nina Auerbach points out that the nineteenth-century woman was trapped in a cultural image that was a “freestanding if fenced-in image of a female God. The outworn love and agony of Christ on the cross are translated into the vividly contemporary love and agony of the Angel in the House” (74). Auerbach provides interesting examples from Victorian art, such as William Holman Hunt’s *The Light of the World*, a painting in which the artist’s models for Christ were not men but women (Elizabeth Siddal and Christina Rossetti) because women are the “hidden alter-ego” of Christ (77).

Fanny Price is no less a recipient of this womanly heritage of noble suffering than Saint Theresa or Joan of Arc, Dorothea Brooke or Tess d’Urberville, but she is perhaps a less conscious recipient. Or at least Austen, aptly called “a discreet symbolist” who in “typical oblique fashion” forces the reader to supply significance for her “resonant silences” (Sulloway 187-9), does not make Fanny such an overt heroine. Fanny disturbs us because Austen has given us enough information to sense Fanny’s power but has not given us any concrete evidence of that power or its source. We must look carefully for the minute clues that will lead us to the heart of Fanny’s mystique.
Such well-camouflaged clues as Austen chooses to provide are found, as John Wiltshire so cleverly detected, on Fanny’s body, particularly on her face. In *Jane Austen and the Body*, Wiltshire demonstrates that Fanny’s body, continually quivering and blushing, betrays Fanny’s intense emotions as her womanly love for Edmund awakens. Wiltshire chides critics for focusing so completely upon the patriarchal conditions for Fanny’s debility and totally missing the true reason for such debility. “If you obliterate Fanny’s desire,” Wiltshire points out, “you cannot understand her ‘invalidism’, which is her desire, thwarted and concealed, expressing itself through her body” (86). Fanny’s upbringing has been designed to crush any Eve-like tendencies in her, and even Fanny herself dutifully struggles to conceal the desires and jealousies that will surface despite all of her attempts to control them. If we take Wiltshire’s cue and inspect Fanny’s body, we find not only the sexual power of Fanny Price, as revealed by Wiltshire, but also the womanly, maternal, Christ-like power of Fanny Price. Fanny’s maturing, virginal body is coded with signs of Christ’s suffering and death, a death which brought life to humankind.

Fanny’s body echoes Christ’s suffering, for example, in the scene in which Edmund finds Fanny ill after a day of catering to her aunts. “I am sure you have the headach?” Edmund asks after discovering her prostrate on the sofa, and after further questioning his mother and Mrs. Norris finds that Fanny has spent most of the day “standing and stooping in a hot sun” cutting roses in the garden and then, in a heat that is “enough to kill any body” carrying the roses across the park to Mrs. Norris’s house, only to make that journey again to fetch a key (65-5). Fanny’s sore head, the blood pounding painfully in it, echoes Christ’s bleeding head as he bore the crown of thorns on his walk to the
crucifixion. Pressed into his forehead by the heckling soldiers, that crown signified that he was essentially king of nothing. Fanny, bearing the bonnet that signifies that she is “not out,” that she is nothing, is forced to endure the pricking thorns and hot sun while Lady Bertram sits in the shade watching her labor and Mrs. Norris, in Herod-like fashion, rules over the servants in the manor house. Fanny’s flushed, tear-streaked face reveals more than the stress her body has endured, however, for it also reveals a moral pain. Fanny suffers a “pain in her mind” from being forsaken by Edmund while he rode with Mary Crawford for four days and left Fanny to the domestic tortures of her “unreasonable aunts” (67). Edmund offers her a healing glass of wine, but like the sour wine forced down Christ’s throat, it is a remedy that she “wished to be able to decline” because she knows Edmund’s kind gesture is tainted by his guilt over his inability to resist Mary Crawford.

During the excursion to Sotherton Fanny’s body once again takes on the stigma of Christ’s trials. Left alone in a wooded walk significantly referred to as “the wilderness,” Fanny is very like Christ hanging on the cross doing penance for those who do not know what true penance and suffering are. Maria Bertram appears first, and Fanny watches as she contrives to send Mr. Rushworth to fetch a gate key while she remains tete-a-tete with Mr. Crawford, allowing his attentions and hinting that she prefers him to Rushworth. In tones of self-pity, Maria describes her feelings about her impending marriage in terms of her reaction to the “smiling scene” before her. “Yes, certainly, the sun shines and the park looks very cheerful. But unluckily that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restrain and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said,” Maria tells Crawford, and in
defiance of her situation she follows his suggestion that she hop over the locked gate.

Fanny tries to guide Maria away from folly:

Fanny, feeling this to be wrong, could not help making an effort to prevent it.

“You will hurt yourself, Miss Bertram, she cried, “you will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes—you will tear your gown—you will be in danger of slipping into the ha-ha. You had better not go.”

Her cousin was safe on the other side, while these words were spoken, and smiling with all the good-humour of success, she said, “Thank you, my dear Fanny, but I and my gown are alive and well, and so good bye.”  (90)

The beautiful, pampered, confident Maria has never known real hardship and restraint, nor will she experience such as the mistress of Sotherton, even though she will not be happy with the bumbling Rushworth. Her words are a mockery of the real restraint and deprivation and loneliness that Fanny has patiently endured.

Fanny’s moral endurance is mocked again when Julia rushes by her in pursuit of Maria and Mr. Crawford. Julia is angry that politeness has forced her to spend much of the morning with Mrs. Rushworth and Mrs. Norris rather than with the young people, and she is particularly incensed that Maria, rather than herself, is obviously preferred by Mr. Crawford. When Fanny urges her to wait for Mr. Rushworth to bring the key to the rather dangerous gate, Julia snaps that she will not wait for him, and she then attacks Fanny: “I have had enough of the family for one morning. Why, child, I have but this moment escaped from his horrible mother. Such a penance as I have been enduring, while you were sitting here so composed and so happy! It might have been as well, perhaps, if
you had been in my place, but you always contrive to keep out of these scrapes.”” Fanny kindly allows for Julia’s temper and replies that poor Mr. Rushworth will have gone after a key for nothing. Julia spitefully returns, “‘That is Miss Maria’s concern. I am not obliged to punish myself for her sins. The mother I could not avoid, as long as my tiresome aunt was dancing about with the housekeeper, but the son I can get away from’” (91).

Julia’s notion of “penance” and “sins” is like Maria’s, shallowly based on selfish, social feelings rather than on deeper spiritual feelings. Penance and hardship are to these young ladies merely a lack of pleasure, while to Fanny suffering brings insight and inner strength. When Julia callously wishes Fanny, rather than herself, had encountered the “pain” of a boring morning with Mrs. Rushworth, she little knows that Fanny has been undergoing a more painful trial in the wilderness, left alone for a whole hour to struggle against feelings of jealousy towards Mary Crawford and feelings of disappointment in Edmund. Fanny is disappointed in the whole day, but she does not complain, as Julia and Maria do, and she tries to find good in the fact that Edmund did come back to her and “had wished for her very much” (93). Mrs. Norris’s comment on Fanny’s day during their ride home resounds with Austen’s irony: “‘Well, Fanny this has been a fine day for you, upon my word!’” she exclaims, continuing, “‘Nothing but pleasure from beginning to end! I am sure you ought to be very much obliged to your aunt Bertram and me, for contriving to let you go. A pretty good day’s amusement you have had!’” (95).

The pleasure-based, selfish views of Maria, Julia, Mrs. Norris, and even Edmund are the result of a lack of true meaning in religious practices of the time, a lack that Fanny
immediately recognizes when she and the others tour the chapel at Sotherton before the
walk into the wilderness. When Fanny enters the old chapel she expects to find the
intensity of religious feeling manifested in the chapel, but she instead finds "a mere,
spacious, oblong room, fitted up for the purpose of devotion--with nothing more solemn
than the profusion of mahogany, and the crimson velvet cushions appearing over the ledge
of the family gallery above." The room has a sterile feeling of utility rather than the
stirring effect Fanny hopes to feel. "'There is nothing awful here, nothing melancholy,
nothing grand,'" she whispers to Edmund, "'Here are no aisles, no arches, no inscriptions,
no banners'" (76-7). Mrs. Rushworth proudly informs them that the chapel has been
improved from its former state, when "'the pews were only wainscot'" and "'the linings
and cushions of the pulpit and family-seat were only purple cloth,'" and she adds that the
chapel "'was formerly in constant use both morning and evening'" but that custom has
been discontinued (76-7). Mary Crawford slyly comments to Edmund that "Every
generation has its improvements," and Fanny is stirred to defend the chapel:

"It is a pity," cried Fanny, "that the custom should have been discontinued. It
was a valuable part of former times. There is something in a chapel and chaplain
so much in character with a great house, with one's ideas of what such a
household should be! A whole family assembling regularly for the purpose of
prayer, is fine!"

"Very fine indeed!" said Miss Crawford, laughing. "It must do the heads of the
family a great deal of good to force all the poor housemaids and footmen to leave
business and pleasure, and say their prayers here twice a day, while they are
inventing excuses themselves for staying away.” (77)

Fanny is too angry to respond further to Mary Crawford’s irreverent arguments, especially when Mary goes on to claim that most people are bored with church services and should be left “‘to go their own way—to choose their own time and manner of devotion’” even if it means not attending church at all. But Edmund puts Fanny’s thoughts into words when he tells Mary, “‘The mind which does not struggle against itself under one circumstance [in church], would find objects to distract it in the other [outside church], I believe; and the influence of the place and of example may often rouse better feelings than are begun with’” (78-9). Mary Crawford’s view of the chapel and of devotion in general expresses the problem at the very heart of Mansfield Park: once a “living thing” that reverberated in people’s lives, faith has decayed into a matter of fashion. Mrs. Rushworth is most proud of the decoration of her chapel, rather than the chapel’s meaning, and Mary Crawford sees only a tedious ceremony performed by an “inferior-looking” chaplain. To Maria and Julia, the chapel is only a place where one is married. Penance means being bored and sacrifice is merely something to be avoided or pushed off on someone else to Fanny’s morally-hollow companions. No one but Fanny, and to some extent Edmund, recognizes the great drama of the soul that a church represents.

The drama of the soul, once intensely rendered in the religious Corpus Christi or mystery plays of the Middle Ages, was as time progressed increasingly watered down by “contemporary and extra-Biblical materials” such as comic characters and political agendas (Spencer et al. 229). Just as the Sotherton Chapel shows how faith has been weakened by “improvements” motivated by pleasure, the theatricals at Mansfield also
reveal the preeminence of pleasure over moral concerns. The solemn chants, symbolic
incense, and woeful countenances of the sacred mystery plays, all meant to stir the
audience into renewed faith, are replaced by the “rants” of Mr. Yates, the pink satin cloak
of Mr. Rushworth, Mrs. Norris’s economical green baize curtain, and the bold love scenes
of *Lovers’ Vows*, a German play chosen by Tom Bertram because it will “amuse” the
indolent Lady Bertram and “keep up her spirits” during Sir Thomas’s dangerous absence
abroad. Edmund sarcastically comments that if they aim to do such an “amusing” play,
they had better add “a good tricking, shifting after-piece, and a figure-dance, and a
hornpipe, and a song between acts” to make it even more amusing. Marilyn Butler
explains that Edmund’s comment refers to the increasing competition between the
licensed, established Shakespearian theaters and the new, unlicensed commercial theaters.
The older theaters insisted on “pure” dramatic productions, but “challenged by playhouses
and halls which now began to draw audiences to pantomine, ballet, and other ‘shows’,
Drury Lane and Covent Garden were being tempted to shorten the classics and break them
up with spectacular and distracting interludes, or to show modern plays in a spicier taste”
(Butler, Introduction xxvi). Like the eventual corruption of the mystery plays, even
contemporary plays were being polluted with private, political, or economic agendas. And
*Lovers’ Vows* was no exception, at least at Mansfield, where the private agendas of the
actors obtrude in every character.

Fanny watches in quiet disgust as the egos of Mr. Yates and Mr. Rushworth strive
to add extra consequence to their respective parts as Baron Wildenhaim and Count Cassel,
but she is both disgusted and alarmed at how Maria Bertram and Mary Crawford use their
parts to further their romantic ambitions. Maria deliberately uses her part as the maternal Agatha as a reason to embrace Henry Crawford, who plays her illegitimate son, and their repeated, unnecessary rehearsals are so obvious that even the obtuse Mr. Rushworth at last becomes suspicious. Mary Crawford is more tactful, but she is equally delighted with her chance to contact Edmund so closely. Miss Crawford plays Amelia, a young woman who falls in love with her clergyman tutor, played by Edmund, and boldly proposes marriage to him. Amelia in essence attempts to persuade a clergyman away from love of God and into love of woman, and this is exactly what Mary Crawford hopes to do with Edmund, whose determination to be a clergyman, rather than something more prosperous, ruins him in Mary’s eyes.

While the character of Amelia mirrors Mary Crawford’s intentions with Edmund, it more exactly mirrors Fanny’s situation with Edmund. Fanny’s mind has been “in so great a degree formed by his care” (429) that Fanny naturally has come to love Edmund with more than cousinly fondness. Her heart longs to do what Amelia, and Miss Crawford, are daring enough to do, but she remains silent in her love. She could reveal her love to Edmund, and persuade him to love her too, but she would certainly expose him to the anger and disinheritance of his family and the disdain of society by marrying him. Mary Crawford would of course be a more acceptable match to the Bertrams, but she expects Edmund to give up his religious calling in exchange for her love. While Mary Crawford is in love with the image of Edmund that she has created, an image decidedly made up of wealth and leisure, Fanny loves him for his soul. Their difference in perception becomes clear when they discuss Edmund’s name:
It was not Mr. Rushworth, however, but Edmund, who then appeared walking towards them with Mrs. Grant. “My sister and Mr. Bertram—I am so glad your eldest cousin is gone that he may be Mr. Bertram again. There is something in the sound of Mr. Edmund Bertram so formal, so pitiful, to younger-brother-like, that I detest it.”

“How differently we feel!” cried Fanny. “To me, the sound of Mr. Bertram is so cold and nothing-meaning—so entirely without warmth or character!—It just stands for a gentleman, and that’s all. But there is nobleness in the name of Edmund. It is a name of heroism and renown—of kings, princes, and knights; and seems to breathe the spirit of chivalry and warm affections.”

“I grant you the name is good in itself, and Lord Edmund or Sir Edmund sound delightfully, but sink it under the chill, the annihilation of a Mr.—and Mr. Edmund is no more than Mr. John or Mr. Thomas.” (Mansfield Park 190)

Always perceiving with a consciousness untarnished by modern perceptions, Fanny sees Edmund’s integrity and respects his goal of becoming a clergyman, but Mary Crawford sees only what Edmund can do for her. Hers is a selfish love that reveals itself in her wish, later in the novel, that Tom Bertram’s illness might prove fatal so that Edmund can inherit Mansfield. Miss Crawford openly avows that she will not sacrifice herself for a clergyman husband who has no money. Fanny, however, will sacrifice her love rather than bring any unhappiness to Edmund. She “will not act,” but will remain silent, doing penance for Edmund as she watches him struggle against Miss Crawford’s evil influence. For example, when a surprised Sir Thomas returns home to discover the theatrical mess in his
manor, he looks with disappointment at Edmund, who has broken his trust. Fanny knows
Edmund has made the wrong choice, but like a Christ pleading for a soul before God, she
"knelt in spirit to her uncle, and her bosom swelled to utter, 'Oh! Not to him. Look so to
all the others, but not to him!'" (166).

Fanny's devout, sacrificing silence, however, puts her in the position to be
sacrificed. With Maria married and Julia gone as well, Fanny stands out at Mansfield as
the next young woman come of age and ready to be socially sacrificed in marriage. Henry
Crawford is the first to realize that Fanny is worthy enough to be sacrificed. In the
absence of Maria and Julia, he tries to engage Fanny in polite conversation at a parsonage
dinner, and presumes to speak to her his disappointment that Lovers' Vows was canceled
by Sir Thomas's reappearance. Fanny cuts him short with "'As far as I am concerned, sir,
I would not have delayed his return for a day. My uncle disapproved it all so entirely
when he did arrive, that in my opinion, every thing had gone quite far enough'" (203-4).
Spoken with a becoming blush and a trembling body, this daring reprimand only makes
Crawford suddenly and acutely aware of Fanny. She is like no other woman he has ever
encountered, and certainly unlike her sophisticated cousins. Fanny's main attraction is her
righteous inaccessibility. "'Never met with a girl who looked so grave on me,'" Crawford
complains to his sister, and he determines "'to make Fanny Price in love with me'" within
the fortnight he has left at Mansfield (208, 206).

Crawford's infatuation with Fanny is at first much like that of Lovelace for Clarissa
Harlowe. As Dorothy Van Ghent has pointed out, Clarissa is the "ideal woman" because
she is both "pure and debile," a woman to be consumed by society and by a "lover as
narcissist, as voyeur, as sadist” (50). Her family uses her like an attractive yet powerless pawn to bring fortune to themselves, and Lovelace hungers to both possess and destroy her perfection. Fanny has been bred to be just such a woman, an inviting Eve stripped of power and energy, a woman barely alive. Crawford even jokes about her weakness as an attractive quality:

"It can be but for a fortnight,” said Henry, “and if a fortnight can kill her, she must have a constitution which nothing could save. No, I will no do her any harm, dear little soul! I only want her to look kindly on me, to give me smiles as well as blushes, to keep a chair for me by herself wherever we are, and be all animation when I take it and talk to her, to think as I think, be interested in all my possessions and pleasures, try to keep me longer at Mansfield, and feel when I go away that she shall be never happy again. I want nothing more.” (208)

But Mr. Crawford does come to want something more than a boost to his ego at Fanny’s expense. In watching his prey carefully he finds that she possesses a power he never knew was there. The mention of her brother William brings a surge of life to her pale features, Mr. Crawford observes, and when William arrives for a visit Crawford sees Fanny metamorphose into a woman pulsing with love and animation. “She had feeling, genuine feeling. It would be something to be loved by such a girl, to excite the first ardours of her young, unsophisticated mind!” Mr. Crawford realizes. Fanny’s resurrecting, powerful love “interested him more than he had foreseen. A fortnight was not enough. His stay became indefinite” (212-13). Mr. Crawford has found out the life-affirming secret of Fanny.
In being sought by Henry Crawford, Fanny takes on yet another aspect of Christ: the erotic aspect of Christ as lover. Jennifer Ash explains that in medieval religious writing, “Christ’s body means and signifies differently in different contexts,” and one of those contexts was that of being a lover, a being with whom the soul can join in complete bliss (81). Christ’s bleeding body is “the object of worship, but it is also the object of desire. The bleeding wounds are privileged, invested with meaning which is not only salvic but also erotic” (82). “‘Kindle me with the/ bliss of Your burning love./ Sweet Jesus, my dear life, let me / be your servant, and teach me / to love You and make me serve / You, loving Lord, so that Your / love alone be ever all my delight, / my thought and my longing’” writes one mystic in a passionate poem addressing God (Ash 83).

Women religious writers especially tell of visions in which they unite with the body and soul of Christ, holding him, kissing him, feeling his wounds until, as the thirteenth-century Hadewijch describes it, “‘I could no longer distinguish him within me. Then it was to me as if we were one without difference’” (Bynum 270-1). Christ’s suffering body becomes a means of ecstasy in this instance, the ecstasy of ever-lasting life in terms of orgasmic ecstasy. The “onlooker” intensely wishes to touch Christ, soothe him, join with him, and finally be saved by him.

To be “loved by such a girl” as Fanny would be both an erotic and salvic experience for Henry Crawford. He finds her suffering as scapegoat of the family sexually and spiritually appealing, as he reveals to his sister:

“Had you seen her this morning, Mary,” he continued, “attending with such ineffable sweetness and patience, to all the demands of her aunt’s stupidity,
working with her, and for her, her colour beautifully heightened as she leant over the work, then returning to her seat to finish a note which she was previously engaged in writing for that stupid woman's service, and all this with such unpretending gentleness, so much as if it were a matter of course that she was not to have a moment at her own command, her hair arranged a neatly as it always is, and one little curl falling forward as she wrote, which she now and then shook back, and in the midst of all this, still speaking at intervals to me, or listening, and as if she liked to listen to what I said. Had you seen her so, Mary, you would not have implied the possibility of her power over my heart ever ceasing.” (268)

Fanny's patient, sacrificial behavior becomes eroticized in her blush-tinged skin, her troublesome curl, her gentle manner as Crawford translates her morality into something more physical and possessable, her body. To touch that curl and kiss that soft cheek, to have her powerful love turned on him, would save him. Indeed, his sister can hardly believe how changed and honorable he has already become in declaring he will marry Fanny. Suddenly, Crawford the cad has become a model man, doing everything moral that he can to impress Fanny: renouncing theatricals, praising sermons, getting William Price his lieutenant's commission. He even plays at being a responsible landowner, visiting his estate in Norfolk in order to look into “a lease in which the welfare of a large and (he believed) industrious family was at stake.” He sets right the mishandling of the case by his estate manager, meets some of his tenants, and realizes there are cottages that need his attention—all acts that “secured agreeable recollections for his own mind” (369). Fanny's love—or at least the thought of it—does indeed seem to have given Crawford new
life and a chance at heaven.

Fanny, of course, cannot believe Crawford has really been converted to a moral life simply by her influence. She knows he does not really love her, only the idea of her, and that his morality is just good acting. But he intends to have her, and those in charge of her destiny are determined to give her to him. Once he becomes sensible of Crawford's interest in Fanny, Sir Thomas prepares her for the sacrifice. Fanny must now be allowed—actually forced—to “come out” and be placed on the marriage market before the public, and Sir Thomas decides to hold a ball in which to officially display Fanny. Fanny is so little accustomed to notice and indulgence that she does not even realize the ball is actually for her, nor does she suspect that Sir Thomas is matching her with Crawford.

While the ball in general is a ritual meant to prepare Fanny for official womanhood and marriage, for a life of “fidelity and complaisance” (Northanger Abbey 56) with Mr. Crawford, the ball at Mansfield has overtones of religious as well as feminine sacrifice. Dressed in a virginal white gown, the gift of Sir Thomas on the occasion of Maria’s wedding, Fanny bears the emblem of her being on her pale bosom: an amber cross given to her by the sea-loving William, the only one in the novel who has truly faced danger and death directly. Like Tess d’Urberville’s brilliant red ribbon, this cross is Fanny’s only ornament, but in its simplicity it is a powerful symbol of everything Fanny stands for. On one level, the cross is a reminder of “life achieved through death” (Bynum 273), of Christ tortured and sacrificed in order to achieve new life for himself and mankind. But the cross is also a symbol that pre-dates Christian appropriation of it, as Joseph Campbell points out in The Masks of God: Creative Mythology. Using the figures on an Orphic sacramental
bowl from third-century Rumania, Campbell illustrates how intertwined pagan and early
Christian concepts of Truth were. In the center of the bowl, surrounded by figures of a
neophyte soul in various stages of his search for knowledge about the mystery of life, is a
dominating figure Campbell calls "the great goddess":

By whatever name, she it is within whose universal womb both day and night are
enclosed, the worlds both of life, symbolized by Demeter . . . , and of death, life's
daughter, Persephone . . . . The grapevine entwining her throne is matched by
that of the outer margin of the bowl; and she holds in both hands a large chalice of
the ambrosia of this vine of the universe: the blood of her ever-dying, ever-living
slain and resurrected son, Dionysus-Bacchus-Zagreus . . . the "child of the abyss,''
whose blood, in this chalice to be drunk, is the pagan prototype of the wine of the
sacrifice of the Mass, which is transubstantiated by the words of consecration into
the blood of the Son of the Virgin. (23)

It is this "Goddess Mother," Campbell explains, "who is symbolized by the Cross; as, for
instance, in the astrological-astronomical sign signifying earth ©. It is into and through
her that the god-substance pours into this field of space and time in a continuous act of
world-creative self-giving; and through her, in return—her guidance and her teaching—that
these many are led back, beyond her reign, to the light beyond the dark from which all
come" (25).

It is appropriate, then, that Fanny—a woman whose being echoes the timeless,
womanly knowledge of the Goddess—possesses this simple cross made not of gold, but of
amber, that ancient, life-giving sap that bled from earth's earliest trees. The amber is
reminiscent of the life-blood that ran down the tree that became Christ's wooden cross in the medieval poem *The Dream of the Rood*. Like Christ himself, the rood was buried and then resurrected or rediscovered and became an icon for life that comes from death. It is no mere coincidence that Austen gives Fanny an intense feeling for trees. Fanny is, for example, distressed at Mr. Rushworth's callous plan to cut down a whole avenue of ancient oak trees that he believes obscure his house from view. Fanny wishes very much to see the avenue before it is sacrificed, and when she does indeed get to visit Sotherton, the avenue is the first object she looks for. In another scene, Fanny rhapsodizes to the unfeeling Miss Crawford on the trees and shrubs that have grown up amazingly fast in Mrs. Grant's garden. "I am so glad to see the evergreens thrive!" she says, "The evergreen!--How beautiful, how welcome, how wonderful the evergreen!" (188). The felling of the old oaks and the quickening evergreens connect to Fanny's own ability to suffer the strokes of others yet to thrive. The amber of Fanny's ornament is a time-laden emblem of this ability, of bloody suffering, of death, and of resilient, shining life rendered in the Christian cross of a modern, less intense era. And like the amber cross, Fanny's inner, life-sustaining essence must endure as it can in a modern era. The blood sacrifices of ancient peoples are echoed in the genteel social rituals of courtship and marriage in which Fanny must now take part. Her cross must have a chain, and Fanny must have a husband.

Austen particularly focuses on the mental angst Fanny experiences in getting a chain for her cross. She is offered two chains, each of which stands for the sacrifices expected of Fanny. The chain from Crawford is given to her by Mary Crawford, who
generously offers Fanny a chain for her precious cross from her own jewelry collection. There is "one necklace more frequently placed before her eyes than the rest," a fancy necklace of "gold prettily worked," and although Fanny prefers a "longer and plainer chain" she chooses it, hoping that she has chosen "what Miss Crawford least wished to keep" (234). She is horrified, however, to discover afterwards that the chain was a gift to Miss Crawford from her brother, and her choosing that particular one is seen by Miss Crawford as proof that she must share the same tastes with Henry Crawford and will welcome his advances. Miss Crawford coyly asks Fanny, "perhaps . . . you suspect a confederacy between us, and that what I am now doing is with his knowledge and at his desire?" (235). Fanny tries to refuse the necklace, but Miss Crawford uses politeness so cleverly that she makes it impossible for Fanny to return the necklace, and Fanny reluctantly agrees to join her cross to it for the ball. Her reluctance springs from the same reluctance she feels in joining herself to Crawford in marriage, for Henry Crawford is like his necklace, a man of expensive and immoral habits. To marry him would be like sacrificing her soul as well as her body, and with him her soul would surely tarnish on its costly chain.

On her return to her room, however, Fanny finds Edmund waiting to give her a chain he has thoughtfully purchased for her, and this is of course the one Fanny would prefer to wear. But when she tells Edmund of Miss Crawford's necklace and of her scruples against accepting it, Edmund insists she wear the first necklace. Fanny protests that "the chain will agree with William's cross beyond all comparison better than the necklace," yet Edmund is so struck by Miss Crawford's seeming generosity, a generosity
so in accord with his own intentions, that he will not have Fanny "mortifying her severely" by returning her necklace. "For one night, Fanny," he counsels her, "for only one night, if it be a sacrifice--I am sure you will, upon consideration, make that sacrifice rather than give pain to one who has been so studious of your comfort" (238). He goes on to add that he will not have any discord between "the two dearest objects I have on earth" (239). Edmund's pleas that she "sacrifice" herself for his and Mary Crawford's sakes wound Fanny as if Edmund has literally plunged a knife into her side:

He was gone as he spoke; and Fanny remained to tranquillise herself as she could. She was one of his two dearest—that must support her. But the other!—the first! She had never heard him speak so openly before, and though it told her no more than what she had long perceived, it was a stab;—for it told of his own convictions and views. They were decided. He would marry Miss Crawford. It was a stab, in spite of every longstanding expectation; and she was obliged to repeat again and again that she was one of his two dearest, before the words gave her any sensation. Could she believe Miss Crawford to deserve him, it would be—Oh! How different it would be—how far more tolerable! But he was deceived in her; he gave her merits which she had not; her faults were what they had ever been, but he saw them no longer. Till she had shed many tears over this deception, Fanny could not subdue her agitation; and the dejections which followed could only be relieved by the influence of fervent prayers for his happiness. (239)

With Christ-like love, Fanny struggles to endure this pain inflicted upon her by the very person she most wishes to save, and she manages to forgive him by turning Edmund's bad
judgment upon herself. With her “fervent prayers for his happiness,” Fanny chastizes herself for presuming to love Edmund when she has so little to offer him. She resolutely declares to sacrifice her love for Edmund’s sake:

To her, he could be nothing under any circumstances—nothing dearer than a friend.

Why did such an idea occur to her even enough to be reprobated and forbidden? It ought not to have touched on the confines of her imagination. She would endeavor to be rational, and to deserve the right of judging of Miss Crawford’s character and the privilege of true solicitude for him by a sound intellect and an honest heart. (239-40)

In choosing to reject Henry Crawford and instead continue to love Edmund silently, Fanny chooses to become socially dead again, this time as a dependent spinster rather than as a dependent ward of the family. She is happy when she discovers on the night of the ball that Miss Crawford’s necklace is too thick to fit inside the cross’s ring, and she thus appropriately joins her cross to Edmund’s chain in silent recognition of the sacrificing love that binds her to Edmund. And when she dances her last dances with Edmund at the ball it is with a mixture of happiness and suffering, happiness to hear him tell that Miss Crawford has “pained him by her manner of speaking of the profession to which he was now on the point of belonging” (Mansfield Park 253) yet pain to know that he still desires Miss Crawford as a wife. Fanny begins to feel a painful stitch in her side as she dances with Edmund, the effect of her exhaustion and a subtle reminder of the sacrificial wound she bears for Edmund.

Sir Thomas, “having seen her rather walk than dance down the shortening set,
breathless and with her hand at her side, gave his orders for her sitting down entirely” (253). He is satisfied that the ball has accomplished all he could wish in advertising Fanny: “She was attractive, she was modest, she was Sir Thomas’s niece, and she was soon said to be admired by Mr. Crawford” (250). Little does he know that Fanny has no intention of going through with this ritual intended to mark her as the property of Mr. Crawford. His disbelief and anger are great when Fanny later tells him that she will not on any account marry Henry Crawford. Fanny is very shaken when her uncle, demanding an explanation for her refusal of so eligible a suitor, comes close to suspecting her of loving one of her cousins, but she “would rather die than own the truth, and she hoped by a little reflection to fortify herself beyond betraying it” (286). Fanny’s resolute yet inexplicable rejection of Crawford makes her an Eve again in Sir Thomas’s eyes:

“... you have disappointed every expectation I had formed, and proved yourself of a character the very reverse of what I had supposed. For I had, Fanny, as I think my behaviour must have shewn, formed a very favourable opinion of you from the period of my return to England. I had thought you particularly free from wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and every tendency to that independence of spirit, which prevails so much in modern days, even in young women, and which in young women is offensive and disgusting beyond all common offence. But you have now shewn me that you can be wilful and perverse, that you can and will decide for yourself, without any consideration or deference for those who have surely some right to guide you—without even asking their advice.” (288)

If Fanny is to be an Eve despite all of Mansfield’s attempts to squelch such an
inheritance in her, she must be buried again. Sir Thomas resolves to send her back to her family in Portsmouth. "It was a medicinal project upon his niece's understanding, which he must consider as at present diseased," Sir Thomas reasons, hoping that Fanny's mind will be returned to "a sober state" when she experiences "a little abstinence from the elegancies and luxuries of Mansfield Park" (335) and realizes what comforts Mr. Crawford can offer her.

Cast into the tumble and noise of her parents' cramped, dark house in Portsmouth, Fanny withers from a lack of exercise and decent food, as well as from the disappointment she experiences when she finds that her family, especially her mother, have no deep feelings for her. She suffers, too, from the knowledge that Edmund intends to propose to Mary Crawford quite soon, as he tells her in a letter, and she can hardly bear the pain this news causes. She becomes pale and tired again, buried alive as Sir Thomas wished, but had her uncle known how very truly Fanny was "in the most promising way of being starved, both mind and body, into a much juster value for Mr. Crawford's good company and good fortune, he would probably have feared to push the experiment farther, lest she might die under the cure" (Mansfield Park 376). Even Mr. Crawford is alarmed when he visits Fanny and notices that "she had lost ground as to health since her being in Portsmouth" (373). His offer to convey her back to Mansfield Park is exactly what Fanny desires, but she will not accept such an offer from him, knowing the obligation under which it would place her. She prefers instead to endure each day's "passing in a state of penance" (392) until Sir Thomas fetches her at the end of her two-months' stay, which is to end—coincidentally—at the time of Christ's resurrection, Easter. But her resurrection is
delayed when Tom Bertram falls dangerously ill, and no one from Mansfield has time to think of returning Fanny to life there. Fanny chafes at this "cruel" delay that keeps her confined to the city, unable to thrive or to nurture others:

She had not known before, how much the beginnings and progress of vegetation had delighted her. — What animation both of body and mind, she had derived from watching the advance of that season which cannot, in spite of its capriciousness, be unlovely, and seeing its increasing beauties, from the earliest flowers, in the warmest divisions of her aunt's garden, to the opening of leaves of her uncle's plantations, and the glory of his woods. — To be losing such pleasures was no trifle; to be losing them, because she was in the midst of closeness and noise, to have confinement, bad air, bad smells, substituted for liberty, freshness, fragrance, and verdure, was infinitely worse; — but even these incitements to regret, were feeble, compared with what arose from the conviction of being missed, by her best friends, and the longing to be useful to those who were wanting her! (393)

She soon discovers just how much Mansfield needs her life-affirming, nurturing presence. "There is no end of the evil let loose upon us," Edmund writes despondingly to her (404). His letter communicates a litany of troubles: Maria has left her husband and hidden herself away with Mr. Crawford, Julia has eloped with Mr. Yates, and Tom's illness has suffered a setback as a consequence of the disgrace of his sisters. At last the hardy plants raised in the rich soil of Mansfield have revealed their rotten roots and now threaten to destroy the whole garden. With chagrin Sir Thomas realizes that his daughters were cultivated "with all the cost and care of an anxious and expensive education" that
produced beautiful, showy petals yet hollow, shallow roots that cannot grasp the soil when passion and temptation sweep over them. “Something must have been wanting within,” Sir Thomas acknowledges, “or time would have worn away much of its evil effect. He feared that principle, active principle, had been wanting, that they had never been properly taught to govern their inclinations and tempers, by that sense of duty which can alone suffice. They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice” (422). The exposure of Maria’s and Julia’s rotten roots in turn reveals the corrupted roots of others. Sir Thomas at last sees Mr. Crawford for what he is, an unprincipled young man who was foolish enough to stunt his growth with Maria’s poisoned regard rather than enrich himself by earning Fanny’s love. Mrs. Norris becomes “quieted, stupefied, indifferent” at the news of her favorite, Maria’s, disgrace, and Sir Thomas recognizes her as the evil influence behind his daughters’ blighting conduct. And Mary Crawford at last appears in her true light before Edmund. He is revolted by her attitude that the scandal of her brother’s and Maria’s affair can be repaired by their marriage and by “good dinners, and large parties” (417); she has no notion of condemning the lovers, only restoring their public reputations after their little “folly” as she refers to it. “‘Guess what I must have felt,’” Edmund tells Fanny in response to Miss Crawford’s lack of moral perception, “‘To hear the woman whom—no harsher name than folly given!—So voluntarily, so freely, so coolly to canvass it!—No reluctance, no horror, no feminine—shall I say? No modest loathings!—This is what the world does. For where, Fanny, shall we find a woman whom nature had so richly endowed?—Spoilt, spoilt!—’” (415). He laments “‘how delightful nature had made her, and how excellent she would have been, had she
fallen into good hands”" (419).

On first receiving the news of her cousins’ scandalous conduct, Fanny bears the family’s wounds literally, feeling with her body all the pain they suffer. She cannot sleep and “passed only from feelings of sickness to shudderings of horror; and from hot fits of fever to cold” (402). She is “reduced to so low and wan and trembling a condition” (403) that she seems truly ill—only no one in the Price household notices. Just as she always has, however, Fanny instinctively bears the pain of others, only to survive and thrive afterwards. Her mind and body again echo Christ’s experience, this time reflecting Christ’s teaching in the Bible:

“I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Gardener. He lops off every branch that doesn’t produce. And he prunes those branches that bear fruit for even larger crops. He has already tended you by pruning you back for greater strength and usefulness by means of the commands I gave you. Take care to live in me, and let me live in you. For a branch can’t produce fruit when severed from the vine. Nor can you be fruitful apart from me.

“‘Yes, I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever lives in me and I in him shall produce a large crop of fruit. For apart from me you can’t do a thing. If anyone separates from me, he is thrown away like a useless branch, withers, and is gathered into a pile with all the others and burned.” (John 15.1-6)

Fanny has all along lived these words, being severely pruned back—even pruning herself to control her jealous feelings—only to emerge in full bloom to become the true daughter of Mansfield Park. Mansfield must undergo this same experience as well if it is to survive
and prosper, and accordingly those branches which do nothing to insure Mansfield’s future life, both physically and morally, are cast off to “wither” and “be burned” in a “pile with all the others.” Maria, doomed never to have children, and the childless Mrs. Norris are banished from Mansfield Park to a secluded foreign home of their own, where their moral decrepitude can no longer taint Mansfield. Julia and Mr. Yates, showing some healthy and penitent roots despite their blighted appearance, are allowed back at the Park to be repotted under Sir Thomas’s enlightened guidance. Tom Bertram recovers from his disease and is a new man—all his father could wish—after his nearly being hacked from the family tree by death. And Henry and Mary Crawford are at last glance seen existing in society as they always have, fashionable and unchanged, yet unmarried, unfulfilled, and childless, regretting severance from Mansfield.

Before they are severed from Mansfield, both Mrs. Norris and Mary Crawford acknowledge Fanny as the catalyst for their ruined hopes. When Fanny is brought back from her Portsmouth tomb at last, Mrs. Norris greets her with blind fury as “the daemon of the piece,” charging that “had Fanny accepted Mr. Crawford, this [scandal] could not have happened” (409). Mary Crawford likewise complains to Edmund, “‘Why, would not she have him? It is all her fault. Simple girl!—I shall never forgive her. Had she accepted him as she ought, they might now have been on the point of marriage, and Henry would have been too happy and busy to want any other object’” (416). No one else at Mansfield seems to regard Fanny as a demon except these two women, and that they should recognize this aspect in Fanny is significant. Demons themselves, they perceive a subtle kinship with Fanny; the three woman share a womanly, powerful connection to death, but
it is Fanny’s power alone that combines the nurturing power of the angel and the 
scourging power of the demon that triumphs over the power of the other two women.

That Fanny is both an angel and a demon at the same time again locates her as an 
ancient echo interpreted in modern sounds. Nina Auerbach explains in *Woman and the 
Demon* that in medieval and Renaissance Christianity both angels and demons are 
represented as unmistakably male, and although poets as late as Blake represented angels 
as bisexual, they referred to angels with masculine pronouns (70-72). By Austen’s time, 
however, and certainly in the Victorian era, both angels and demons have taken on a 
primarily feminine aspect and were often merged into one entity that emanated both terror 
and benevolence at the same time. Auerbach traces this evolution:

To be an angel, then, is to be masculine and breathtakingly mobile: traditional 
angels take possession of infinite space with an enviable freedom that later 
Romantic poets dare attribute only to such birds as albatrosses, skylarks, and 
invisible nightingales. As heir of this tradition, the Victorian angel in the house 
seems a bizarre object of worship, both in her virtuous femininity with its inherent 
limitations--she can exist only within families, while masculine angels existed 
everywhere--and in the immobilization the phrase suggests. In contrast to her 
swooping ancestors, the angel in the house is a violent paradox with 
overtones of benediction and captivity. Angelic motion had once known no 
boundaries; the Victorian angel is defined by her boundaries. Yet the stillness of 
this new icon is invested with powers that earlier athletic angels did not possess, 
for as masculinity is superseded by her presence, so is creative divinity. This new
angel takes orders from no father-creator, but become [sic] herself the source of order. (72)

Demons, too, lost their exclusively masculine and Christian association and came to embody a feminine, pre-Christian essence akin to the angel’s essence. Auerbach goes on to describe the blending of angel and demon in Victorian iconography:

It may not be surprising that female demons bear an eerie resemblance to their angelic counterparts, though characteristics that are suggestively implicit in the angel come to the fore in the demon. Their covert identification is motivated by their common cause: both are illicit invaders of traditional Anglican symbolism, announcing a new dispensation that is of pre-Christian antiquity. In the Socratic usage cited in the OED, “demon” need not designate an evil spirit alone but may incorporate divinity into its supernatural power . . . . In Victorian literature female demons often assume this broader identity, while male demons limits themselves to single-minded opposition to good. The female invasion of religious iconography is not a pallid surrogate for the real thing, but one agent of the radically new sort of terror, conflating divinity with demonism, that Peter Brooks locates in Matthew Lewis’ *The Monk*: “at the dead end of the Age of Reason, the Sacred has reasserted its claim to attention, but in the most primitive possible manifestations, as taboo and interdiction, and ethics has implicitly come to be founded on terror rather than virtue.” (75)

In her virtuous guise as the maternal angel of the house, woman also embodies the cleansing, divine terror of the demon that is “the source of all sacred experience,” the
“violence whose very presence establishes the essential function of all myths and rituals: to disguise, to divert, and to banish disorder from the community” in order to ensure the survival of the community. This angelic/demonic power makes woman a figure both to be loved and feared (Auerbach 76).

Fanny possesses this feminine/angelic/demonic power, as we have already seen, and is worthy of it because she has lived it with her suffering. Mrs. Norris and Mary Crawford are equally inheritors of this power because they are women, but they are not so completely “in touch” with it (to use a hackneyed phrase) as Fanny is because they do not know what true suffering is. Mrs. Norris is in fact a distorted mirror of Fanny, her power only able to touch the surface of things rather than the core. For example, Fanny’s affinity with nature is reflected in Mrs. Norris’s attempts to control nature. “For my own part, if I had any thing within the fiftieth part of the size of Sotherton, I should be always planting and improving, for naturally I am excessively fond of it,” she tells Mr. Rushworth, and then brags to Dr. Grant, “It was only the spring twelve-month before Mr. Norris’s death, that we put in the apricot against the stable wall, which is now grown such a noble tree, and getting to such perfection, sir.” Dr. Grant immediately offends her by saying that this remarkable tree that she was responsible for planting in such good soil produces a fruit “so little worth gathering” (47-8), a statement that prophesies Mrs. Norris’s failure to nurture her nieces into women who are both lovely and productive. Trusting in aromatic vinegar to cure an headache (65), promising a gardener a “charm” for his son’s illness (94), “curing” the old coachman of his rheumatism (170), Mrs. Norris practices her Christian charity with a touch of pagan witchiness. Indeed, she seems almost to wish she were a
witch, feeling “dreadful presentiments” and “a foreboding of evil” that make her sure Sir Thomas will not return from Antigua alive (33). When he does return alive and well, she is disappointed that her vision proved false, and she is even more disappointed that her power of managing Mansfield is at an end. When Sir Thomas tries to reprimand her for her part in the theatricals, she immediately diverts the subject to her part in getting Maria engaged to the rich Mr. Rushworth, using terms of god-like power to describe her accomplishment. Lady Bertram was hard to stir from her sofa, she says, but she “left no stone unturned. I was ready to move heaven and earth to persuade my sister, and at last I did persuade her” (170). Raising the supremely indolent Lady Bertram from the dead was indeed a feat, but it is nothing compared to being raised from the dead, as Fanny has been. Mrs. Norris’s notion of suffering comprehends only the fact that she is a widow, socially dead in a way, with only a tiny house and a small income to support her. She has no children of her own, no real power, and no true sense of faith. Neither a truly creating, nurturing angel, nor a powerful demon, Mrs. Norris cannot command the womanly power within herself because she does not deserve it. Her hatred of Fanny reflects her powerlessness.

Mary Crawford is a more complex figure than Mrs. Norris, and a more dangerous one, for she does command a certain power. Hers is the power of death without new life; there is nothing regenerative, nothing life-affirming about her. She fully understands her demonic power, but has no access to her angelic, maternal power. Like Mrs. Norris, she does not know what it is to suffer, and she thus cannot exercise her full womanly power. She offers the illusory promise of eternal youth rather than eternal life. “Nothing ever
fatigues me," she proudly claims after quickly mastering horseback riding, which she undertakes for pleasure rather than for health, as Fanny does (62). And when Fanny sits down during their walk at Sotherton, Mary Crawford firmly claims, ""I am really not tired, which I almost wonder at; for we must have walked at least a mile in this wood."

Edmund protests that they haven’t walked that far, no ""more than a furlong in length,"
and he adds, ""We have been exactly a quarter of an hour here . . . Do you think we are walking four miles an hour?"" Mary laughs, ""Oh! I know nothing of your furlongs"" and tells him, ""Oh! Do not attack me with your watch"" (85). Miss Crawford talks as if she is not bound by the measuring devices of this world, as if she has no need of them. There is about Miss Crawford the bewitching air of someone who has found a secret potion, a fountain of youth, that shields her from debility and leaves her unconcerned with time.

Her lack of concern for time leads her to scoff at man’s attempts to control time and destiny, either through implements like watches or through rituals connected with sacrifice and renewal. She regards Edmund’s determination to be a clergyman as a needless sacrifice of himself to a god in whom she sees no power. ""Your father’s return will be an interesting event,"" she slyly observes to Edmund, who takes her bait:

""It will, indeed, after such an absence; an absence not only long, but including so many dangers."

""It will be the fore-runner also of other interesting events; your sister’s marriage, and your taking orders."

""Yes."

""Don’t be affronted," said she laughing; "but it does put me in mind of some of
the old heathen heroes, who after performing great exploits in a foreign land, offered sacrifices to the gods on their safe return."

"There is no sacrifice in the case," replied Edmund with a serious smile, and glancing at the piano-forte again, "It is entirely her own doing."

"Oh! Yes, I know it is. I was merely joking. She has done no more than what every young woman would do; and I have no doubt of her being extremely happy. My other sacrifice of course you do not understand."

"My taking orders I assure you is quite as voluntary as Maria’s marrying."

(97-8)

One of the tests an ancient sailor like Odysseus, for example, encountered in his voyage was the temptation by sirens, whose beauty and irresistable song lure an adventurer away from his quest into unredeemable death. Says Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "Such demons--at once dangers and bestowers of magic power--every hero must encounter who steps an inch outside the walls of his tradition" (83). Mary Crawford is such a demon. Her very name suggests the slippery, shape-changing, alluring quality of the siren. "Mary" is the name of the madonna as well as that of the prostitute, Mary Magdalene, and "Crawford" brings to mind the crawfish, a water creature whose "tail" resembles that of the mermaid and whose claws can grab an object tenaciously. It is no coincidence that Mary Crawford plays the harp and that her harp playing is one of the attractions that lures Edmund toward her and almost away from his profession, God, and Fanny. Austen describes her as an eighteenth-century drawing room version of the sirens from ancient myth: "A young woman, pretty, lively, with a harp as elegant as herself; and
both placed near a window, cut down to the ground, and opening on a little lawn, surrounded by shrubs in the rich foliage of summer, was enough to catch any man’s heart” (58). The animated and always laughing Miss Crawford, set against a lush, summery scene, embodies life at its fullest and strongest, still childishly fresh yet ripened enough for picking and immense enjoyment, without any suggestion of death or suffering for such fruits. Her irritation at being unable to hire a farmer’s cart during harvest to convey her harp to Mansfield reveals more than an ignorance of country practices; it reveals a disregard for the rhythms of country life that require death/harvest in order to bring about life/crops. Edmund gently explains to her, “‘You could not be expected to have thought on the subject before, but when you do think of it, you must see the importance of getting in the grass. The hire of a cart at any time, might not be so easy as you suppose; our farmers are not in the habit of letting them out; but in harvest, it must be quite out of their power to spare a horse’” (52). Miss Crawford responds unsympathetically, merely commenting on “‘the sturdy independence of your country customs’” (52).

That her youthful immediacy is a powerful draw against Fanny’s promise of eternity after death, becomes quite evident in the “glee” scene previously discussed, in which Fanny invites Edmund to watch the stars with her and he instead gravitates toward Mary’s voice, joined with the other young people in song. Speaking of the night sky, Fanny spoke her feelings. “‘Here’s harmony!’ said she, “Here’s repose! Here’s what may leave all painting and music behind, and what poetry only can attempt to describe. Here’s what may tranquillize every care, and lift the heart to rapture! When I look out on such a night as this, I feel as if there could be neither
wickedness nor sorrow in the world, and there certainly would be less of both if
the sublimity of Nature were more attended to, and people were carried more out
of themselves by contemplating such a scene.” (102)

Fanny is speaking of all that she stands for: a sublime suffering that leads to the tranquility
of death and at last to the rapture of eternal life. She urges Edmund to look into the night,
“where all that was solemn and soothing, and lovely, appeared in the brilliancy of the
unclouded night, and the contrast of the deep shade of the woods” (102). Edmund does
look out the window and remarks that he sees Arcturus “looking very bright.” He is
seeing the brightest star in a constellation called “Bootes,” which according to one myth is
the figure of the herdsman son of Demeter, the goddess of the harvest (Chartrand 447).
His mention of this particular star, with its mythological association with the goddess
responsible for the cycles of agriculture, suggests that he will follow Fanny’s guidance.

Fanny says, “I wish I could see Cassiopeia,” referring to the constellation that depicts the
vain queen chained to her throne because she claimed to be more beautiful than
Poseidon’s daughters, the Nereids. Another story places Cassiopeia’s daughter
Andromeda in the chair as a sacrifice to the sea in atonement for her mother’s vanity
(Chartrand 471-2). Fanny’s mention of a constellation so associated with evil beauty
seems to serve as a reminder to Edmund that Mary Crawford, too, has an alluring
loveliness that, unlike Demeter’s, can produce no good. She is happy when Edmund
suggests that they go out into the night to see the stars better, and when he asks if the
dark will frighten her, she assures him, “Not in the least.” At that moment, however,
Mary Crawford’s voice swells with the others’ in the glee, and Edmund automatically
turns from the window, saying “We will stay till this is finished, Fanny” and “moving forward by gentle degrees towards the instrument, and when it ceased, he was close by the singers, among the most urgent in requesting to hear the glee again” (102). The siren’s youthful song beckons, and not even the brilliant, eternal promise of the stars can keep Edmund next to Fanny’s side at this moment.

Edmund does, of course, discover his mistake in Miss Crawford and finds his way back to Fanny, and “after wandering about and sitting under trees with Fanny all the summer evenings,” realizes that he wants to marry her (421). Fanny, set among the trees and the night stars that symbolize her power, offers Edmund “earthly happiness” (432) as well as guides him back to the moral path that will lead him to eternal happiness. She restores comfort and faith in mankind to Sir Thomas, who at last realizes that “Fanny was indeed the daughter he wanted,” the one who will bear Mansfield’s heirs and foster in them a moral consciousness that will keep Mansfield fruitful and deserving of blessings. She and Edmund soon “begin to want an increase of income” as their family grows under Fanny’s watchful, maternal eye. She has been the angel as well as the demon of Mansfield Park, the model of morality by which all others are judged and appropriately punished. With her “consciousness of being born to struggle and endure” (432) Fanny has carried within her the ageless message, both pagan and Christian in interpretation, that from death will come life. While not physically scourging Mansfield, she has nevertheless been the active agent behind its cleansing and resurrection. Avrom Fleishman writes that Fanny has a charismatic power that is easier to acknowledge than to explain.

We need not hold her up as a divine savior to grant her a function in the novel
paralleling the archetypal role of children in many myths and much literature. We have only to think of the heroines of Shakespeare's late romances or those of James's fiction to put Fanny in a perennial tradition of symbolic suggestion. She is the child who inherits the future and justifies the sufferings of the past. (69)

Fanny is the woman who bears the knowledge of the cave, the goddess's knowledge of suffering, death and life, as echoed in a myriad of ways. With infinities to Mother Earth, to Eve, to Christ, to her own mother, Fanny is the symbolic suggestion of Truth.
CHAPTER 5

“GEOMETRY OF THE SOUL”: DEATH AND PERFECTION IN *EMMA*

Her hair, like golden threads, play’d with her breath—
O modest wantons, wanton modesty!
Showing life’s triumph in the map of death,
And death’s dim look in life’s mortality.
Each in her sleep themselves so beautify,
    As if between them twain there were no strife,
    But that life liv’d in death, and death in life.
Shakespeare in *The Rape of Lucrece*

Death is the mother of beauty; hence from her,
Alone, shall come fulfilment to our dreams
And our desires. . . . Wallace Stevens in “Sunday Morning”

“One can imagine any thing nearer perfect beauty than Emma altogether—face and
figure?” Mrs. Weston asks Mr. Knightley in chapter five of *Emma*. She goes on to
glowingly describe her favorite as if she were raving over an exquisite painting:

“Such an eye!—the true hazle eye—and so brilliant! regular features, open
countenance, with a complexion! oh! what a bloom of full health, and such a
pretty height and size; such a firm and upright figure. There is health, not merely
in her bloom, but in her air, her head, her glance. One hears sometimes of a child
being ‘the picture of health;’ now Emma always gives me the idea of being the
complete picture of grown-up health. She is loveliness itself. Mr. Knightley, is not
she?” (34)

Mr. Knightley, “one of the few people who could see faults in Emma Woodhouse, and the
only one who ever told her of them" (8), politely responds,

“I have not a fault to find with her person,” he replied. “I think her all you
describe. I love to look at her; and I will add this praise, that I do not think her
personally vain. Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little
occupied with it; her vanity lies another way. Mrs. Weston, I am not to be talked
out of my dislike of her intimacy with Harriet Smith, or my dread of its doing them
both harm.” (34)

At the heart of this deceptively simple conversation lie a number of assumptions about
women’s bodies. Implied in Mrs. Weston’s and Mr. Knightley’s admiration of Emma is
the fact that Emma is an exception and most women are imperfect in appearance. In fact,
social views of the eighteenth century looked upon women as generally imperfect
creatures, with inferior minds, inferior bodies, and inferior moral sensibilities. And as
inferior, weak creatures, women were living reminders of the humanness of the body, of
the inevitable decay and lack of perfection of the human body while alive, and of the
ultimate decomposition of the body when dead. Women’s bodies were thus culturally
construed as sights of death and, as I will show in this chapter, this view of woman was so
pervasive, so variously yet subtly manifested, that women had virtually no way in which to
escape from it. Emma, so perfect in everyone’s eyes as well as in her own, seems to be
above this association with death, but she finds that her perfection allies her to death more
terribly and more thoroughly than imperfection links the women around her to death.

Mrs. Weston’s description of Emma expresses the eighteenth-century belief that a
perfect, beautiful body corresponds to mental and moral superiority. This idea had its
roots in the works of such philosophers as Pythagoras, Plato, Galileo, Descartes, Pascal, and others, whose quests to define life turned upon mathematical models. Accordingly, "mathematics became the single most powerful model for the attainment of perfection in the West. By the seventeenth century, it constituted an invariable paradigm not only for the physical sciences, but for philosophy and the fine and literary arts as well" (Stafford et al. 215). The idea that perfection could be measured resulted in the idea that only that which is "clear, distinct, and demarcated" is good or valuable, and whatever is "ambiguous, indistinct, and confused" is "without serious moral and aesthetic worth because [it is] not rooted in unshakable, eternal principles" (215).

This definition of perfection was ruthlessly applied to the human body particularly in the eighteenth century, when the pseudo-science of physiognomy (phrenology) became widely popular. Such works as theologian Johann Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* (1775-78) and anatomical artist Petrus Camper's *On the Connection between the Science of Anatomy and the Arts of Drawing, Painting, and Statuary* (1794) perpetuated the idea that there existed a "geometry of the soul" (Stafford et al. 222). In other words, a body that is beautiful or "simple, homogenous, and ruled by geometrical proportions" indicates a mind of intelligence and a soul of moral excellence. Ugly features, such as a crooked nose or stooping shoulders, are a sure index of "inner irrationality and ethical monstrosity" (216).

When Mrs. Weston points out Emma’s "regular features," "open countenance," "pretty height and size," and "firm, upright figure," she refers to the geometric, measurable proportions of Emma’s body, proportions which happen to conform with
society's standards of perfect beauty. Her complexion likewise denotes a measurable
good health, youth, and another quality that is equally measurable, health. Her health in turn
points to yet another measurable characteristic: wealth. If Emma had been born a
pauper's daughter, she very likely would have been denied the warm fires, healthy meals,
cushy carriages, pleasant walks, and medical attention that ensured better health (and a
better chance of surviving beyond infancy) for those with money toward the end of the
eighteenth century (McManners 84-5). Emma's wealth, of course, puts her in the
position of being "first in consequence" in Highbury; her status is another quality that is
scrupulously measurable. With such beauty and all it denotes, Emma's judgment is
naturally considered superior as well. "Whatever you say is always right," Harriet Smith
tells her, adding, "How nicely you talk; I love to hear you. You understand every thing"
(67, 69). Mrs. Weston is equally as confident that her beautiful Emma is morally good, as
she assures Mr. Knightley when he expresses doubts about Emma's friendship with
Harriet, her social inferior:

With all dear Emma's little faults, she is an excellent creature. Where shall we see
a better daughter, or a kinder sister, or a truer friend? No, no; she has qualities
which may be trusted; she will never lead any one really wrong; she will make no
lasting blunder; where Emma errs once, she is in the right a hundred times. (35)

Mr. Knightley again concedes politely that "Emma is an angel" (35), but he is by
no means convinced of her moral perfection. He does not hesitate to point out to Emma
the flaws in her moral behavior, such as her self-serving friendship with Harriet or her rude
behavior to Miss Bates at Box Hill. He sees beyond Emma's appearance into her true
moral character, and in doing so is the only person in the novel who does not subscribe to phrenological interpretations of morality in the style of Lavater and Camper. Instead, Austen associates Mr. Knightley with another scientist who came to the opposite conclusions from Lavater and Camper. In *On Physiognomies; Against Physiognomies* (1778), Georg Christoph Lichtenberg contended that “life erodes geometrical perfection; it distorts edges and roughens contours” (Stafford et al. 224). Only those who truly live life—even if banged up in the process—can have true moral insight, Lichtenberg concluded. A perfect body denotes a lack of healthy suffering; to maintain a perfect body one has to avoid the world, living in unhealthy “narcissistic isolation” (224). Sir Walter Elliot from *Persuasion* immediately comes to mind here as an example of such a narcissist. He abhors Lady Russell’s crows’ feet, Admiral Croft’s sunburnt face, Mrs. Smith’s crippled body, without being able to see that wrinkles and stiff limbs reflect lives truly lived and wisdom truly gained through love and sorrow. Sir Walter does not really love, nor is he truly loved by, anyone. His physical perfection is accomplished in egotistical isolation; his life is empty, and his death will be empty and unmourned.

Sir Walter’s perfection is totally of his own imagining and his need to feel perfect reveals the deeper need to deny his mortality. He clings to a facade composed of his name, his estate, and his good looks in order to forget—even deny—the fact that in the end he will turn to dust like any other animal. Ernest Becker describes the intensity of such a struggle in *The Denial of Death*: “The prison of one’s character is painstakingly built to deny one thing and one thing alone: one’s creatureliness. The creatureliness is the terror. Once admit that you are a defecating creature and you invite the primeval ocean of
creature anxiety to flood over you” (87).

Like Sir Walter, Emma deliberately (if less ruthlessly) maintains her facade of perfection and guards it firmly. She does not, for instance, wish her father ever to “suspect such a circumstance as her not being thought perfect by every body” (Emma 9). And when she decides to paint a portrait of Harriet, she knows that she has no great artistic talent, “but she was not unwilling to have others deceived [as to her ability], or sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved” (39). It is not only her talent with a brush that must be deemed perfect, but in painting Harriet she wishes all to see how perfect Harriet--her current project--has become under Emma’s guidance. She has been fashioning Harriet into a perfect woman after her own image. “‘You have given Miss Smith all that she required,’” observes Mr. Elton to Emma, “‘Skilful has been the hand’” (37). Emma replies that Harriet “‘only wanted a little drawing out’” (37) with “‘only a little more knowledge and elegance to be quite perfect’” (20). And perfect she must be, if she has been shaped after Emma’s own image. When Emma commences the life-size portrait of her protégé, she intentionally adds those characteristics that make Harriet more closely resemble herself. After the first day of the sitting, she admires her work:

There was no want of likeness, she had been fortunate in the attitude, and as she meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance, she had great confidence of its being in every way a pretty drawing at last, and of its filling its desired place with credit to them both--a standing memorial of the beauty of one, the skill of the other, and the friendship
That Emma has “improved” Harriet evokes various reactions in those who view the portrait. Mrs. Weston believes Emma has done Harriet a favor by giving “her friend the only beauty she wanted . . . . The expression of the eye is most correct,” she remarks, “but Miss Smith has not those eye-brows and eye-lashes. It is the fault of her face that she has them not” (42). Mr. Knightley bluntly says, “You have made her too tall, Emma,” and Mr. Elton effusively defends Emma’s improvements by denying them. “It appears to me a most perfect resemblance in every feature . . . . certainly not too tall . . . . the proportions must be preserved, you know. Proportions, foreshortening.—Oh, no! It gives one exactly the idea of such a height as Miss Smith’s” (42). That Emma has painted herself into Harriet’s portrait of course backfires when Mr. Elton eventually declares his love for Emma, the original, rather than for Harriet, the copy. Scorned by Emma, Mr. Elton proves he may know nothing about art, but he certainly knows what composes a perfect woman. When Austen introduces Mrs. Elton to the reader, she ironically uses art terms to describe Mr. Elton’s success in finding the perfect woman for himself: “He had caught both substance and shadow—both fortune and affection” we are told (163).

Emma’s facade of perfection is important to her, but it is also important to those who view her. The society that surrounds her needs to see her as perfect. Besides health, the quality most associated with Emma is “spirit” in the sense of both mental and physical energy (Wiltshire 128). Emma’s radiant health and her aura of spirit combine to make her seem something of a goddess to Highbury, someone who seems almost immortal. Of
course, no one in Highbury truly believes Emma is immortal, nor do they consciously acknowledge her as a goddess, but they do admire her as one would admire a portrait of a very beautiful woman, a woman “fair but frozen” (Emma 63) on a canvas, immortalized in her beauty and youth, offering the dream of being inanimate—dead—without decay. In the sanitorium-like village of Highbury, where women especially are defined by death, Emma is an image of the promise of beautiful death. She is the “picture of health” to all who view her.

In Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic, Elizabeth Bronfen explains that while Western culture so feared death that it viewed the corpse with disgust and wariness, the triad of women, beauty, and death found in so much art and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries points to another, equally conventional set of cultural norms. For if any discussion of death involves masking the inevitability of human decomposition, it does so by having recourse to beauty. We invest in images of wholeness, purity and the immaculate owing to our fear of dissolution and decay. The function of beauty, Lacan suggests, is to point to the relation man has with his own death, but to indicate this only as a dazzling sight. The idea of beauty’s perfection is so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration, fragmentation, and insufficiency, even though it actually only serves as substitution for the facticity of human existence one fears yet must accept. (62)

To her father, for example, Emma is absolutely faultless and is the image of her mother, who died when Emma was five. Emma is described as having inherited her
mother's "talents" of quickness, confidence, presence, strength, and resilient memory (32, 33, 71); as the image of such a lively woman, who must have died relatively young, Emma embodies both life and death. Mr. Woodhouse is obsessed with his aging body and seeks to protect it from decay and death; his wife died young, and to look at Emma is to see that wife untouched by the ravages of old age or the decomposition of the grave. Emma is, like the portrait of Harriet is intended to be, "a standing memorial of the beauty of one"; she is a living reminder of the beautiful dead, and as such she must be perfect.

The intense wish to see the dead, whether they die young or not, as beautiful and perfect does not lie with Mr. Woodhouse alone. It was a prevalent, widespread need among society of the time. "Human nature is so well disposed towards those who are in interesting situations," Austen writes in *Emma*, "that a young person, who either marries or dies, is sure to be kindly spoken of" (162), and she further writes on Mrs. Churchill's death in the novel, "...when lovely woman stoops to folly, she has nothing to do but die; and when she stoops to be disagreeable, it is equally recommended as a clearer of ill-fame. Mrs. Churchill, after being disliked at least twenty-five years, was now spoken of with compassionate allowances" (351). Austen's own letters testify to the desire to see the dead as restored to perfection rather than marred by imperfection and decay. On the death of a young neighbor, Austen writes to her sister Cassandra that "many a girl on early death has been praised into an angel, I believe, on slighter pretensions to beauty, sense, and merit than Marianne" (Cecil 93), and she writes to her brother Frank of their father's death, saying, "The serenity of the Corpse is most delightful! It preserves the sweet, benevolent smile which always distinguished him" (Cecil 108). Four years after her dear
friend Anna LeFroy’s death, which occurred on Austen’s birthday in 1804, Austen wrote a memorial poem in which she describes Mrs. LeFroy as a perfect angel. “Let me behold her as she used to be” writes Austen,

I see her here with all her smiles benign,

Her looks of eager love, her accents sweet,

That voice and countenance almost divine,

Expression, harmony, alike complete. . . .

Hers is the energy of soul sincere;

Her Christian spirit, ignorant to feign,

Seek but to comfort, heal, enlighten, cheer,

Confer a pleasure or prevent a pain. (Cecil 106)

Clearly, the dead—and particularly dead women—are acquitted of physical and moral imperfection in society’s eyes. As the living image of her dead mother, Emma must likewise be perfect in the eyes of those who knew her mother.

Emma’s living perfection and the incredible health she exudes make her truly a stand-out in a village like Highbury, where life is carried on as if in a sanitorium for ill and dying people. Highbury is an insulated little community in which everything and everyone are seen in relation to health. Highbury “remains oblivious to the political and social structures that are actually organizing its world. Highbury knows people, becomes familiar with them, in the mode of patienthood” John Wiltshire points out in Jane Austen and the Body (112). The novel is full of references to health, “from Isabella’s claims about the favourable air of Brunswick Square, to Harriet’s treasured court-plaister, to the
Hartfield arrowroot dispatched for Jane, to Emma’s speculations about that special ‘constitution’ of Frank Churchill’s which makes him cross when he is hot” (Wiltshire 112). Even a horse catches a cold, causing Frank Churchill to take the more public Crown chaise back to Enscombe, a move that exposes him to the gossip that leads Jane Fairfax to suppose he has given her up. Mr. Perry the physician is everywhere, doctoring the poor and the rich and the young and the old alike, carrying medicine and gossip as remedies for his patients’ various illnesses. Mr. Woodhouse, of course, is the supreme representation of the sanitorium patient, for he wraps himself in precautions and warm fires and wholesome food in order to ward off death. Mr. Woodhouse is the ultimate example of one whose preoccupation with health and illness is really a preoccupation with death; his valetudinarianism embraces death while at the same time denying it. Like the inhabitants of the sanitorium in Thomas Mann’s The Magic Mountain, Mr. Woodhouse lives in a cocoon-like “charmed circle of isolation and invalidism” (Mann 719) in which the constant reminder of one’s mortality serves to make that mortality seem less horrible. Living with constant, real or imagined, illness is a way of easing into death; one resigns from active life, where death can surprise a person through accidents, assassinations, plagues, etc., and one lives “deathfully,” resignedly, as Mr. Woodhouse does.

Choosing to live resigned to death is a man’s prerogative, however. In The Magic Mountain, the hero Hans Castorp checks himself into the sheltered life of the sanitorium for seven years and finally finds the courage to leave that sheltered world and face death actively, in the real world. Mr. Woodhouse is a hypochondriac who has chosen to live as an invalid; being well would not give him half as much power, nor gain him as much
attention, as he gets by being unwell. Women have no such prerogative. Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* speaks for all eighteenth-century women when she points out to Captain Harville that women “live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced upon exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation . . .” (221). Men may go “back into the world” where life goes on with vigor; women, those weak and imperfect beings, must remain “confined” and linked to death as patients, nurses, wives, mothers, spinsters, governesses—with no chance of escaping such death-bound definitions of womanhood.

In *Emma*, all the women characters encounter death, either directly or through social or bodily weakness. On the first page we are told that Emma and Isabella lost their mother (one of Austen’s few good mothers) when they were children. Isabella Knightley has undertaken an affectionate marriage and motherhood, and beneath her comically presented hypochondria, she lives with the serious fear of infection taking herself or one of her beloved family away. Mrs. Weston has endured the life of a governess—luckily in a good family—and during the course of the novel faces childbirth. Harriet Smith contracts such a dreadful cold that Mr. Perry is called to see her. Mrs. Bates is elderly and in failing health. Miss Bates has her health but is a poor, rather pitiful spinster who elicits respect from her neighbors only because of “what she once was,” the daughter of a clergyman, and because she is sweetly accepting of her socially dead position. Jane Fairfax, an orphan, is known to have been saved from falling overboard during a water party, and while in Highbury is constantly indisposed as Frank Churhill toys with her and
spinsterhood/governessing looms in her future. Mrs. Churhill is often ill (or imagines herself so) and then dies. All of the women, except Miss Bates, are motherless; most are also fatherless. And in no other Austen novel are illness and spinsterhood so pervasive among women, or so connected.

Indeed, in no other Austen novel is spinsterhood so clearly presented as an illness. At one point in *Emma*, Mr. Woodhouse solicitously tells Jane Fairfax that “‘young ladies are very sure to be cared for’” (265). What this essentially means is that women, particularly unmarried women, are “positioned as patients, or potential patients, at a lower level of bodily capacity and resourcefulness than young men, and, while entitled to ‘care’, have initiative taken from them” (Wiltshire 119). Married women have their husbands and children to care for them, but unmarried women fall to the more public care of the neighborhood, particularly in Highbury. Miss Bates and Harriet Smith certainly receive their share of “care.” Emma constantly feels guilty because she does not do enough in caring for Miss Bates, and she assuages her guilt by sending the Bateses foods and herbs that Mr. Woodhouse considers wholesome for them. Other neighbors, like the Eltons, are quick to offer carriages and servants to attend to Miss Bates’s errands, and Mr. Knightley, who gives his entire store of apples to the Bates ladies, makes sure Miss Bates is accorded the respect she deserves, even from the errant Emma. Mr. Perry often makes medical calls but refuses to charge for them. Having no visible parents, Harriet has been left in the “care” of Mrs. Goddard, and Emma undertakes to care for her future by improving her deportment and finding a good husband for her. Even Mr. Knightley concerns himself with Harriet’s care when he warns Emma that she is not behaving properly by Harriet and
will ruin the girl.

The cocoon of care spun around unmarried women is not always so kindly meant or beneficial, however. In Jane Fairfax’s case, it is oppressive and at times malicious. Jane rivals Emma in beauty and excels her in accomplishments, but she lacks wealth and connections and is therefore destined to be a governess. Such flaws as these mark Jane as a patient in need of “intensive” care, and that is just what Highbury gives her. Her aunt, Miss Bates, happily tells Emma that Jane has been unwell lately and that “her kind friends the Campbells think she had better come home, and try the air that always agrees with her; and they have no doubt that three or four months at Highbury will entirely cure her” (143).

The Highbury cure, however, consists of much more than Miss Bates’s constant fussing over Jane’s coughs and comforts. She is bombarded with advice, from avoiding drafts while dancing to changing wet stockings, offered tempting foods because she “really eats nothing--makes such a shocking breakfast, you would be quite frightened if you saw it” (213), provided with carriages to prevent her walking to engagements, lent gentlemen’s arms and umbrellas at every turn, offered servants to fetch letters for her, given remedies like arrowroot to alleviate headaches, and visited by Mr. Perry himself. Her looks, headaches, appetite, her future—all seem to be the property of Highbury. What Jane most needs is exercise, action, and decision in her life, but she is instead smothered with care.

Some of those who presume to care for Jane Fairfax do so with a tinge of malice. Frank Churchill, who knows that much of Jane’s indisposition is due to the stress their
secret engagement causes her, deliberately and delightedly plays up Jane's illness. He refers to her complexion as "naturally so pale, as almost always to give the appearance of ill-health.--A most deplorable want of complexion" (178), and he cleverly feeds Emma's conjectures that Jane is in love with a man she cannot have, Mr. Dixon, who recently married her friend Miss Campbell. Emma immediately falls into the misleading trap Frank has set: Jane's sickly, suspiciously tubercular appearance (her mother had died of consumption, after all) must indicate that she is hiding unrequited passion for a man behind that cold, proper reserve of hers. Emma does admit that "'there was a softness and delicacy in her skin which gave peculiar elegance to the character of her face'" (179), and she notices that when Jane touches the pianoforte (which Frank agrees must be a daring gift from Dixon) it is with great emotion (216). All the symptoms of the consumptive artist are there in Jane: the interesting paleness of her complexion, the "slight appearance of ill health" in her figure (149), the intense love of music, the brooding reserve. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag explains how tuberculosis was very often associated with "the disease of love" (20) and with artists, poets, musicians, and others who were unusually sensitive, and she further explains that in the eighteenth century it became fashionable to wear illness as "a kind of interior decor of the body" (28). In the city especially, "it was glamorous to look sickly" (28) because it made one interesting and mysterious. Sontag explains that

TB is the disease that makes manifest intense desire; that discloses, in spite of the reluctance of the individual, what the individual does not want to reveal. The contrast is no longer between moderate passions and excessive ones but between
hidden passions and those which are brought into the open. Illness reveals desires of which the patient probably was unaware. Diseases--and patients--become subjects for decipherment. And these hidden passions are now considered a source of illness.” (45)

Frank Churchill sees that Highbury regards Jane as a patient, and he takes that view one step further in encouraging Emma to see Jane as a patient of the passions, suffering from the love she is hiding. He does this, of course, to screen from Emma the fact that he and Jane are engaged, but he also does this because he enjoys the thought that Jane pines her health away over him. Frank Churchill has no real regard for Jane's delicate health, as Mr. Knightley notices when Frank urges Jane to sing yet another duet one evening, even though “her voice grew thick.” Mr. Knightley angrily complains that Frank “’thinks of nothing but shewing off his own voice’” and insists that Miss Bates rescue her niece (206).

Frank Churchill’s egotism takes a nasty tone when his engagement with Jane begins to founder, and he turns the metaphor of Jane as patient into reality, deliberately wounding her and making her ill in fact. At Box Hill he uses Emma to make veiled barbs at Jane. He coyly asks Emma to find a good wife for him:

“Find somebody for me. I am in no hurry. Adopt her, educate her.”

“And make her like myself.”

“By all means, if you can.”

“Very well. I undertake the commission. You shall have a charming wife.”

“She must be lively, and have hazle eyes. I care for nothing else. I shall go abroad for a couple of years--and when I return, I shall come to you for my wife.”
In describing such a wife—in describing Emma—Frank Churchill highlights characteristics of health and liveliness, the bright hazel eyes and the "fine glow of health" he earlier told Emma he most admired in a complexion (179). Such characteristics are the opposite of Jane, with her dark hair and grey eyes and colorless skin. Jane gets his meaning loud and clear, and when she later discovers that Frank has left Highbury, she prepares to commit suicide metaphorically, by agreeing to be a governess to Mrs. Smallridge. (Is Austen playing with the name here, suggesting a narrow ridge/ledge from which Jane is going to jump?) Emma glimpses Jane "looking extremely ill" (342), she hears that Jane "would hardly eat anything," and she is told that Jane "had been seen wandering about the meadows" (354)—all symptoms of a mind and body suffering greatly. Frank later tells Mrs. Weston that he was shocked at "how ill I had made her" (402), and after he reconciles with Jane, he takes credit for her "improved" appearance. "Is not she looking well? . . . Better than she ever used to do?" he asks Emma (433), and goes on to add a touch of color, of health, to Jane's complexion in a manner reminiscent of Mrs. Weston's previous description of Emma: "Did you ever see such skin?—such smoothness! such delicacy!—and yet without being actually fair.—One cannot call her fair. It is a most uncommon complexion, with her dark eye-lashes and hair—a most distinguishing complexion!—So peculiarly the lady in it.—Just colour enough for beauty" (434). As the "young physician from Windsor" (413), Frank has healed the woman whose illness was a tribute to his power over her. Some of Frank's last words in the novel testify to the egotism of his love for Jane, for he sounds as if he's raving over a new painting or
sculpture he’s acquired:

“Look at her. Is not she an angel in every gesture? Observe the turn of her throat. Observe her eyes, as she is looking up at my father. --You will be glad to hear (inclining his head, and whispering seriously) that my uncle means to give her all my aunt’s jewels. They are to be new set. I am resolved to have some in an ornament for the head. Will not it be beautiful in her dark hair?” (435)

Jane the patient, the elegant painting, the ornamental wife of the heir of Enscombe is destined to follow the steps of the dead woman whose jewels she will receive, a woman whose life was one of illness, appearances, and unhappy consequence. It is well that Frank so admires her looks, for that is likely what he will remember when Jane dies as a relatively young woman; Austen revealed in a letter that “Jane Fairfax died nine or ten years after her marriage to Frank Churchill” (Fergus 140).

Frank Churchill’s self-serving power over his lovely patient is disturbing, but Mrs. Elton’s determination to keep Jane a patient is more invidious. She keenly understands that a young woman’s being unmarried is a social illness curable only through marriage. She herself played the patient and went to Bath, that mecca for the ill, to cure her unmarried state by catching Mr. Elton. Emma is affronted when Mrs. Elton presumes to recommend the Bath waters for Mr. Woodhouse’s ailments as well as her own. Bath “is so cheerful a place, that it could not fail of being of use to Mr. Woodhouse’s spirits,” she advises Emma, “and as to its recommendations to you, I fancy I need not take much pains to dwell on them. The advantages of Bath to the young are pretty generally understood” (247).
Bath, or at least Weymouth, has failed to cure Jane Fairfax of her unmarried status, Mrs. Elton thinks, and so she decides to “assist and befriend her” (253). Mrs. Elton’s “notice” (255) has an element of aggression in it, however. Vain, self-centered, and overbearing, Mrs. Elton is infinitely proud to be a married woman, and she enjoys triumphing over the unmarried ladies and keeping them in their place, particularly if they have no chance of marrying. With the authority of a doctor, for example, she scolds Jane Fairfax for getting soaked one morning:

“My dear Jane, what is this I hear?—Going to the post-office in the rain!—This must not be, I assure you.—You sad girl, how could you do such a thing?—It is a sign I was not there to take care of you.”

Jane very patiently [emphasis added] assured her that she had not caught any cold.

“Oh! Do not tell me. You really are a very sad girl, and do not know how to take care of yourself.—To the post-office indeed! Mrs. Weston, did you ever hear the like? You and I must positively exert our authority.” (265)

Mrs. Weston does join Mrs. Elton in exerting the authority of the married woman, and as John Wiltshire points out, “The kindness—even Mrs. Weston’s—has an element of aggression in it, and unconscious wish to keep Jane within known bounds . . .” (Jane Austen and the Body 116). Mrs. Elton’s chastising speech, in fact, reveals a jealous aggression towards Jane and a desire to punish her under the guise of curing her. Proud as she is to have been “saved” by marriage, Mrs. Elton is keenly aware that marrying also means maturing, losing youth and the social ideal of beauty associated with youth. Her
comments about Jane and about herself reveal a mixture of pride and jealous anxiety. She refers to Jane twice as a "sad girl," an expression that immediately emphasizes Jane's youth, even though Mrs. Elton is not much older than Jane. Earlier in the novel, Mrs. Elton brags of her own musical ability yet says she must give up music because she is now a married woman with no time for it; she then raves about Jane Fairfax's beauty and her musical talent and declares that she will bring Jane forward so that all can see her loveliness and musical accomplishments (248-9, 255). In Jane she sees youth, beauty, and talent, the very characteristics that she wants to see in herself and tries to get others to acknowledge by contradicting her declarations that "my performance is mediocre to the last degree" (248), that "nobody can think less of dress in general than I do" (291), and that "I am no young lady on preferment" (320).

In Literature and Medicine During the Eighteenth Century, Marie Mulvey Roberts explains that a cult of youth existed during the eighteenth century and that the ideas associated with this cult were particularly undermining to women. Women in general lived longer than men and were thought to have "more animal, sexual appetites," giving them a seeming advantage over men in longevity. "Such a threat to male masculinity and power," Roberts says, "couldn't be allowed, so male-dominated culture sought to disempower women in several ways, particularly in regard to physical appearance" (162). Eighteenth-century society imposed an "aesthetic criterion formulated by men" to keep women in their place (162). Women were made to understand that aging made them considerably less valuable and that they must preserve their youth at whatever cost. This meant refraining from the "hard work" (162) of a
man's world, such as politics, the military, sports, and business, all areas of male power. The cult of youth demanded that a woman must marry before she reached "the years of danger" (Persuasion 13) and became too old for marriage, whether she had money and beauty or not. Men, on the other hand, could marry as late as they liked and "it was deemed unthinkable for a man to marry an older woman, unless she were quite exceptional and he were stupid" (Roberts 160). Literature reflected the cultural eye in seeing old maids and governesses—unredeemed by marriage—as corpse like beings, thin, drawn, dried-up creatures kept segregated from the living. Mistresses and harlots had value as long as they were youthful enough to please. And in an ironic, twisted compliment to youth, rapes such as that visited upon Clarrissa Harlowe happen only to young women, never to older women, who have lost the beauty and vitality that make younger women inviting objects worth undermining.

Mrs. Elton may be vain, but she is no fool. She played her assets of youth and loveliness and money in Bath, and she was rewarded with a suitable husband. She now plays the role of the mature, married lady, milking that role for all the power and consequence she can get out of it, but all the time very aware that maturity means aging and loss of power. Jane Fairfax becomes a scapegoat for Mrs. Elton's anxiety about aging. Mrs. Elton's determination to bring Jane forward contradicts her equal determination to place Jane in "a good situation" as a governess, where she will be even more buried than before. She is in effect offering Jane the medicine with which to cure her social malady, yet not allowing Jane to take the medicine. To use another analogy, the jealous queen, whose own mirror reflects Snow White's beauty rather than her own, offers
Snow White the apple of love, knowing that one bite will instead consign Snow White to that awful, inanimate state of limbo, the “sleeping death” (*Snow White* 14). Mrs. Elton regards governesses much as everyone else does, as non-entities; her earlier surprise that Mrs. Weston, who had been Emma’s governess, is “so truly good” and “so very lady-like . . . quite the gentle-woman” (250) insinuates that most governesses are to be hidden away because they are flawed women, unworthy of society. Her insistence that Jane take the position she has found for her is tantamount to insisting on Jane’s social death. Mrs. Elton seems to draw strength from the idea that Jane must become a governess; when she finds a situation for Jane, she is “in raptures” and is

wild to have the offer closed with immediately.--On her side, all was warmth, energy, and triumph--and she positively refused to take her friend’s negative, though Miss Fairfax continued to assure her that she would not at present engage in any thing, repeating the same motives which she had been heard to urge before.

--Still Mrs. Elton insisted on being authorized to write an acquiescence by the morrow’s post. (325)

The thought of Jane Fairfax rendered inanimate animates Mrs. Elton with “warmth, energy, and triumph” and ensures that her mirror will once again reflect only herself as the paragon of beauty and accomplishment.

Emma watches the “care” given to such social patients as Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax, and although she is determined never to marry, she is equally determined never to become a patient. Who, after all, would presume to be able to “care” for the perfect Miss Woodhouse, to presume to correct her diet or lend *her* a servant or find a husband for
her? Who would dare to treat her like Miss Bates, as someone to be pitied and visited and condescended to? Emma does not have the imperfections that make women patients; she has beauty, health, intelligence, money, consequence, and power. She need not give up her perfect state by marrying, and she believes her perfection will protect her from becoming a patient as a spinster. What Emma discovers, however, is that her perfection will eventually make her a patient anyway, checked into the Hartfield sanitorium because she wants to remain perfect.

When Harriet expresses astonishment that Miss Woodhouse does not intend ever to marry, Emma explains,

"I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry. Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing! but I never have been in love; it is not my way, or my nature; and I do not think I ever shall. And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune, I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's." (77)

This is a powerful statement on Emma's part, and critics have interpreted her intentions in different, yet connected ways. Helen Storm Corsa, in "A Fair but Frozen Maid: a Study of Jane Austen's Emma," suggests that Emma is like the frozen maiden described in Garrick's riddle, of which Mr. Woodhouse remembers bits. The frozen maid is a woman whose coldness reveals a fear of sexuality. Leroy W. Smith contends in Jane Austen and
the Drama of Woman that Emma is making a “flight from womanhood” in that she “resists
taking her place in the adult female world because she sees that a woman’s place is one of
dependence and assumed inferiority” (131). I would like to add to these interpretations
by suggesting another, more subtle dimension to Emma’s reluctance to enter womanhood
through marriage. Beneath her fear of the sexuality and dependence of being a woman is
the fear of death manifested in a fear of imperfection.

Emma has seen how imperfection ties unmarried women to death by making them
patients or by consigning them to the social deaths of spinsterhood or governessing, but
she also sees that marriage ties a woman to imperfection and death as well. Some of the
components of Emma’s perfection—her wealth and power, mainly—would be diminished if
she were to marry and become subject to a husband. Her health, revealed in her youth and
beauty, would be risked as well. If survived, childbearing distorts a woman’s body,
sometimes permanently, and as Austen pointed out in a letter to her niece Fanny, a woman
can become “worn out before she is thirty” and become old in “Constitution, spirits,
figure, and countenance” by constantly bearing children (Fergus 123). The emotional
risks of marriage might likewise whittle away at Emma’s perfection. She has the rare
opportunity to marry for love, but in making such a marriage and building a family, Emma
would be open to many painful risks such as her own/her husband’s/her children’s deaths.
Because she has the power to marry for love, Emma faces greater risk of pain; loving
deeply means hurting more deeply if death takes someone beloved away. At the beginning
of the novel, Emma is inclined not to accept these painful risks but to experience a muted
version of them as a spinster aunt to Isabella’s children. She tells Harriet,
“And as for objects of interest, objects for the affections, which is in truth the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be avoided in not marrying, I shall be very well off, with all the children of a sister I love so much, to care about. There will be enough of them, in all probability, to supply every sort of sensation that declining life can need. There will be enough for every hope and every fear, and though my attachment to none can equal that of a parent, it suits my ideas of comfort better than what is warmer and blinder. My nephews and nieces!—I shall often have a niece with me.” (78)

Aunthood is much more preferable to Emma than motherhood because it allows Emma not to feel the power of death to influence “every hope and every fear” as intensely as a mother would have to. The agonies her sister—and even her brother-in-law—suffers over her children may be presented comically, but Austen is perfectly serious in drawing the Knightley family as one built on love, on the risk of suffering “every hope and fear.” For Emma, it is easier to believe that love “is not my way, or my nature” and preserve her perfect façade rather than risk body and heart in loving. Emma does not see that in choosing spinsterhood, she would be engaging in the very sanitorium atmosphere that insulates her father, living an essentially no-risk life, never really attached to anything passionately enough to regret death’s taking it from her.

Emma instead believes her mature years will be anything but sanitorium-like. When Harriet suggests that she will be just like Miss Bates, Emma indignantly corrects her by describing her old age as one of activity and occupation, one in which she will be the mistress of a great house, the benefactress of the neighborhood, the nurse of her father,
the doting aunt to Isabella’s children. She will remain someone whom all look up to. She will not be in need of care and pity, as Miss Bates is; she will instead give the care. Unfortunately, Emma’s idea of care will in the end turn her into a patient of the worst kind because it is an egotistically-based care that will only come back upon itself. She will end up in that very narcissistic isolation that Lichtenberg warned would be the fate of those who so totally believe in perfection. Fortunately, Emma has the chance to see her future self mirrored in the older women around her and to see that her perfection will be her misfortune.

Emma’s remark to Harriet that she should “always have a niece with me” is ominously reflected in Miss Bates and Mrs. Churchill. Miss Bates, with her mother, raised Jane Fairfax after her parents died, and she loves Jane as a mother would. In fact, she undertakes the same “hopes and fears” that Isabella Knightley does, constantly bustling about Jane’s health, coaxing her appetite, calling in Mr. Perry, making sure Jane avoids draughts and rain showers, etc. Sweet Miss Bates smothers Jane in nursing her. “Odiously” composed at all times, Jane finally breaks down before Emma during the Donwell strawberry party:

“Oh! Miss Woodhouse, the comfort of being sometimes alone!”—seemed to burst from an overcharged heart, and to describe somewhat of the continual endurance to be practised by her, even towards some of those who loved her best.

“Such a home, indeed! such an aunt!” said Emma, as she turned back into the hall again. “I do pity you. And the more sensibility you betray of their just horrors, the more I shall like you.” (328)
In pitying Jane for having "such an aunt," Emma ironically fails to see that she herself
could be such an aunt. She believes that because she has money she is nothing like Miss
Bates. Miss Bates is a spinster nursing an elderly parent and devoted to a niece; Emma
will be a spinster nursing an elderly parent and devoted to a niece or nephew. Emma may
have wealth, but she will be in the very same position as Miss Bates someday. Will her
niece wish sometimes to escape from her Aunt Emma? Yes, if Emma is anything like the
other controlling aunt of the novel, Mrs. Churchill. Mrs. Churchill reflects the very kind of
aunt Emma will become because she has money.

The Churchills, "having no children of their own, nor any other young creature of
equal kindred to care for" (13) adopted Frank from Mr. Weston, who'd married Miss
Churchill, when he was a baby. What sort of adoptive mother Mrs. Churchill was is never
described, but Austen leaves the impression that Mrs. Churchill wanted Frank not because
she desperately wanted a baby to love, but because she wanted to see Frank raised
properly because his mother had been a Churchill; in other words, she wants him because
she is rich and believes she knows what's best for him. The price she exacts for taking
such pains is control over Frank; he cannot marry a penniless woman like Jane Fairfax
without her consent, which he knows she will never give, and she expects Frank to be at
her beck and call, attending her in all her illnesses and nervous complaints. Frank, as well
as others, seems to think these illnesses are more contrived than real, yet he dances
attendance upon her because he cannot afford to lose her favor. She is regarded by Frank,
and by Highbury, as a cranky old patient whose whims must be tolerated because she is
rich.
Could Emma, so attached to a niece or nephew that she might make that child her heir, ever be as demanding as Mrs. Churchill is to Frank? Her behavior to Harriet suggests this is very possible. Emma solicits Harriet’s acquaintance in the first place because her health is suffering after Miss Taylor leaves:

As a walking companion, Emma had very early foreseen how useful she might find her. In that respect Mrs. Weston’s loss had been important. Her father never went beyond the shrubbery, where two divisions of the grounds sufficed for his long walk, or his short, as the year varied; and since Mrs. Weston’s marriage her exercise had been too much confined. She had ventured once alone to Randalls, but it was not pleasant; and a Harriet Smith, therefore, one whom she could summon at any time to a walk, would be a valuable addition to her privileges. But in every respect as she saw more of her, she approved her, and was confirmed in all her kind designs. (22)

Emma’s interest in Harriet soon becomes a dependence upon Harriet in the guise of improving her. When Harriet confesses she misses visiting the Martins, Emma tells her rather coldly, “‘You are a great deal too necessary to Hartfield, to be spared at Abbey-Mill’” (49). “Necessary” means amusing Emma, flattering Emma, playing a part in Emma’s matchmaking schemes. “Necessary” means practically letting Emma adopt her and fashion her into a genteel lady, and letting Emma choose a husband for her. In making Harriet so indispensable to herself, Emma is really setting up a relationship very like that which she has with her father, a relationship of patient and young nurse. She unconsciously mirrors her father’s valetudinarian habits in her behavior to Harriet, for just
as her father invites guests to supper yet won’t let them eat any of the food because he
feels it is bad for them, Emma invites Harriet into her world in order to prepare her for a
good marriage, yet she won’t let Harriet choose the best man for herself. Poor Harriet
squelches her feelings for Robert Martin because she doesn’t wish to offend Emma, who
has done so much for her. And Emma has made it perfectly clear that she would cast
Harriet off if she ever married such a man, “I could not have visited Mrs. Robert Martin
of Abbey-Mill Farm,” she tells Harriet after she refuses Martin’s proposal, “Now I am
secure of you for ever” (47).

Emma is capable of setting up a relationship in which she, like Mrs. Churchill,
demands the attention and obedience that a rich patient might require from a dependent
ward/nurse. She certainly has learned from her father’s example that bodily complaints,
especially in a wealthy person, will gain one all sorts of attentions; she herself, in declaring
she could never hurt her father by marrying, is the best example of such attentions. It is
not hard to imagine Emma, twenty years down the line, her beauty and health fading, as a
cranky old spinster aunt resorting to pleas of illness and threats of disinheritance in order
to control the attention of her namesake niece, Emma Knightley, or one other of her
nieces and nephews. She may be as healthy as Miss Bates is, but Aunt Emma may very
well be regarded as Mrs. Churchill is, as a querrelous old patient who must be humored
because she is rich and powerful. In fact, it is easy to imagine Emma as Mrs. Churchill,
but nearly impossible to imagine Emma as a Miss Bates or even as her father. If Emma is
to be a patient, she will be a demanding one, made miserable by her ego, isolated and
lonely in her perfection.
That her perfection will lead to a lonely old age and a lonely, unmourned death becomes clear to Emma after the trip to Box Hill. Ashamed that she insulted and hurt Miss Bates in front of their whole party, and at last openly admitting that she has been rudely neglectful to Jane Fairfax, Emma resolves to make up for her sins by showing genuine care for these ladies. Her attempts are rebuffed, however. Miss Bates is polite and obliging, but has not “the same cheerful volubility as before—less ease of look and manner” (342) when Emma pays a call. Jane Fairfax, made extremely ill after witnessing Frank Churchill’s flirtation with Emma at Box Hill, refuses even to see Emma or accept any offers of “care” from her. When Emma invites Jane to spend the day at Hartfield, Jane refuses. When Emma sends arrowroot for Jane’s headache, it is sent back promptly. And when Emma comes in her carriage to offer Jane an airing,

Jane was quite unpersuadable; the mere proposal of going out seemed to make her worse.—Emma wished she could have seen her, and tried her own powers; but, almost before she could hint the wish, Miss Bates made it appear that she had promised her niece on no account to let Miss Woodhouse in. “Indeed, the truth was, that poor dear Jane could not bear to see anybody—anybody at all—Mrs. Elton, indeed, could not be denied—and Mrs. Cole had made such a point—and Mrs. Perry had said so much—but, except them, Jane would really see nobody.”

(354)

Pointedly excluded when others (such imperfect women, too) are welcomed, Emma is “mortified” that her friends do not want her care, even if it is given with “proper feeling” now (355).
Emma soon discovers that there are others who will not want her care or notice. When Harriet reveals that she loves Mr. Knightley and presents a good case for his returning her love, Emma is stunned to realize that she herself has loved Mr. Knightley all along and the thought of Harriet marrying Mr. Knightley completely alters the future she has imagined for herself. She realizes that such a marriage would leave Hartfield "comparatively deserted; and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined happiness" (383). Instead of being the center of the neighborhood, Emma will instead be relegated to its forgotten margins:

The child to be born at Randall's must be a tie there even dearer than herself; and Mrs. Weston's heart and time would be occupied by it. They should lose her, and probably, in great measure, her husband also.---Frank Churchill would return among them no more; and Miss Fairfax, it was reasonable to suppose, would soon cease to belong to Highbury. They would be married, and settled either at or near Enscombe. All that were good would be withdrawn; and if to these losses, the loss of Donwell were to be added, what would remain of cheerful or of rational society within their reach? Mr. Knightley to be no longer coming there for his evening comfort!---No longer walking in at all hours, as if ever willing to change his own home for their's!---How was it to be endured? And if he were to be lost to them for Harriet's sake; if he were to be thought of hereafter, as finding in Harriet's society all that he wanted; if Harriet were to be the chosen, the first, the dearest, the friend, the wife to whom he looked for all the best blessings of existence; what could be increasing Emma's wretchedness but the reflection never far distant from
her mind, that it had been all her own work? (383)

Emma will be left alone to gaze at the portrait she once did of Harriet, that memorial of
her own perfection. Like that portrait, she herself will be a memory of perfection, of
beauty and health and spirit, to all who were once close to her, they will remember
excellent, elegant Miss Woodhouse as a young lady among them, as the image of her
mother and the promise of a beautiful death. And they will shake their heads at the
rumors that she has become a cross old lady governing her nieces and nephews.

Emma will find that in preserving her perfection all her life she has allied herself to
death, for death is a state of perfection unblemished by the scars of life. In the famous
“Snow” chapter of Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, the hero Hans Castorp realizes
that the snow he is so attracted to is an emblem of death because it is too perfect in its
pureness and silence. He observes that individual snowflakes, composed of water, the
basis of human life, are geometrically perfect:

Yet each, in itself—this was the uncanny, the anti-organic, the life-denying
character of them all—each of them was absolutely symmetrical, icily regular in
form. They were too regular, as substance adapted to life never was to this
degree—the living principle shuddered at this perfect precision, found it deathly,
the very marrow of death—Hans Castorp felt he understood now the reason why
the builders of antiquity purposely and secretly introduced minute variations from
absolute symmetry in their columnar structures. (485)

The snow represents death, that cold, perfect state of nothingness from which life, with its
bodily frame and its emotions and thoughts, is an aberration, a less-than-perfect state.
Emma has all along believed that it was imperfect women who succumbed to death in life, suffering as patients, as socially-ill spinsters, as buried-alive governesses, even as vulnerable wives and mothers. The people around her have looked upon her perfection and endowed it with a death-defying quality, and Emma has invested in that belief, feeling that her perfection was somehow a guarantee against the threat of death in life, that as a “fair but frozen maid” she would always be perfect and alive. She instead finds that being perfect is not really living. To truly live, one must love, taking on the pain and cares of life.

The moment Emma realizes that she loves Mr. Knightley is like a moment of wounding for her. The knowledge “darted through her, with the speed of an arrow” (370), and with this knowledge Emma’s concept of her perfect self is shattered. She realizes she was blind, weak, and vain in her parading perfection (Emma 373-4). She is wretched, mortified, unable to sit still, inconsolable; even Mrs. Weston asks “‘Are you well, my Emma?’” (381) when she sees Emma so out of spirits. Emma’s answer of “‘Oh! perfectly. I am always well, you know,’” now sounds hollow and lacking energy.

Mr. Knightley is the only person who has seen imperfection in Emma and treated her as a human being rather than as a goddess. And it is as a human being that Emma loves him, accepting the pain that mars her perfection. When she discovers that Mr. Knightley loves her, and not Harriet, Emma is healed and animated again, and by agreeing to marry him she accepts the risk of future pain. Mr. Knightley is older than she is, and likely to leave her a widow, but he will be “such a partner in all those duties and cares” (408) of family life and “infinitely most dear” (374) to her that life with him will be worth
the risk of such a future loss.

Emma will become a mother as well, and will suffer the same worries as the other mothers of the novel, Isabella and Mrs. Weston. Throughout the novel these women have shown Emma what true care and love are, as opposed to the self-serving care exhibited by Mrs. Churchill and Mrs. Elton and for a while by Emma herself. Isabella may not be as quick or witty as Emma, but she radiates love and caring. She is “wrapt up in her family; a devoted wife, a doating mother, and so tenderly attached to her father and sister that, but for these higher ties, a warmer lover might have seemed impossible” (84). Mrs. Weston, although never suffering the life-denying existence most governesses endured, was nevertheless socially buried as Emma’s governess. Her marriage to the worthy Mr. Weston, coming at her “time of life” (9), makes her bloom with life. At her age, bearing a child is especially risky; we glimpse her tired out with walking at the Donwell strawberry party (323), and declining to join the Box Hill excursion (331), we know Emma won’t announce her engagement until her friend is “safe and well” (410), and finally we learn that “Mrs. Weston’s friends were all made happy by her safety; and if the satisfaction of her well-doing could be increased to Emma, it was by knowing her to be the mother of a little girl” (418). Our last glimpse of Mrs. Weston is a portrait of motherhood, of a woman “giving an account of a little alarm she had been under, the evening before, from the infant’s appearing not quite well” (435), a woman “with her baby on her knee . . . one of the happiest women in the world” (425).

In no other novel does Austen provide such complete images of loving motherhood as she does in presenting Isabella and Mrs. Weston in Emma. And in no
other novel are there people such as Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Bates and poor old John Abdy (347), people who are truly elderly. The prominent presence of mothers and aged people in *Emma* reflects changes in society that were occurring at the turn of the nineteenth century. John McManners points out in *Death and the Enlightenment* that “as the [eighteenth] century progressed, the conventional life span of active life was extended, at least for the upper classes, as a result of improvements in the comforts and conveniences of living and travelling,” and due to “advances in surgery and medical treatment” (439). With the shadow of death being lifted, people lived longer and some reached true old age, an accomplishment that led to “the rise of a new respect for old age” (McManners 439). The mortality rate for children declined as well, and parents began to show more affection and to nurture children in the confidence that those children would indeed reach adulthood. Parenting became an important job, and motherhood in particular was given new respect, a mother’s caring love was important in influencing and guiding a child who would live to influence future generations. The family circle took on a prominence it had never before had (McManners 449-57).

These new, life-affirming attitudes took place “within the hard and empty shell of the old ideological carapace” (McManners 448). In *Emma* we see this co-existence of the old, death-wary generation and the life-embracing, risk-taking younger generation. Mr. Woodhouse’s comment that his son-in-law is “‘too rough’” and that Mr. Knightley “‘tosses [his nephews] up to the ceiling in a very frightful way’” (73-4) reveals the cautious approach to life and love giving way to the approach of “an affectionate father” who “wishes his boys to be active and hardy” (73-4). Mrs. Churchill’s distant, frosty style
of mothering literally dies away, and Mrs. Weston's bouncing knee and Isabella's cooing concern replace it. The younger generation still must live in the shadow of death, as all humans must, but they are able, at least, to "let death have no sovereignty over [their] thoughts" (Mann 497).

Emma begins the novel self-contained, framed within a perfection that is too perfect for life. She is both a victim of and a subscriber to the belief that her flawlessness somehow protects her from the various ways death reaches into a woman's life. Born in a century intimately acquainted with death, a century that venerated classical art, architecture, and thought for the precision, control, and assuring endurance against time that they embodied, Emma is classified as a beautiful work of art that offers the hope of defying the decay of living. But by the end of the novel she learns that perfection may be awe-inspiring in its "symmetrical crystallometry" (Mann 485), but perfection has no soul. To have a soul, one must first be alive, animated, vulnerable, and imperfect. One must love, fearing death but not paralyzed by the fear of it. In the end, Emma stands among a "small band of true friends"—her father, the Bates ladies, the Westons, Isabella and John Knightley, the Knightley children—a group that represents three generations, all united by being human, imperfect, and aware that from imperfection can come "perfect happiness" in a loving life (Emma 440).
CHAPTER 6

VALOR AND VALUE IN *PERSUASION*

“My sister Maggie is always wanting to tell me stories—but they’re stupid things. Girls’ stories always are. Can you tell a good many fighting stories?” Tom Tulliver in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*

Looking out, as she must, from the front of her house towards the activity of man in the world at large, whilst her husband looked out to the back at sky and harvest and beast and land, she strained her eyes to see what man had done in fighting outwards to knowledge, she strained to hear how he uttered himself in his conquest, her deepest desire hung on the battle that she heard, far off, being waged on the edge of the unknown. She also wanted to know, and to be of the fighting host. D.H. Lawrence in *The Rainbow*

In the most memorable scene in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot stands silhouetted against a winter window engaged in a genteel battle of wits with gallant Captain Harville, woman against man. The topic is constancy: who is the most constant in heart, woman or man? Anne’s gentle, eloquent words express the truth about womanhood that she knows first-hand:

> We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions. (*Persuasion* 219)

Captain Harville spiritedly counters, “I will not allow it to be more man’s nature than woman’s to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved. I believe the
reverse. I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing the most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather” (219). “Your feelings,” Anne acknowledges, “may be the strongest, but the same spirit of analogy will authorize me to assert that ours are the most tender.” She goes on to explain:

“I should deserve utter contempt if I dared to suppose that true attachment and constancy were known only by woman. No, I believe you capable of every thing great and good in your married lives. I believe you equal to every important exertion, and to every domestic forbearance, so long as—if I may be allowed the expression, so long as you have an object. I mean, while the woman you love lives, and lives for you. All the privilege I claim for my own sex (it is not a very enviable one, you need not covet it) is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone.” (221-2)

Captain Harville yields in the face of so persuasive a speech, little knowing that Anne has just done a daring, courageous thing. She knows her words are overheard by Captain Wentworth, and she is trying to tell him that she still loves him, even after refusing him eight years earlier. She speaks now, braving the social restrictions and criticism that she could not speak against years before. She is telling her story the only way she can, under cover of a story about women; she even tells Harville that “Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands” (221). Writing at a nearby table, Wentworth has just dropped his pen, and this gesture—whether accidental or not—gives Anne hope that he
understands her coded message. If he does, she will be at his mercy, the course of the rest of her life charted based on his reaction. Will he come back to her, or will he set her adrift forever? Will she live or die? Her effort leaves her drained: "She could not immediately have uttered another sentence; her heart was too full, her breath too much oppressed" (222).

The verdict comes moments later in the form of a note hastily thrust towards her by Wentworth. "'You pierce my soul,'" he declares in the note, "'I can hardly write. I am every instant hearing something which overpowers me. You sink your voice, but I can distinguish the tones of that voice, when they would be lost on others'" (223-4). After affirming his love for her, he places himself in her power in his post-script: "'I must go, uncertain of my fate; but I shall return hither, or follow your party, as soon as possible. A word, a look will be enough to decide whether I enter your father's house this evening, or never.'" Anne, of course, provides that look and recovers her breath and her voice with a strength that brings both Wentworth and life back to her.

The essence of this highly-charged scene lies not in the question of who is more constant in love, woman or man, or even who has been more constant, Anne or Wentworth, but instead lies in the question of who is most courageous. Who has faced loss, disappointment, and death, who has acknowledged his or her own mortality, and who has learned to truly love in the face of this knowledge? Woman or man, Anne or Wentworth? In a novel filled with strutting, confident, and in some cases really brave men, there are quite a few brave women as well. Anne gives men their due, agreeing with Captain Harville that men "'have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to
struggle with. You are always labouring and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship’’ (220). But women face life and death too, in a different way. For men, life and death are something physical to be prevented and battled, with great swords and mighty oars, powerful pens and rich names. For women, life and death are to be endured. Women, as Anne points out, are confined at home, with only thin sewing needles, blunt spoons, dainty teacups, and silence—sometimes interrupted by hysteria— with which to confront life and death. These implements are hardly effective weapons, but women make do with them. In _Persuasion_, especially, women face their deadly, everyday lives more truthfully and with more valor than men face their wars.

Anne in particular faces her nothingness with a quiet courage that no one notices, even the resentful Wentworth. He believes Anne acted like a coward when she yielded to her friend Lady Russell’s persuasions that she not marry Wentworth. Coming back after seven years of high seas adventure, he is full of confidence and, he thinks, real courage, and he is ready to choose an equally robust wife, a woman vastly different from the weak woman he believes Anne to be. What he must discover, however, is that he has never understood what real love is, and this understanding comes only after he experiences the power of death over love. The threats of death and loss teach Wentworth that real love involves a risk that only the most courageous of hearts—like Anne’s—can endure. Wentworth must lose Anne, and surrender himself to the possibility of losing her again, before he recognizes Anne’s valor and her value, and before he can become worthy of loving her himself. Wentworth must face death as a woman does, in silence and with no weapons, in order to learn what love is. Unlike romantic love, which is often ephemeral
and passively experienced, real love must be achieved because it is an “heroic task, one
requiring rare strength and courage” in order to reach the intimacy and trust that real love
requires. Intimacy is

the active and continuous process of knowing and being known, sensually and
sympathetically; and trust [is] the belief that neither oneself nor the other will
betray intimacy: that which has become known between them. Trust is the
surrendering of oneself to the power of chance--the chance of loss or regret. Trust
is perhaps the most exalted of all forms of vulnerability. (Mitchell 1-2)

When Anne and Wentworth first fall in love and wish to marry, their love is romantic
rather than intimate:

He was, at that time, a remarkably fine young man, with a great deal of
intelligence, spirit, and brilliancy; and Anne an extremely pretty girl, with
gentleness, modesty, taste, and feeling.--Half the sum of attraction, on either side,
might have been enough, for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to
love; but the encounter of such lavish recommendations could not fail. They were
gradually acquainted, rapidly and deeply in love. It would be difficult to say which
had seen highest perfection in the other, or which had been the happiest; she, in
receiving his declarations and proposals, or he in having them accepted.

(Persuasion 29-30)

Their relationship is the beginning of intimacy, but they are too young and they idealize
one another too much to really know one another. Idealization leads to a possessiveness
and a disillusionment that prevent deeper intimacy and trust. Such intimacy and trust are
achieved only after each person can recognize the humanness and fallibility—and thus the separateness—of one another (Mitchell 3). Lonely, sexually attracted to one another, and delighted to find that they think very alike, Anne and Wentworth are intent upon themselves as a couple, not as two separate people who are mortal and will die separately. They see perfection and youth in one another, those qualities which all lovers like to believe will last forever, but which are inevitably illusions. As Donald M. Hassler explains, a true marriage is “dependent upon a deep insight into the nature of cold death and not merely a protection against loneliness and death.” Only when each person reaches “a profound awareness . . . of death can love and human relationship[s] have meaning,” Hassler continues (169).

In *Persuasion*, this sort of knowledge belongs primarily to women, and to one woman in particular. Lady Russell, a widowed friend of the Elliots, has been viewed by critics and readers as a selfishly overprotective, snobby mother figure for Anne. She is elitist in her attitudes, and she undeniably loves and acts as a mother to Anne, but I believe her motivation for persuading Anne not to marry Wentworth comes not from prejudice against him but from her own experience of death and love. The word “widow” comes from the Latin verb “-videre,” which means “to separate,” so a widow is one who knows separation and loss. As a widow, Lady Russell knows both the intimacy of union with a man as well as her separateness from him, and her disapproval of Wentworth springs from this awareness. While Anne’s father disapproves of Wentworth’s lack of money and connections, Lady Russell fears his personality. Wentworth displays an overwhelming confidence in his skills and his future, and he asks Anne to believe in his future, which she
is quite willing to do, but Lady Russell sees this optimistic buoyancy and confidence as dangerously egotistical:

Captain Wentworth had no fortune. He had been lucky at his profession, but spending freely, what had come freely, had realized nothing. But, he was confident that he should soon be rich;—full of life and ardour, he knew that he should soon have a ship, and soon be on a station that would lead to every thing he wanted. He had always been lucky; he knew he should be so still.—Such confidence, powerful in its own warmth, and bewitching in the wit which often expressed it, must have been enough for Anne; but Lady Russell saw it very differently.—His sanguine temper, and fearlessness of mind, operated very differently on her. She saw in it but an aggravation of the evil. It only added a dangerous character to himself. He was brilliant, he was headstrong.—Lady Russell had little taste for wit; and of any thing approaching to imprudence a horror. She deprecated the connexion in every light. (Persuasion 30-1)

Lady Russell fears that Wentworth is too wrapped up in himself to truly appreciate Anne, and she also fears that Anne, believing in Wentworth's god-like conception of himself, might easily be “sunk by him into a state of most wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependence” and disappointment if he fails (Persuasion 30). He is, after all, in a risky profession during a time of war. As the wife of a sailor, Anne would have to endure months, perhaps years, of separation from her husband, often not knowing whether he were alive or dead. And if he were not lucky enough to make his fortune, or if he were wounded so that he never could make his fortune (like Mr. Price in Mansfield Park),
would Wentworth return to Anne the same confident, handsome man she married? Would
Anne, raised as a baronet’s daughter, be thrown into a life of money worries and
unhappiness with a depressed, disappointed husband?

Lady Russell has good reason for fearing that Wentworth’s egotism could
consume Anne; she watched as such a thing happened to Anne’s mother. Lady Russell
had been Lady Elliot’s dearest friend, and when Lady Elliot died young, Lady Russell
agreed to watch after her daughters, favoring Anne because “it was only in Anne that she
could fancy the mother to revive again” (Persuasion 12). She hopes to prevent Anne’s
wasting herself on a self-absorbed man, as her mother did when she married Sir Walter.
Sir Walter’s chief interest is maintaining a level of living that keeps him looking young, for
“vanity was the beginning and the end of Sir Walter Elliot’s character” (10). Too busy
admiring himself in the many mirrors stationed about his dressing room, Sir Walter’s
excessive self-preoccupation blinded him to the merits of his good wife:

His good looks and his rank had one fair claim on his attachment; since to them he
must have owed a wife of very superior character to any thing deserved by his
own. Lady Elliot had been an excellent woman, sensible and amiable, whose
judgment and conduct, if they might be pardoned the youthful infatuation which
made her Lady Elliot, had never required indulgence afterwards.—She had
humoured, or softened, or concealed his failings, and promoted his real
respectability for seventeen years; and though not the happiest being in the world
herself, had found enough in her duties, her friends, and her children, to attach her
to life, and make it no matter of indifference to her when she was called on to quit
Anne is swept up in a “youthful infatuation” with a man who, while not “conceited” and “silly” like her father, is intensely self-directed. Lady Russell recognizes in Wentworth the same vanity and confidence that led Sir Walter to take his wife for granted and never learn her value, even after she was gone from him and his unchecked self-indulgences had led him and his daughters to financial distress.

Lady Russell’s estimation of Wentworth’s character seems to be born out by his reaction when Anne breaks their engagement. Anne succumbs to Lady Russell’s persuasion, “but it was not merely selfish caution, under which she acted, in putting an end to it. Had she not imagined herself consulting his good, even more than her own, she could hardly have given him up.—The belief of being prudent, and self-denying principally for his advantage, was her chief consolation” (*Persuasion* 31). Wentworth, however, reacts selfishly, acting “totally unconvinced and unbending” and “feeling himself ill-used by so forced a relinquishment” (31). His anger is primarily a result of his egotism; rather than feeling his loss of Anne, he feels only the insult of her family upon his pride, the apparent weakness of her love for him, and her willingness to lose him. He places all of the loss on Anne’s side, just as it might have been if she had married him and had to live a sailor’s wife’s existence, a life in which she would have faced the possibility of losing her idealized conception of him to poverty or to death. He condemns Anne for not having the same courage he has to stand up to her family and Lady Russell.

Wentworth immediately takes to sea to vent his anger and forget his heartbreak by challenging death in daring chases, raids, and battles against the French for the next seven
years. Little does he know that Anne, too, wagers a battle against death, but her battle is
more harrowing and more challenging than he can conceive. Each time Wentworth repels
death with a deft maneuver of his ship or his sword, he can laugh at death and celebrate
the fact that he is still alive and powerful. Anne can have no such satisfaction, for she is
already dead among the living from the moment she breaks her engagement with
Wentworth. Her struggle is merely to keep herself going until physical death takes her.

Anne becomes an old maid. When the novel opens, she is twenty-seven years old
and still unmarried, having refused an eligible offer from Charles Musgrove at twenty-one
and never receiving another offer after that. Although she is "most dear and highly
valued" by Lady Russell, she is virtually invisible to her own family, in which she
possesses "inferior value" (*Persuasion* 11-12).*1 Her older sister Elizabeth is also
unmarried and feeling "her approach to the years of danger" (13), but she has preserved
her youthful beauty and holds great consequence as the mistress of Kellynch, and therefore
merits superior value in her father's eyes. Anne's younger sister, Mary, has grown
"course" in appearance, but by marrying Charles Musgrove "had acquired a little artificial
importance" in her father's view, "but Anne, with an elegance of mind and sweetness of
character, which must have placed her high with any people of real understanding, was

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*1Austen's novels often have a key word that reverberates throughout each novel. In
*Emma*, for example, the key word is "perfection." The controlling word of *Persuasion* is "value"
and its synonym "worth." As I have shown in previous chapters, a woman's value is intimately
connected to death, and it is significant here, in Austen's last completed novel, written while she
was dying, that her heroine is so "dead" that she virtually has no value. Anne is the culmination of
all of Austen's heroines, and her courage in gaining back both life and value for herself is a
powerful message with which Austen ends her life and her career as a woman novelist in a man's
world.*
nobody with either father or sister: her word had no weight; her convenience was always to give way;--she was only Anne” (11-12). Even in her father’s favorite book, the Baronetage, where Sir Walter gazes lovingly at his family name and admires his ancestors’ names and “all the Marys and Elizabeths they had married” (10), there is only one Anne, unmarried and therefore invalid in the family tree. When Anne makes practical, vigorous suggestions for “retrenching” at Kellynch and saving the family fortune, Sir Walter and Elizabeth are offended by her “rigorous requisitions” (18), and when they decide to remove to Bath and rent Kellynch, Anne is not consulted. Upon Mary’s request that Anne stay with her for a while after the others move to Bath, Elizabeth merely remarks, “‘Then I am sure Anne had better stay, for nobody will want her in Bath.’” Elizabeth instead insists on taking her friend, Mrs. Clay, “as a most important and valuable assistant” (36), unable to see that the flattering, low-born Mrs. Clay has designs on Sir Walter. When Anne does arrive in Bath months later and Mrs. Clay tactfully offers to leave because “she could not suppose herself at all wanted,” she overhears Elizabeth quickly assure her friend that “[Anne] is nothing to me, compared with you” (137).

Even among those who do esteem her, Anne is still weightless because she is unmarried. Mary’s first words when Anne arrives at Uppercross are to ask why she did not come earlier and to wonder, when Anne explains that her duties at Kellynch delayed her, “‘Dear me! what can you possibly have to do?’” Mary’s attitude toward Anne echoes society’s belief that a maiden woman, whether she be a beloved sister and aunt or not, can have no real feelings. When Mary’s son has a serious fall and must be nursed, Mary becomes upset that she, simply because she is his mother, is expected to miss the
Musgroves' dinner party in order to comfort the boy. Anne's offer to remain behind with little Charles is immediately snatched up by Mary, who reasons, "You, who have not a mother's feelings, are a great deal the properest person... I know you do not mind being left alone" (58). Anne comes to Uppercross with no illusions that she will be the center of attention, but still she is a little surprised that her feelings of sadness on leaving her beloved Kellynch should matter so little to the Musgroves. Anne "believed she must now submit to feel that another lesson, in the art of knowing our own nothingness beyond our own circle, was become necessary for her" (Persuasion 44).

At Uppercross Anne is presumed to have no needs of her own; she is merely useful and used. Mary depends upon her to soothe away her frequent discontent and (imagined) illnesses. Not only Mary, but Charles and the Musgroves, continually pour forth their "confidences" into Anne's supposedly neutral ear, making her "too much in the secret of the complaints of each house" (46). Mary frets about Charles's inattention to her illnesses and about the Musgroves' lack of respect for her Elliot background, and she cannot stand Mrs. Musgrove spoiling her children so thoroughly. Charles urges Anne to "persuade Mary not to be always fancying herself ill," and the Miss Musgroves wish she would hint to Mary that her Elliot airs are unbecoming. Mrs. Musgrove is compelled to critique Mary's mismanagement of her children and tell tales about the misbehavior of Mary's servants. Anne absorbs all of these disgruntled opinions, filters them into kinder suggestions, and tries to impart her own wisdom "of the forbearance necessary between such near neighbors," mostly to no avail (47). Her one enjoyment and talent is blatantly disregarded by the self-absorbed Musgroves:
[Anne] played a great deal better than either of the Miss Musgroves; but having no voice, no knowledge of the harp, and no fond parents to sit by and fancy themselves delighted, her performance was little thought of, only out of civility, or to refresh the others, as she was well aware. She knew that when she played she was giving pleasure only to herself; but this was no new sensation: excepting one short period of her life, she had never, since the age of fourteen, never since the loss of her dear mother, known the happiness of being listened to, or encouraged by any just appreciation or real taste. In music she had been always used to feel alone in the world; and Mr. and Mrs. Musgrove's fond partiality for their own daughters' performance, and total indifference to any other person's, gave her much more pleasure for their sakes, than mortification for her own. (48)

Anne's resignation to her voiceless, weightless existence among the lively and the living is not just a resignation to her choice to be an old maid; it is also a punishment to herself. Her word has no weight because she will not give it weight. She will not speak up. Laura Mooneyham remarks in Romance, Language, and Education in Jane Austen's Novels, "It is telling that the idea of Anne's speaking out is most often expressed hypothetically or conditionally" by Austen (162). Mooneyham cites several instances in which Anne internalizes her words rather than speaking them, but the most important example of her silence involves her inability to orally express her regret in giving up Wentworth. "How eloquent could Anne Elliot have been," Austen tells us, "how eloquent, at least, were her wishes on the side of early warm attachment, and a cheerful confidence in futurity, against that over-anxious caution which seems to insult exertion
and distrust Providence!” (33). Although “she did not blame Lady Russell, [and] she did not blame herself for having been guided by her” (Persuasion 32), Anne nevertheless is haunted by the fact that she did not speak up for her love when Wentworth pressed her to. After seven years,

She was persuaded that under every disadvantage of disapprobation at home, and every anxiety attending his profession, all their probable fears, delays and disappointments, she should yet have been a happier woman in maintaining the engagement, than she had been in the sacrifice of it; and this, she fully believed, had the usual share, had even more than a usual share of all such solicitudes and suspense been theirs, without reference to the actual results of their case, which, as it happened, would have bestowed earlier prosperity than could be reasonably calculated on. All his sanguine expectations, all his confidence had been justified. His genius and ardour had seemed to foresee and to command his prosperous path. He had, very soon after their engagement ceased, got employ; and all that he had told her would follow, had taken place. He had distinguished himself, and early gained the other step in rank--and must now, by successive captures, have made a handsome fortune. (Persuasion 33)

Anne now realizes--too late she thinks--that real love involves submitting to chance, to the chance that Wentworth might have failed and brought them to “more than a usual share of all such solicitudes and suspense.” To love Wentworth as his wife would have meant accepting his humanness--his chance of failing--and accepting his separateness from her. Her new understanding forms the basis of genuine love, which relies on the “oneness”
generated by intimacy and the "separateness" necessary to prevent oneness from becoming destructive. Such "fusing together into oneness initiates and preserves intimacy. The danger of intimacy, to which one or both lovers are subject, is the idealization of oneness, the consequent possessiveness, and the loss of individuality. However, when coming together is followed by mutual moving apart, the lovers preserve individuality. The danger involved is that apartness may become estrangement" (Mitchell 3). For Anne, moving apart has added more meaning to her love and allowed her to recognize Wentworth's humanness, but such deeper love has come with a bittersweet price: Anne has lost Wentworth, has lost her "life," has lost her voice.

Moving apart has not been enough to add more meaning to Wentworth's love, however. When his sister and her husband, Admiral Croft, rent Kellynch and invite him to visit, he is obliged to take part in their visits to nearby Uppercross and there he comes into contact with Anne again. Even after seven years, he is still self-centered and unable to relinquish his belief that Anne has not lived up to his ideal of a strong woman. His egotism still prevents him from realizing the value of what he has lost. In many ways, he mirrors Sir Walter by clinging to his money and youthful vigor and denying the power of loss and time. Rather than becoming worn and weather-beaten as most sailors, Sir Walter deprecatingly points out, inevitably become, Wentworth has returned with "a more glowing, manly, open look, in no respect lessening his personal advantages" (*Persuasion* 61). Significantly, his first remark concerning Anne is one that again associates her with the loss of attributes he values in himself. With no more tact than vain Sir Walter has when he disdainfully calls Anne "haggard" (12), Wentworth indiscreetly remarks to the
Musgrove sisters that Anne is so greatly changed that he hardly recognizes her:

Frederick Wentworth had used such words, or something like them, but without an idea that they would be carried round to her. He had thought her wretchedly altered, and in the first moment of appeal, had spoken as he felt. He had not forgiven Anne Elliot. She had used him ill; deserted and disappointed him; and worse, she had shown a feebleness of character in doing so, which his own decided and confident temper could not endure. She had given him up to oblige others. It had been the effect of over-persuasion. It had been weakness and timidity.

(*Persuasion 62*)

Even Wentworth’s exposure to danger and death have not taught him the impact of loss. He enjoys telling the attentive, fawning Musgrove sisters of his military adventures, describing his scrapes with privateers as “entertaining” and laughingly recounting his escape from a gale: “‘Four-and-twenty hours later, and I should only have been a gallant Captain Wentworth, in a small paragraph at one corner of the newspapers; and being lost in only a sloop, nobody would have thought of me’” (66). The response he intends with this narrative is immediately delivered in Louisa’s and Henrietta’s ego-boosting “exclamations of pity and horror” at the thought of his death. He brags of his attachment to the ship he commanded, “‘Ah! she was a dear old Asp to me. She did all that I wanted. I knew she would.--I knew that we should either go to the bottom together, or that she would be the making of me’” (65). Wentworth seems, perhaps unconsciously, to be making a comparison between his risk-taking courage in a vessel that “did all he wanted” and Anne’s inability to take such a risk with him. He sees only the loss
of himself and has no real conception of what it is to lose something—or someone—
himself.

Wentworth’s intention, as he tells his sister, is to gain a wife, to “fall in love with all the speed which a clear head and a quick taste could allow,” and he makes himself fully available not only to the Musgrove girls but also to “any pleasing young woman who came in his way, excepting Anne Elliot” (Persuasion 62). He merely bows to Anne when they first meet at Uppercross, and thereafter he virtually ignores her, speaking as little as possible to her and never touching her by offering an arm or a hand, as he does with the Musgrove sisters. Under cover of his resentment is a fear of Anne. He seems to feel the need to protect himself from Anne, as if he fears falling in love and hurting himself all over again. Anne, on the contrary, continually reacts with bravery in her encounters with Wentworth. Robyn R. Warhol has observed, “Love quite literally hurts in Persuasion,” especially where Anne is concerned. “‘Pain,’ ‘sensation,’ and ‘agitation’—words for conditions of bodily distress—form the lexicon of emotion in the narrator’s commentary on Anne’s encounters with Wentworth,” Warhol explains (16). Anne’s first meeting with Wentworth at Uppercross Cottage leaves her in “nervous gratitude” that such a meeting is over, and she accepts his reported opinion of her lost looks as a wound that, once gotten over, will make her stronger: “‘So altered that he should not have known her again!’ These were words which could not but dwell with her. Yet she soon began to rejoice that she had heard them. They were of sobering tendency; they allayed agitation; they composed, and consequently must make her happier” (61).

Anne has a hard time steeling herself against Wentworth’s presence, however, for
his nearness continues to bring real, physical pain to her. Seated on a sofa with Mrs. Musgrove between them, for example, Anne is thankful that Mrs. Musgrove’s large body screens “the agitations of Anne’s slender form, and pensive face” from Wentworth’s view (67), and when she later dutifully plays the piano while Wentworth dances with the other ladies, her eyes fill with tears of pain, and she wills herself to play “equally without error, and without consciousness” (71). One of Anne’s most excruciating encounters comes when Wentworth comes close to actually touching her. While tending the ailing little Charles one morning, Anne is surprised when Wentworth arrives at the cottage while everyone else is upstairs, and after making awkward, polite conversation, each retreats to a separate part of the room. Before long, Anne’s youngest nephew appears and in mischievous fashion climbs onto Anne’s back and will not be removed, despite her scolding and her attempts to pull him off. Suddenly she is relieved of the naughty child; “some one was taking him from her, though he had bent down her head so much, that his little sturdy hands were unfastened from around her neck, and he was resolutely borne away, before she knew that Captain Wentworth had done it” (79). Anne feels this action so intensely and with “most disordered feelings” that she is “perfectly speechless.” Pain shoots through her mind and her body:

His kindness in stepping forward to her relief—the manner—the silence in which it had passed—the little particulars of the circumstance—with the conviction soon forced in her by the noise he was studiously making with the child, that he meant to avoid hearing her thanks, and rather sought to testify that her conversation was the last of his wants, produced such a confusion of varying, but very painful
agitation, as she could not recover from, till enabled by the entrance of Mary and the Miss Musgroves to make over her little patient to their cares, and leave the room. (79)

In "Mourning and Melancholia in Persuasion," Elizabeth Dalton sees this scene as one in which "the threads of life and death are interwoven, and death may provide the context for discovery of a new love or the revival of an old one" (57). Using Freudian psychology, Dalton interprets the scene--and the later fall of Louisa on the Cobb at Lyme--as a suggestion of "a fear of the perils and responsibilities of sex and childbearing" with which both Anne and Wentworth must come to terms (57). Dalton explains:

This is the most powerful physical experience Anne has in the novel, involving distress, loss of control, even violence, and it is caused by having a child attached to her body--until he is "borne away." The language and imagery, the confusion and intense emotion, suggest that the scene may be a disguised representation of a child being born as well as "borne away." Moreover, as dream language often reverses cause and effect and conflates opposites, perhaps Wentworth's unfastening of the little boy from Anne's back represents also the act by which the child is first fastened to the woman's body. Thus this scene may contain in condensed and symbolic form the whole sequence--intercourse, pregnancy, parturition--whose dangers, both real and fantasied, are hinted at in the condition of many of the female characters, including the dead mother of whom Anne is almost the double. (57)

Seeing Anne encumbered with a child--alone and with no defenses but her own hands and
her words—Wentworth must be aware of the pain a woman experiences, both in bearing a child and in the possibility of losing that child. Childbearing has responsibilities, pains and delights, and risks. In rescuing Anne, Wentworth is perhaps finally understanding the connection between risk and love; his "studious noise" with the child suggests a willingness to participate in the joys and risks of marital love, and his silent concern for Anne suggests his returning interest in her, even if he cannot forgive her and face his love for her yet.

The first instance that Wentworth is gaining the courage it takes to return to loving Anne comes when he at last deliberately touches her. Exhausted after a long walk with the others one morning, Anne lags behind the party, and when Admiral and Mrs. Croft trot by in their chaise and stop to offer "any lady who might be particularly tired" (88) a seat with them, Anne, always putting herself last, declines along with the other ladies. Mrs. Croft notices her tired look and entreats again, "Miss Elliot, I am sure you are tired," and Anne "though instinctively beginning to decline, [Anne] was not allowed to proceed. . . . [The Crofts] compressed themselves into the smallest possible space to leave her a corner, and Captain Wentworth, without saying a word, turned to her, and quietly obliged her to be assisted into the carriage" (89). Anne is numbed by his touch:

Yes,—he had done it. She was in the carriage, and felt that he had placed her there, that his will and his hands had done it, that she owed it to his perception of her fatigue, and his resolution to give her rest. She was very much affected by the view of his disposition towards her which all these things made apparent. This little circumstance seemed the completion of all that had gone before. She
understood him. He could not forgive her,—but he could not be unfeeling.

Though condemning her for the past, and considering it with high and unjust resentment, though perfectly careless of her, and though becoming attached to another, still he could not see her suffer, without the desire of giving her relief.

It was a remainder of former sentiment; it was an impulse of pure, though unacknowledged friendship; it was proof of his own warm and amiable heart, which she could not contemplate without emotions so compounded of pleasure and pain, that she knew not which prevailed. (89)

Wentworth's action shows that he is not indifferent to Anne, yet his demeanor suggests that an unforgiving self-centeredness still prevails in his character. He is still afraid to speak to her, for to do so would unleash a thousand painful words of condemnation and perhaps, a confession of remaining love. He will not take the full risk. Anne, too, is afraid to speak, but she is not afraid to feel, finding intense pain and pleasure in contact with Wentworth.

Wentworth's determination to avoid Anne and the pain she represents leads him to court Louisa Musgrove. In Louisa, Wentworth thinks he sees all the strengths that Anne fails to possess. She is spirited, beautiful, and most importantly, she is stubborn, a quality Wentworth mistakes for strength and courage. Anne accidentally overhears him praising Louisa for her resoluteness, and she knows he has her own conduct in mind as a comparison to Louisa's:

Your sister is an amiable creature; but yours is the character of decision and firmness, I see. If you value her conduct or happiness, infuse as much of your own
spirit into her, as you can. But this, no doubt, you have been always doing. It is
the worst evil of too yielding and indecisive a character, that no influence over it
can be depended on—you are never sure of a good impression being durable.
Every body may sway it; let those who would be happy be firm. . . . My wish for
all, whom I am interested in, is that they should be firm. If Louisa Musgrove
would be beautiful and happy in her November of life, she will cherish all her
present powers of mind. (86)

Not only does Wentworth find the liveliness and decisiveness in Louisa that he fails to find
in Anne, he also finds a great attention to himself. Louisa is always ready to dance, walk,
laugh, and admire Captain Wentworth, she hangs on his every word, and she cleverly
maneuvers her sister Henrietta out of Wentworth's path by reminding Henrietta of her
prior understanding with Charles Hayter. Here is a woman, Wentworth thinks, who is
strong enough to devote herself to him, a woman who will stand by him. And Louisa
certainly does her best to prove her steadfast character to Wentworth. After his speech on
firmness, she endeavors to be as firm as possible in all matters, especially in persuading her
father to let the young people accompany Wentworth on a trip to Lyme, where he wishes
to visit his naval friends, Captains Harville and Benwick. Mr. Musgrove is reluctant to
sanction such a journey, but "Louisa, who was the most eager of the eager, having formed
the resolution to go, and besides the pleasure of doing as she liked, being now armed with
the idea of merit in maintaining her own way, bore down all the wishes of her father and
mother for putting it off till summer; and to Lyme they were to go--Charles, Mary, Anne,
Henrietta, Louisa, and Captain Wentworth" (92).
Lyme proves to be a turning point for both Anne and Wentworth. In fact, as Laura Mooneyham observes, "Lyme is the structural centre of the novel because it marks the point at which Anne's and Wentworth's roles begin to reverse. Anne becomes more active, Wentworth more passive. Anne grows into a new confidence; Wentworth loses much of his bravado" (170). Although Anne must fight "against a great tendency to lowness" (*Persuasion* 96) when she sees Louisa getting acquainted with Wentworth's dear friends, the Harvilles and Captain Benwick, whom she might have known intimately if she had married Wentworth, Anne finds that the wounds she has bravely and silently endured in Wentworth's presence have began to heal into scars now: "Anne found herself by this time growing so much more hardened to being in Captain Wentworth's company than she had at first imagined could ever be, that the sitting down to the same table with him now, and the interchange of the common civilities attending on it--(they never got beyond) was become a mere nothing" (*Persuasion* 97).

She finds that she is by default much thrown together with Captain Benwick, whose story very much resembles her own. Benwick and his fiancée, Fanny Harville, chose to wait to marry until he could make enough money and advance enough in his career to support them. Just as he made his fortune at sea and achieved promotion enough to enable him to marry, Fanny died, and Benwick had been mourning her ever since. Anne compares his case to her own, thinking, "he has not, perhaps, a more sorrowing heart than I have. I cannot believe his prospects so blighted for ever. He is younger than I am; younger in feeling, if not in fact; younger as a man. He will rally again, and be happy with another" (95). Anne's assessment that Benwick will rally because he is "younger as a
"man" is important. It implies a man's power of choosing to be happy, a power to move about in search of another woman and, upon finding her, to take action and marry her. A woman rarely has such opportunity and must wait for another man to find her. In Anne's own case, she is again in contact with Wentworth, but she is powerless to signal her love to him. A woman cannot speak first, especially when the man she loves will hardly speak to her. "Nothing is more difficult in Anne's world than to express what one means simply and directly; the very structure of her society works against honesty and sincerity," Mooneyham explains, and this linguistic shackling is especially so for Anne (165). She sees Wentworth moving on with Louisa after his disappointment over herself, and she knows Benwick has the power to move towards another woman as well, yet Anne realizes she cannot deliberately move, and her immobility in love makes her a widow of sorts. She has learned great courage, however, and understands that if she cannot seek new love, she can seek a new life in which her mourning takes a more positive form. Made wiser and stronger by her loss, Anne can regain her voice and can help others (Brodie 712-13).

Her first task is to help Captain Benwick. A grave, melancholy young man, Anne discovers that he has immersed himself in romantic poetry as a means of prolonging his bereavement instead of alleviating it. Rather than encouraging him to read the very same romantic, brooding works with which she had once consoled herself, Anne exercises her "seniority of mind" and "ventured to recommend a larger allowance of prose in his daily study; and on being requested to particularize, mentioned such works of our best moralists, such collections of the finest letters, such memoirs of characters of worth and suffering, as occurred to her at the moment as calculated to rouse and fortify the mind by
the highest precepts, and the strongest examples of moral and religious endurance” (Persuasion 99). Benwick listens to her attentively, and her good effect on him is noticed by the others as a sign that Benwick is falling in love with Anne.

It is not only Benwick who is drawn to the new, stronger, more vocal Anne, however. Along with her demeanor, Anne’s looks have changed. “She was looking remarkably well; her very regular, very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced” (Persuasion 101). Anne is gratified when her party passes a fine-looking gentleman on the beach steps and this gentleman looks at her “with a degree of earnest admiration, which she could not be insensible of” (101). Even Captain Wentworth notices this attention to Anne: “Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which shewed his noticing of it. He gave her a momentary glance,—a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, ‘That man is struck with you,—and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again’” (101). No longer submerged in grief, Anne is coming back to life again.

Just as Anne comes back to life, however, lively Captain Wentworth must face death, and this experience teaches him what true courage and strength are in the face of loss. On the party’s last morning at Lyme, they take a farewell walk along the Cobb and decide to descend some narrow, steep steps to the Lower Cobb to escape the wind. Louisa insists on jumping from the steps and having Wentworth catch her, for “the sensation was delightful to her” (Persuasion 106). The steps are rather high and the pavement rather hard, making Wentworth reluctant to “jump” her, “but no, he reasoned
and talked in vain; she smiled and said, ‘I am determined I will.’ he put out his hands; she was too precipitate by half a second, she fell on the pavement on the Lower Cobb, and was taken up lifeless!’ (106). The chaos that follows is as intense as that Wentworth may have experienced in the height of a battle, yet the cool Captain Wentworth falls apart under duress. Louisa lies unconscious, Charles Musgrove is “immoveable” and his wife Mary is hysterical, Henrietta faints away, and Wentworth, “in a tone of despair, and as if all his own strength were gone,” asks, “Is there no one to help me?” as he holds Louisa helplessly (107). Captain Benwick and Anne, experienced in loss, are the only two who are strong enough to keep cool during this moment. Anne quickly takes charge. She directs Benwick to relieve Wentworth, ordering, “Rub her hands, rub her temples; here are salts,—take them, take them” (107). She sees Wentworth “staggering against the wall for his support” and hears him moaning, “Oh God! Her father and mother!” and she immediately calls out, “A surgeon!” to snap him out of his stupor. He does snap to attention and begins to dart off in the first direction that occurs to him when Anne again calls him to his senses. “Captain Benwick, would not it be better for Captain Benwick? He knows where a surgeon is to be found,” she suggests (107). Her words again direct him, and he returns to his station by Louisa. Anne, “attending with all the strength and zeal, and thought, which instinct supplied,” tries to awaken Henrietta, calm Mary, bolster up Charles’s feelings, and “assuage the feelings of Captain Wentworth” all at the same time, and when the two men look to her for direction, she confidently replies that they must carry Louisa inside carefully. The Harvilles come to meet them and have Louisa carried to their house nearby.
When it becomes clear that Louisa is not dead, but that she will need intense nursing to pull her through her injury to the head, Mrs. Harville, "a very experienced nurse," undertakes her recovery. Wentworth determines that he must bear the news to Uppercross himself and will take back everyone but Charles and "only one" other who must stay to help Mrs. Harville. He immediately thinks of Anne. "'Mrs. Charles Musgrove will, of course, wish to get back to her children, but, if Anne will stay, no one so proper, so capable as Anne!'" he pleads. "'You will stay, I am sure; you will stay and nurse her;' cried he, turning to her and speaking with a glow, and yet a gentleness, which seemed almost restoring the past.--She coloured deeply; and he recollected himself, and moved away" (111). Wentworth's recognition of Anne in this instance is complex. His look suggests that in spite of himself he still feels for Anne, but his insistence that she is proper and capable and that she must use her skill to nurse the woman whom he now loves seems to place Anne away from him. In fact, when Mary Musgrove insists on staying and Anne is forced to accompany Wentworth and Henrietta back to Uppercross, Anne is mortified that Wentworth seems "vexed" at this arrangement, and she grimly acknowledges "that she was valued only as she could be useful to Louisa" in his eyes (112). John Wiltshire points out that the figure of the nurse—and Anne is undoubtedly placed in a position as nurse throughout the novel—is a complicated one that implies the nurturing strength of motherhood while also implying "social powerlessness" and a lack of sexuality. "A true woman," Wiltshire explains, will necessarily be a good nurse, but her womanliness will be one in which her own purposes and sexual desires will be subordinated to, and sublimated in, her
ministrations to the child or to the patient. Her hands are intimate with the body, and she has therefore a quasi-sexual relation to the subjects whom she attends, but her own sexuality is necessarily screened or suspended. . . . It is a role in which Anne comes to be valued, but her value is predicated upon the obliteration (or suspension) of her own bodily needs.” (168)

In insisting that Anne nurse, Wentworth seems to be joining the others in seeing Anne as an unredeemable old maid, a woman whose own desires must be sublimated to serve the desires and needs of others. I think, however, that along with this view Wentworth is also beginning to acknowledge Anne in a different light. A nurse is also someone who literally touches death in some cases and is intimately acquainted with the mortal aspect of humanness; nurses deal with the loss and the truth that death brings, and they are more “steeled” against death because of their experience. Anne has been figuratively widowed, has mourned her loss of Wentworth, has had to acknowledge her own transience and nothingness, and for her experience she has gained a wisdom and a courage that few possess—the courage of the nurse. When Wentworth looks to Anne for composure and guidance during the Louisa crisis, he cannot help but realize that she is not the weak female he once thought her, but she is instead a woman of true bravery in the face of death. She captains the sinking ship, so to speak, when all hands are losing their nerve—including Wentworth—in this close call with death (Wiltshire 184-5). She does not think of herself, but of her crew, and Captain Wentworth cannot fail to see this proof of real bravery.

His realization of Anne’s worth almost comes too late, however. As Louisa
recovers, Wentworth finds that although he has made no proposal of marriage to her, everyone believes him to love her and to intend to marry her. Almost losing her to death, however, makes him realize that she is not—and cannot be—as precious to him as a wife should be. The near loss of Louisa causes him to realize what he never learned from his own heroic scrapes with death in the navy: the pain of losing someone or something he dearly loves. He realizes that the dear one he has almost lost is not Louisa, but Anne. He sees that he did not truly value Louisa, at least not as he should have if he meant to marry her. He had thought that it was Anne who had lost him, but now he knows it was he who lost her by idealizing her and, when he thought she had fallen short of his ideal, scorning her for the very qualities he wanted her to have:

... he had not cared, could not care for Louisa; though, till that day, till the leisure for reflection which followed it, he had not understood the perfect excellence of the mind with which Louisa's could so ill bear a comparison; or the perfect, unrivalled hold it possessed over his own. There, he had learnt to distinguish between the steadiness of principle and the obstinacy of self-will, between the darings of heedlessness and the resolution of a collected mind. There, he had seen every thing to exalt in his estimation the woman he had lost, and there begun to deplore his pride, the folly, the madness of resentment, which had kept him from trying to regain her when thrown in his way. (Persuasion 228)

Louisa's fall, under the guise of bravery, has literally and figuratively "fallen short" of the true resilience and bravery Anne represents. Elizabeth Dalton reads great significance into Louisa's fall as a statement about womanhood and the courage required to be a woman.
Dalton points out that *Persuasion* contains a number of dead or damaged ladies: Fanny Harville, Lady Elliot, Mrs. William Elliot are dead, and Anne’s friend Mrs. Smith, Mary Musgrove, and Louisa are ill or infirm. Louisa’s fall is the act of a young woman trying her best to catch a husband without understanding the risks of love and marriage.

“Louisa’s accident and the image of the ‘dead young ladies,’” says Dalton, “dramatizes vividly this theme of the dangerous fall into female sexuality. Sex is linked not only with loss of honor but also with pain, physical injury, even death, evoking a specifically female fear: that of the tearing of the body in intercourse and childbirth” (55). In watching Louisa exercise her will against all persuasions of prudence, Wentworth sees a woman he has created and made an ideal of, just as he once wished Anne to be his ideal. His inability to catch Louisa and save her, i.e. to support her and keep her from the risks of sexuality and marriage, brings home the truth that there are serious risks in loving and that no man can have the power to save a woman. Confident and brave as he was, he would not have been able to save Anne from those risks if she had married him while still so young. He now understands that Anne is separate from him, and that to love her is to accept those risks and accept the possible, killing pain that death might bring. He at last sees what Anne has already recognized, that “the ingredient of hovering death and potential limitation [is] a defining parameter to the reaching out for one another” (Hassler 174).

He realizes this truth just at the point at which he is in danger of losing Anne again. Having accepted her role as old maid/nurse, Anne leaves Uppercross to join her father and sister in Bath, sure that she will soon hear the tidings that Wentworth has married Louisa. Her determination to go on with her life takes an interesting turn when she finds that her
cousin, William Elliot, the heir to her father’s title and estate, is the very same gentleman who admired her so openly at Lyme. Ensconced in her father’s and sister’s good graces, Mr. Elliot soon makes clear his interest in Anne, and Anne finds his attention pleasing, despite her suspicions that his perfect manners conceal something decidedly imperfect about him. The idea of taking her cherished mother’s place as the next Lady Elliot is almost too tempting for Anne. She likes the feeling of regained vitality she has experienced under Mr. Elliot’s tender compliments and earnest looks; her hopes that she is “to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty” seem to be coming true under Mr. Elliot’s influence (Persuasion 118). When Wentworth finds himself fortunate enough to be free of Louisa after all (she falls in love with Benwick during her recuperation), he heads for Bath to pursue Anne, only to find that she is courted by Mr. Elliot and seeming to thrive under such attentions. He must garner all his courage in order to approach her again, but gallant Captain Wentworth seems to have trouble keeping his courage high. Fighting French ships and clashing swords with privateers required a different, somehow easier courage assisted by canons and weapons and the company of one’s shipmates. Navigating social occasions, getting past Anne’s snobby family, removing his competitor, Mr. Elliot, and simply trying to tell Anne he loves her without breaking social rules require both finesse and a courage unassisted by manly weapons.

Anne fortunately sees that Wentworth struggles for courage. When they first meet in Bath, she experiences a renewal of all the pain she previously felt in his presence, but she meets this pain with a composure that is superior to Wentworth’s. Seeing him approaching through a shop window, Anne has a few moments to get over the
“overpowering, blinding, bewildering, first effects of strong surprise,” and appears calm when they meet despite the “agitation, pain, pleasure, a something between delight and misery” that she feels inside herself. She is ready to renew the acquaintance, but after greeting her Wentworth turns abruptly away with “embarrassment.” He gathers courage and approaches her again, but Anne notices that he is not the self-assured man he was at Uppercross:

They had, by dint of being so very much together, got to speak to each other with a considerable portion of apparent indifference and calmness; but he could not do it now. Time had changed him, or Louisa had changed him. There was consciousness of some sort or other. He looked very well, not as if he had been suffering in health or spirits, and he talked of Uppercross, of the Musgroves, nay, even of Louisa, and had even a momentary look of his own arch significance as he named her; but yet it was Captain Wentworth not comfortable, not easy, not able to feign that he was. (*Persuasion* 166)

Anne is encouraged by this lack of ease. “If she could only have a few minutes conversation with him again,” she muses, “she fancied she should be satisfied; and as to the power of addressing him she felt all over the courage if the opportunity occurred. Elizabeth had turned from him, Lady Russell overlooked him; her nerves were strengthened by these circumstances; she felt that she owed him that attention” (170). Her courage does not fail when several days later she sees him enter the same room where she and her family await the beginning of a concert. Wentworth seems prepared to avoid her and her “formidable” attendants, but she steps forward and speaks invitingly, forcing him
to come near her. Such daring in front of her family makes Anne feel strong and "equal to
everything" (171). She makes a great effort to keep a conversation going as long as
possible so that she may determine his feelings, but she must struggle against her own
overwhelming feelings at the same time. When the conversation turns to Benwick and
Louisa, Wentworth admits that he finds Louisa's mind inferior to his friend's, and he is
disappointed that Benwick should so quickly forget Fanny Harville in favor of a woman so
little equal to her. "'A man does not recover from such a devotion of the heart to such a
woman,'" Wentworth says meaningfully, "'He ought not--he does not.'" Anne is "struck,
gratified, confused, and beginning to breathe very quick, and feel an hundred things in a
moment," but she manages to speak in order to keep Wentworth, who has lapsed into
silence, talking to her (173). She brings up Lyme, and when Wentworth remarks that she
must have bad memories of such a place, she sees a way to send a message to him. "'The
last few hours were certainly very painful,'" Anne tells him, "'but when pain is over, the
remembrance of it often becomes a pleasure'" (174). Her words convey her own
experience with love and pain, and they say to Wentworth, "Do not be afraid of past pain;
learn from it, and love again."

Anne cannot gage the effect her words have on Wentworth because she is at that
moment called on to help her Sir Walter and Elizabeth greet Lady Dalrymple, and when
she turns around again Wentworth is gone. But she is hopeful her speech must have had
some effect. She reviews their conversation confidently:

His choice of subjects, his expressions, and still more his manner and look, had
been such as she could see in only one light. His opinion of Louisa Musgrove's
inferiority, an opinion which he had seemed solicitous to give, his wonder at
Captain Benwick, his feelings as to a first, strong attachment,—sentences begun
which he could not finish—his half averted eyes, and more than half expressive
glance,—all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at least; that anger,
resentment, avoidance, were no more; and that they were succeeded, not merely by
friendship and regard, but by the tenderness of the past; yes, some share of the
tenderness of the past. She could not contemplate the change as implying less.—
He must love her. (Persuasion 175)

He must love her, but does he have the courage to fight for her? Anne begins to
wonder whether he does or not. She contrives during the concert to leave a seat open
near her, and when Captain Wentworth takes the bait and cautiously approaches, she does
her best to put him at ease in the presence of their hostile witnesses. She at last gets
“almost a smile” from him and sees him looking at the vacant seat, inclined to take it,
when Mr. Elliot requires her help translating the Italian being sung at that moment. She
“sacrifices to politeness” for a few minutes, and when she turns back to Wentworth she
sees by his stern look that he is about to leave the concert. He is jealous of Mr. Elliot, she
realizes with chagrin. “How was such jealousy to be quieted? How was the truth to reach
him?” Anne wonders. “How, in all the peculiar disadvantages of their respective
situations, would he ever learn her real sentiments?” (180). Anne realizes that Wentworth
is afraid to try and to lose again; she must be the one to take action.

Anne is influenced in her call to action by her friend, Mrs. Smith. A schoolmate
twelve years ago, Mrs. Smith is a poor, crippled widow when Anne renews their
acquaintance in Bath. The story of Mrs. Smith's marriage is very important because it could have been Anne's story and because it offers Anne the strength to pursue Wentworth. Mrs. Smith, with no real family to guide her, left school and married a rich young man with whom she was very much in love. The young couple lived gaily together, and one of their intimate acquaintances was Mr. Elliot, on whom her husband doated. Mr. Elliot led his friend to an extravagance that brought the Smiths to ruin, and when her husband died Mrs. Smith found herself with a great tangle of an estate, and sadly in need of help from Mr. Elliot, her husband's executor. Having secured his own fortune in marrying a rich, merchant-class woman, Mr. Elliot refused to help her recover her only means of remaining support, an estate in the West Indies, and disabled by a crippling, lingering illness, Mrs. Smith had been powerless to take charge of her affairs. In relating her story, Mrs. Smith makes clear that she deeply loved her husband, who was "a man of warm feelings, easy temper, careless habits, and not strong understanding" (*Persuasion* 197), and because she loved him Mrs. Smith followed his example of happy, luxurious living without question. But it lead to her ruin, to that same "state of most wearing, anxious, youth-killing dependance" (30) that Lady Russell had feared for Anne if she married the warm, spirited, over-confident Wentworth. At thirty years old, widowed by a man who did not value her selflessly enough to secure her future, Mrs. Smith is essentially a dependent, damaged woman, appearing "old and sickly" before her time. Although not literally dead, the socially dead Mrs. Smith echoes other dead, unvalued women in the novel; her acquaintance with Anne began when she offered Anne comfort after losing her good, yet unappreciated mother (Postlethwaite 44), and Mrs. Smith's acquaintance with
Mr. Elliot allowed her to see first-hand how little he cared about his wife, whom he had married strictly for her fortune and whose death he is mourning only in his appearance, not in his heart, at the time that Anne meets him.

Mrs. Smith offers Anne a glimpse of what she has perhaps escaped by not marrying Wentworth when she was so young and untried, but she also offers Anne a glimpse of how resilient a woman can be in the face of adversity. Anne is shocked when she first sees Mrs. Smith again, finding her once beautiful friend greatly changed, but surprisingly “cheerful beyond her expectations” (145). Anne could scarcely imagine a more cheerless situation in itself than Mrs. Smith’s. She had been very fond of her husband,—she had buried him. She had been used to affluence,—it was gone. She had no child to connect her with life and happiness again, no relations to assist in the arrangement of perplexed affairs, no health to make all the rest supportable. . . . Yet, in spite of all this, Anne had reason to believe that she had moments only of languor and depression, to hours of occupation and enjoyment. How could it be?—She watched—observed—reflected—and finally determined that this was not a case of fortitude or of resignation only.--A submissive spirit might be patient, a strong understanding would supply resolution, but here was something more; here was that elasticity of mind, that disposition to be comforted, that power of turning reality from evil to good, and of finding employment which carried her out of herself, which was from Nature alone. It was the choicest gift of Heaven; and Anne viewed her friend as one of those instances in which, by a merciful appointment, it seems designed to counter-
balance almost every other want. (146)

Mrs. Smith offers Anne an example of womanly courage in the face of death and the consequences it has brought for her. She is the “antithesis” of Mary Musgrove, whose imagined illnesses and hardships are the result of bruised ego rather than real suffering and deprivation (Postlethwaite 44). She confirms for Anne the lesson Anne learned in comforting Captain Benwick: a woman must and can go on alone after loss. In fact, as John Wiltshire has pointed out, Mrs. Smith uses sailing metaphors in reference to herself and her survival, suggesting that a woman possesses the same bravery and cunning required of a good, fighting sailor (Wiltshire 184). She tells Anne that she has “weathered” her difficulties well (*Persuasion* 146), and although her “peace” was “shipwrecked” by Mr. Elliot and by her husband’s gullibility, she has remained afloat (*Persuasion* 185). Her language echoes that of Mrs. Croft, Captain Wentworth’s sister, who has cheerfully weathered storms and worries of all kinds so that she may be with her husband, Admiral Croft, on his ship, and who firmly declares that “the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship” (70). John Wiltshire explains that “Austen links, through these metaphors, Mrs. Smith’s mode of survival in her cramped rooms with Mrs. Croft’s ‘weathered face’ and happiness in confined quarters, and links them also with the survival and resilience of Captain Harville, another crippled victim of hazard and misfortune, and as I have suggested, her informal support system is an underclass reflection of the male bonding of the sailors” (184).

Mrs. Smith’s dependence on Nurse Rooke, the woman who has attended her in her illness and who has been a friend to her, is reminiscent of male friendships, Wiltshire also
suggests. Nurse Rooke has taught Mrs. Smith how to knit, and Mrs. Smith has been supporting herself by making "thread-cases, pin-cushions, and card-racks" which Nurse Rooke then sells to the rich ladies she attends; Nurse Rooke not only brings back money for Mrs. Smith, but she also brings back entertaining and useful gossip from the sick chambers she visits, furnishing "the worth of volumes" as Anne remarks (Persuasion 146-148). It is Nurse Rooke who, with "flying visions of attending the next Lady Elliot," tells Mrs. Smith of Mr. Elliot's intention to marry Anne. Mrs. Smith hopes to turn this gossip to her advantage when she teases Anne about this rumor and expresses the hope that when Anne is Lady Elliot she will urge her husband to remember his old friend, Mrs. Smith. Many critics condemn Mrs. Smith, along with Nurse Rooke, for such a mercenary view of Anne's prospective marriage and for the fact that she does not reveal Mr. Elliot's true character to Anne until after Anne assures her that she is not going to marry him. Mercenary she may be, but what other weapons is she to use? A man in her situation might have challenged Mr. Elliot to a duel, or physically forced him to perform his duties as executor, or might have done very well disentangling his estate without Mr. Elliot's help, but Mrs. Smith has neither the physical nor the social strength for such wrangling. Words are her only weapon, words she hears and words she uses, and such a weapon is hardly more condemnable than canons and swords are for men. John Wiltshire defends Nurse Rooke, and his defense comprehends Mrs. Smith as well:

... Nurse Rooke's enterprise in wringing from her convalescent patients both useful gossip and charitable donations reflects the commercial imperatives and initiatives that rule the lives of men the novel asks us to admire. (It is amusing to
see critics who unquestionably accept the sailors’ right to plunder French frigates
getting upset at this “nurse-accomplice” taking minor advantage of her wealthier
clients. (184)

In looking out for herself, however, Mrs. Smith is not so self-supporting as to have no
genuine feelings of concern for Anne in marrying Mr. Elliot. She explains to Anne that
she thought Anne was to definitely marry her cousin, and in light of this she could not
wreck Anne’s peace by exposing Mr. Elliot’s cruelty to her. Anne, she believes, has a
chance at happiness because she is so superior to Mr. Elliot’s first wife; “‘Mr. Elliot has
sense to understand the value of such a woman,’” she tells Anne, and continues, “‘... he
is sensible, he is agreeable, and with such a woman as you, it was not absolutely
hopeless’” (185, 199). Once she is sure that Anne’s heart is safe from Mr. Elliot, she has
the “comfort of telling the whole story her own way” (198). Her words—those genteel,
womanly weapons—effectively sink Mr. Elliot’s chances with Anne.

Mrs. Smith’s courage under duress and her unabashed use of words fortify Anne.
She leaves Mrs. Smith’s lodgings determined to reveal Mr. Elliot, to remove him from her
way, so that she may take action with Wentworth. Two days later she finds her chance.
Engaged for the whole day with the Musgroves, Anne arrives at their quarters only to
discover Captain Wentworth and Captain Harville there as well, discussing their promise
to Captain Benwick of having his portrait framed for Louisa. Anne feels “the happiness of
such misery, or the misery of such happiness” (Persuasion 216) in being near Wentworth
as she awaits Henrietta’s and Mary’s return for her, and she is strengthened by
overhearing a conversation between Mrs. Croft and Mrs. Musgrove. These seasoned,
married women are discussing the evils of long engagements between lovers, and their words back up Anne’s own actions with regard to her refusal of Wentworth eight years ago:

“Oh! dear Mrs. Croft,” cried Mrs. Musgrove, unable to let [Mrs. Croft] finish her speech, “there is nothing I so abominate for young people as a long engagement. It is what I always protested against for my children. It is all very well, I used to say, for young people to be engaged, if there is a certainty of their being able to marry in six months, or even in twelve, but a long engagement!”

“Yes, dear ma’am,” said Mrs. Croft, “or an uncertain engagement; an engagement which may be long. To begin without knowing that at such a time there will be the means of marrying, I hold to be very unsafe and unwise, and what, I think, all parents should prevent as far as they can.” (217)

This womanly advice, strongly uttered, proves that Anne’s choice not to engage herself indefinitely to a young, unmade sailor was not the act of a weak, persuadable girl, but was the thoughtful, sacrificing act of a strong, sensible young woman who had both of their interests at heart. Anne listens with “a nervous thrill” to these words from knowing married women, and she notices that Wentworth, too, has stopped writing and has “turned round the next instant to give a look--one quick, conscious look at her” (218).

It is at this moment that Captain Harville beckons Anne to join him at the window and hear his opinions on Captain Benwick’s lack of constancy in marrying so soon after Fanny Harville’s death, and when Captain Harville begins to attack women’s constancy in general, Anne has her opening for her attack. Shaking inside, Anne launches her only
weapon—carefully chosen words—at the nearby Wentworth. "It would not be in the
nature of any woman who truly loved” to forget a man, Anne begins deliberately, and she
defends woman, and herself, against Harville’s contention that women have weaker bodies
and therefore weaker affections:

"Your feelings may be the strongest," Anne replied, "but the same spirit of analogy
will authorise me to assert that ours are the most tender. Man is more robust than
woman, but he is not longer-lived; which exactly explains my view of the nature of
their attachments. Nay, it would be too hard upon you, if it were otherwise. You
have difficulties, and privations, and dangers enough to struggle with. You are
always labouring and toiling, exposed to every risk and hardship. Your home,
country, friends, all quitted. Neither time, nor health, nor life, to be called your
own. It would be too hard indeed” (with a faltering voice) “if woman’s feelings
were to be added to all this.” (Persuasion 220)

Anne’s speech, which cannot be shouted but must be uttered in socially-acceptable,
moderated tones, nevertheless speaks volumes to Captain Wentworth. “We both must
risk and suffer in love,” she is saying. Woman are “tender,” which implies they are not
only soft-hearted, but they are also subject to “tenderness,” to “soreness, sensitivity,
susceptibility to pain” in their lives through intercourse, childbirth, illness, and death
(Warhol 7). Women face the enemies of death and loss with their bodies just as vividly as
men do in their battles. But men suffer greatly and risk greatly, too, Anne acknowledges,
and she generously admits that to endure the loss of a woman’s affections amidst so many
other deprivations would be the worst hardship of all; any woman who truly loved would
not intentionally wound a man so, without consulting what is best for him, as Anne did in refusing her hand to Wentworth. Anne was trying to prevent possible pain, not create pain. Wentworth drops his pen after this speech of Anne’s, signaling a surrender of his weapons (the mighty pen and the pointed, dripping sword) to Anne’s more delicate, yet powerful verbal arsenal.

Laura Mooneyham sees great significance in the fact that Jane Austen originally wrote this scene quite differently but then revised it “to give Anne the active verbal role in bringing the lovers together. In the excised chapter, Wentworth discovers Anne’s love for him only when she is forced through his questions to acknowledge that she is not engaged to Elliot” (174). Mooneyham continues,

*Persuasion* thus offers a model of the “moment of assent” in which the heroine is fully responsible for propelling the romantic resolution into being. When Wentworth, understanding Anne’s meaning, drops his pen in his desire to hear Anne’s words more fully, his act symbolizes his submission to Anne’s dominant linguistic role. He writes his proposal in a letter under the influence of her words, responding on paper to her every nuance of speech. . . . The two lovers have achieved true communication, for neither can any longer “listen in silence.” (174)

And along with true communication, they have achieved true intimacy. Anne’s last words to Captain Harville are intended to show Wentworth that she is willing to risk losing him again in order to love him again. Men will endure great things, she says, “as long as the woman you love lives, and lives for you.” Women, she adds, have the painful pleasure of “loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone” (222). I will endure
anything, she is signaling, even your death, in order to love you. Understanding these
words, Wentworth at last acknowledges Anne’s courage and her value, calling her “too
good, too excellent creature” in his letter of proposal to her (224). When he meets her
outside a few minutes later, he confesses that his selfishness and vanity kept him from
understanding the love behind her previous refusal of him. Finding that she would have
accepted him had he only applied to her again when he was in England two years after
their separation, he blames himself for the pain he caused to both of them:

“Good God!” he cried, “you would! It is not that I did not think of it, or desire it
as what could alone crown all my other success. But I was proud, too proud to
ask again. I did not understand you. I shut my eyes, and would not understand
you, or do you justice. This is a recollection which ought to make me forgive
every one sooner than myself. Six years of separation and suffering might have
been spared. It is a sort of pain, too, which is new to me. I have been used to the
gratification of believing myself to earn every blessing that I enjoyed. I have
valued myself on honourable toils and just rewards. Like other great men under
reverses,” he added with a smile, “I must endeavour to subdue my mind to my
fortune. I must learn to brook being happier than I deserve.” (233).

Wentworth has learned that in originally idealizing Anne he was consuming her,
expecting her to mirror the vigor and determination with which he thought he could
control destiny. He would not acknowledge that she was separate from him, that she was
human and prone to weakness, that she had her own merits that did not rely upon him for
expression. He did not know her intimately, only ideally. Nor did he want to
acknowledge the humanness and weakness in himself. Not until he faced the loss—and then the unwanted, threatened gain--of Louisa did he understand that he cannot control life, but must instead expose himself to the chance of loss. Faced with loss, he learned to value Anne in her courage and her separateness from him. Anne and Wentworth can now join in true love, "more tender, more tried, more fixed in a knowledge of each other's character, truth, and attachment; more equal to act, more justified in acting" (Persuasion 227).

As all Austen novels do, Persuasion ends in a marriage, but Austen throws a note of caution--and reality--into the union of Anne and Wentworth. Their love will exact a price from them, she makes clear, especially from Anne:

Anne was tenderness itself, and she had the full worth of it in Captain Wentworth's affection. His profession was all that could ever make her friends wish that tenderness less; the dread of a future war all that could dim her sunshine. She gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance. (Persuasion 237)

Austen seems to forecast that Anne's life will be like that of Mrs. Croft, whose courage in loving her husband was equal to the risks of losing him. Anne's glory echoes Mrs. Croft's glowing account of her marriage to a sailor:

When you come to a frigate, of course, you are more confined--though any reasonable woman may be perfectly happy in one of them; and I can safely say, that the happiest part of my life has been spent on board a ship. While we were
together, you know, there was nothing to be feared. Thank God! I have always
been blessed with excellent health, and no climate disagrees with me. A little
disordered always the first twenty-four hours of going to sea, but never knew what
sickness was afterwards. The only time that I ever really suffered in body or mind,
the only time that I ever fancied myself unwell, or had any ideas of danger, was the
winter that I passed by myself at Deal, when the Admiral (Captain Croft then) was
in the North Seas. I lived in perpetual fright at that time, and had all manner of
imaginary complaints from not knowing what to do with myself, or when I should
hear from him next; but as long as we could be together, nothing ever ailed me,
and I never met with the smallest inconvenience. (Persuasion 70-1)

Chances are, Anne will “weather” her union with Wentworth with all the strength and
contentment that Mrs. Croft exudes; Austen perhaps had a real life example in mind when
she designed Mrs. Croft as a model for Anne to follow, yet she could not mar the reader’s
happiness, by revealing the actual fate of this model. Austen’s sister-in-law, Fanny
Austen, lived on board various ships with her husband, Charles Austen, and their growing
family. She, too, managed to find ship life comfortable and to ride out inconveniences
with cheerfulness in order to be with her beloved husband. She died at the age of twenty-
four, however, after giving birth to their fourth child, leaving her husband with only the
consolation of dreaming of her (Kaplan 115-20). Whether as Mrs. Croft or as Fanny
Austen, Anne will always have to live with the shadow of death in her love for
Wentworth.
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