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EDITED BY JANE STABLER



JANE AUSTEN

Reflections of a Reader



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3. Mothers and Daughters in Jane Austen

None of Jane Austen's heroines becomes a mother in the course of the novels, which take them, usually, only to the altar and not beyond, but all are daughters, with at least one parent. And all of them, even Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, at twenty-seven the eldest heroine, are, at the beginning of the novels, living at home with their families, though families of very different shapes. Jane Austen does not write, as the Gothic novelists did and as many novelists of the later nineteenth century did, about orphans or foundlings who did not know who their parents were. She was interested in how families operated,¹ and though sometimes it seems as if her heroines exist only to show how unlike parents a child can be, all are affected by their relationship with their mothers, even when, as happens more than once, those mothers are absent, or dead.²

I thought in the first half of my talk I would go quickly through all the novels to outline the mother-daughter situation that is central to each one, and then, because I can't do justice to all six, concentrate on two in particular: the two most popular and widely read, *Sense and Sensibility* and *Pride and Prejudice*. These are both, alas, novels in which mothers fail their daughters but they do so in different ways, and it will be interesting to examine the differences. What they also have in common—and I think this is relevant to the topic—is that Jane Austen

1 For previous discussion of this topic, see Juliet McMaster, 'Jane Austen's Children', *Persuasions On-line*, 31.1 (2012), jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol31no1/mcmaster.html? and Christopher Ricks, 'Jane Austen and the Business of Mothering', in *Essays in Appreciation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 90–113.

2 For a full-length study of absent mothers in the fiction of Austen's time, see Susan C. Greenfield, *Mothering Daughters: Novels and the Politics of Family Romance, Frances Burney to Jane Austen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001).

wrote the earliest versions of them when she was very young and very close to the age of her heroines, and perhaps at a time when her view of mothers was that of a girl in her late teens and early twenties. When she revised and published the novels she was in her late thirties, but as you probably know she had continued to live with her parents, and after her father's sudden death, continued to live with her mother, and did so until the end of her life—and I will say just a little before I close about her mother, about Mrs. Austen.

First, though, let us go through the six major novels in order of publication. These novels were written over a long period, and rewritten, and in some cases published long after they were written, and the last novel published was actually one of the first written, but since that novel, *Northanger Abbey*, is the only novel to feature a sensible and successful mother, I thought it would be nice to build up toward that cheerful apex of good parenting, before we look at the sorry spectacle of mothering in the two novels in the second half of this talk.

Sense and Sensibility, published in 1811, begins, uniquely for Jane Austen, with a death, the death of the father of the three Dashwood girls, who are by that death made poor, dowryless, and homeless all at a single stroke. Because their family was a close and loving one, they are also made wretchedly unhappy. Deaths don't always have that effect in Jane Austen, and she is at times almost scandalously honest about how the death of a parent or other elderly relative might be very much wished for. But the Dashwood girls, Elinor, Marianne, and the very much younger girl Margaret, have a mother who is affectionate, intelligent, loyal and charming. But all these qualities do not, as we'll see, make her altogether a good mother: one of the tensions in this novel is between being a fond mother and a good mother. Mrs. Dashwood is always the former, always loving and affectionate, and good company, too; she has so many attractive qualities! But while she neither—intentionally—neglects her daughters, nor spoils them, her ideas about how the world works, her belief in sensibility over sense, endangers both of them.

Pride and Prejudice, published in 1813, has in Mrs. Bennet probably the most famous mother in Jane Austen, perhaps in all fiction:

Her mind was less difficult to develope. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was

discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news. (I i 5)

That character assassination in Chapter i is never really countered by anything else we learn about her, and yet, as Mrs. Bennet anxiously hovers over the marital prospects of her five daughters, who, should their father die as the Dashwoods' does, in this era of high mortality, would be much poorer than the Dashwoods, as she struggles with that situation we might want to spare her a sympathetic thought. One of the very few good additions to the dialogue made by the film of 2005 in which Keira Knightley was so miscast as Elizabeth Bennet, was an exchange between the scornful Elizabeth and her mother in which Elizabeth storms, 'why do you think so much about marriage!' and the mother snaps back, 'so will you, when you have five daughters!'.³ The fact that the exchange would not happen in Jane Austen's world and is out of character for both speakers seems less important here than that this is the fundamental dilemma: as another impoverished unmarried daughter says in one of Jane Austen's unfinished novels, "'you know we *must* marry...'"⁴ All of Jane Austen's heroines are husband-hunters, though none would like to admit it, even to themselves: it is only by the Mrs. Bennets of her world that this fact is mentioned.

Mansfield Park is the next to be published, and that novel begins by listing the marital fortunes of the three sisters from Northampton who will become Lady Bertram, Mrs. Norris and Mrs. Price. Mrs. Norris, cold and stingy, has no children (luckily for the children) but indolent Lady Bertram is the mother of two daughters, Maria and Julia, and slatternly Mrs. Price of several, of whom the reader's concern is with Fanny. I said earlier that Jane Austen didn't write about orphans or foundlings, but Fanny in a way is both, because she is adopted away from her impecunious family in Portsmouth to be brought up in the Bertram home alongside, but not in equality with, her cousins. Abandoned by her own mother—she is the child who can be spared by a woman who adores

3 *Pride and Prejudice*, dir. by Joe Wright (United International Pictures, 2005). See the special issue of *Persuasions On-line*, 27.2 (2007), which was dedicated to discussion of the film, and the review by Susan Fraiman, 'The Liberation of Elizabeth Bennet', *Persuasions On-line*, 31.1 (2010), <http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol31no1/fraiman.html>

4 *The Watsons*, in *Later Manuscripts*, ed. Todd and Bree, p. 82.

her sons and neglects her daughters—Fanny does not find a mother-substitute at Mansfield Park, but as often happens in Jane Austen novels, mysteriously brings herself up, with the guidance of one sympathetic, though often obtuse, male, her cousin Edmund. We might want to note right now that this pattern of relative maternal neglect, or absence, and a male mentor figure, occurs more than once in these six novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, *Emma* and *Northanger Abbey*, the central young women learn valuable lessons from the men they will marry.

Emma is the next novel, and Emma's mother is dead. In a way which suited eighteenth-century minds, in a period when so many women died in childbirth or died young from other illnesses, we're told that her mother had died too long ago for Emma to have more than 'an indistinct remembrance of her caresses', and that her place was amply filled by the governess Miss Taylor. But Miss Taylor arrived when Emma was five, and presumably she came very soon after Mrs. Woodhouse's death. The loss of a mother at five is not really a minor loss, according to our thinking now, is it? So we might want to link motherless Emma Woodhouse, Emma who likes playing lady bountiful with other characters, whom she treats as if she were a little girl and they were her toys,⁵ Emma who is the cleverest but also the least mature, in some ways, of the central figures in Jane Austen, with our next heroine, motherless Anne Elliot, who certainly does remember the death of her mother and mourns her loss, since it happened when she was thirteen.

One of the first things we know about Anne Elliot is that her mother has died, because as you'll remember the novel begins with Anne's silly, vain, snobbish father, Sir Walter, indulging in his favourite book, the *Baronetage*, which tells the history of his family and includes his own marriage and children. One of the many distinctive things about *Persuasion* is that everything in it is given a date: we know Anne's birthday, very unusual for a fictional character, and we know the year of her mother's death. Later on, that death will be alluded to as the reason she was unhappy at school, and the reason why, except for her brief youthful engagement with the appreciative Frederick Wentworth, no one for a long time has cared much about her considerable musical ability (Anne is a talented pianist, like several of Jane Austen's heroines and

5 Nora discusses the relationship between Emma and Harriet in Chapter 8.

Jane Austen herself.). Her over-reliance, at nineteen, on the bad advice given her by her friend Lady Russell, who was also her mother's friend, the catastrophic, and plot-igniting, advice to break the engagement to Wentworth, might be read as a symptom of her gratitude, as a girl whose sisters and father offer her little or no warmth or support, to someone who was 'in the place of a parent' (II xi 267–68). A kind and honoured mother-substitute has, in the word that echoes through the novel, 'persuaded' her to make a terrible mistake, one which, wonderfully, the novel corrects.

In *Northanger Abbey*, written early but published posthumously along with *Persuasion*, the last motherless girl is not quite a heroine. The heroine of the novel is in fact the very young Catherine, who is a bit giddy and impressionable, but comes, unusually in Jane Austen, from a large, healthy, fairly well-off family with a pair of live, and reliable, parents at its centre. Catherine's mother is one of the few really sensible mature women whom Jane Austen writes about. But Catherine meets, in the course of her own very naïve husband-hunting, with Eleanor Tilney, the sister of Henry, the young man with whom Catherine has fallen in love. Eleanor is not a heroine but is a very important secondary figure, and she takes us in a circle back to Jane Austen's early work, for like Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility*—and like Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot—Eleanor in *Northanger Abbey* is motherless. Her mother has died like Anne's when she was in her teens, leaving her like Anne with a cold and selfish father. She has no vain and self-absorbed sisters, it is true, but also no permanent companion at home, for her brothers, one selfish like her father, the other the charming, warm, funny, affectionate Henry, lead the lives of middle-class boys of that time and go away to school and university. Eleanor probably had, like Emma, a governess, but she is long gone, and when Henry is away she has only the rather empty role of playing at presiding over her father's household, again, like Emma, but Emma really does run the house whereas Eleanor is 'but a nominal mistress of' *Northanger Abbey* (II xiii 232), really thought of by her father as a beautiful possession like his pictures or china, and as a counter in the marriage games he wants to play with his children's lives, as he plans wealthy alliances for them.

We are talking about mothers today, not fathers, but General Tilney is one of the most unpleasant fathers anywhere in Jane Austen. The

way in which his presence checks laughter and natural behaviour is wonderfully depicted, and the fun Catherine and Eleanor have when he is briefly away, lingering late in the dining room, as if they were gentlemen, is dramatized also, as is the exchange Eleanor has with Catherine about her mother's death and how she misses her. This conversation has the important plot function of planting in Catherine's mind the idea that the General is a murderer (he's bad, but not quite that bad) but it is also there to give us a sense of the loneliness and suffering of even a well-off, beautiful, confident young woman like Eleanor Tilney, if she loses her mother before she grows up. "A mother would have been always present. A mother would have been a constant friend", she laments (II vii 185).

But if losing a mother is tragic, we shall see that having one can be a problem, too, especially in the two early novels I want to spend time with now. I'll go again in order of publication and look first at *Sense and Sensibility*, which has many mother-daughter sets, starting with the least important and also the least attractive, that is Fanny Dashwood, the selfish, cold and avaricious sister-in-law of the Dashwood girls, and her equally cold and avaricious mother, Mrs. Ferrars, who is also the mother of Edward Ferrars, the young man with whom Elinor, the heroine through whose eyes we see most of the novel's action, is in love. Mrs. Ferrars is extremely rich. She has inherited all of her husband's money and uses it to alternately indulge and bully her children. We never find out how that money was earned, but one or two country estates are mentioned, though never visited in the novel. Presumably Mrs. Ferrars, who really cares for nothing but money, keeps them making money for her by renting them out. They are spoken of only as sources of income. Sometimes in the novel they are dangled over Edward as a bribe to make him do something that will make his mother proud of him. By choosing to live in London, being an absentee landlady who does not live on her own land, but turns it into money, she reduces her attraction for country-loving Jane Austen. But dislikeable though she is, we cannot say that all of her money comes from trade—we see money from trade in the situations of other characters in the novel, and in *Pride and Prejudice*. Income from trade alone is always thought by the more snobbish characters in the novels as something to be ashamed of, but Jane Austen is more up-to-date and understands that trade can also be an honest way to earn a

living, and that it is the snooty characters' attitudes to it that are silly and outmoded. Her novels do, though, register a still-prevailing sense at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth century that an income derived from the land, from agriculture, was more respectable, as a desire to live in the country rather than the town was usually a sign of a more stable set of values. Edward's worthiness to be a hero is indicated in part by his wishing to be ordained, and to take up a parish in the country. Mrs. Ferrars, who wishes her sons to 'make a name for themselves', to be 'public men' of some sort, or, failing that, to be the sort of playboy figure who careers around the metropolis from social event to social event in a barouche-landau (the very newest sort of coach, light and fast, able to hold four persons as well as the driver), shows nothing but the shallowest values, though seems respectable because she is so very dull: 'She was not a woman of many words', the narrative tells us, 'for, unlike people in general, she proportioned them to the number of her ideas' (II xii 265), a neat slap in two directions, at the noisy many as well as the silent Mrs. Ferrars.⁶ Such ideas as she has, though, are all worldly: she will not allow her shy, thoughtful, well-meaning eldest son Edward to follow his own desires, because the clergy is "'not smart enough'", not flashy, not something about which she and her daughter can boast (I xix 119).

That daughter, Fanny, resembles her greatly, and we will see this pattern in the novel, of a mother having one daughter who resembles herself, and feeling special warmth, in a way of which the novel is not uncritical, toward that daughter. Toward Fanny, Mrs. Ferrars is, according to her lights, indulgent. She has given her a large dowry, as we learn in Chapter i, in this novel in which money is one of the main concerns, and she shares with Fanny, who is perhaps the eldest child (we don't know), all her hopes and schemes for her sons: Edward must be a great man, or Robert, his younger brother, must be; Edward (or

6 We are told, 'His mother wished to interest him in political concerns, to get him into parliament, or to see him connected with some of the great men of the day. Mrs. John Dashwood wished it likewise; but in the mean while, till one of these superior blessings could be attained, it would have quieted her ambition to see him driving a barouche. But Edward had no turn for great men or barouches. All his wishes centered in domestic comfort and the quiet of private life. Fortunately he had a younger brother who was more promising' (I iii 18). Later, Edward expresses the hope that his mother "'is now convinced that I have no more talents than inclination for a public life'" (I xvii 104).

Robert) must marry an heiress. Indeed, at different times they are meant to be marrying the *same* heiress.

When Edward turns out in the second volume of the novel not to be headed in that direction at all, but to have engaged himself, years earlier, to the impecunious nobody Lucy Steele, Mrs. Ferrars takes the extreme step of disinheriting him and transferring all the prerogatives of the eldest son to Robert, and all the income, too, enough to live on, the crucial £1000 a year which enabled a young couple to keep several servants, have dinner parties and a carriage. This despite the fact that she herself, and Fanny, are actually as attracted to Lucy's cold, ambitious and vulgar personality as they are repelled by Elinor Dashwood's quiet good manners.

Like mother, like daughter, then, and between Fanny Dashwood and her mother there is a kind of closeness based on similarity, though in fact in the novel we scarcely see them speaking to one another (there is a brief exchange while they both insult some of Elinor's artwork). However, John Dashwood, Fanny's husband, who adores both his wife and his mother-in-law (it is a credit to Jane Austen that here she can make a usually praise-worthy emotion, uxoriousness, and filial feeling toward a mother figure, so repellent as she does in the figure of John Dashwood) gives a triumphant description of a highly symbolic moment when his mother-in-law, on their arriving to visit her in London, "'put bank-notes into Fanny's hands to the amount of two hundred pounds'" (II xi 255). John gives this as an instance of Mrs. Ferrars's "'noble spirit'" (II xi 255), but the physicality of the description—the actual amount being *named*, and the picture of the hand-to-hand transfer—suggests both a grossness in the action, and the greedy materialism of both women. This is the stuff of their intimacy. Those of you who remember the novel's story well enough to recall how it turns out will know that in the end Lucy Steele, the penniless nobody from nowhere, the Becky Sharpe type figure driven entirely by mercenary motives, achieves the social rise she desires by tricking not Edward but Robert into marrying her, and that she becomes, in her own vigorous self-seeking, 'as necessary to Mrs. Ferrars'—*necessary* is a nice word—'as either Robert or Fanny' (III xiv 427). In short, Lucy becomes another daughter. But that is a domestic setting we are told about but don't see.

A mother whom we do see a great deal of, throughout the novel, is my own particular favourite, Mrs. Jennings, a character whom I think of as having great importance for the novel's overall shape and for its themes. For if the novel teaches impulsive, unguarded Marianne, Elinor's passionate younger sister, to be a little more sensible and self-controlled, it also teaches both Marianne *and* Elinor to have a value for Mrs. Jennings, whom they dismiss at first as 'vulgar', but whom the novel I think sees in a more complex way from the start.⁷ Here is her introduction: 'Mrs. Jennings [...] was a good-humoured, merry, fat, elderly woman, who talked a great deal, seemed very happy, and rather vulgar' (I vii 40). Okay: she *is* vulgar. She is nosy and noisy and more interested in enjoying herself than in how the way she enjoys herself appears to other people. But the shape of the sentence there is interesting, for 'good humour', a very important category in Jane Austen, is the first quality named, and 'rather vulgar' the last. Elinor and Marianne, nicely brought up, about as far themselves from vulgarity as it is possible to get and still be alive, place more emphasis on that last quality perhaps than the narrative does. I won't say too much more about vulgarity now—it's a characteristic that was obviously very significant in the social world Jane Austen lived in and wants to describe—but it is worth keeping that introduction to Mrs. Jennings in mind when we get on to that other vulgar mother, Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Mrs. Jennings has two daughters: one, Lady Middleton, married to Sir John, the man who provides the Dashwood family with their new home in Devon, Barton Cottage, the setting of much of the first part of the novel, is her antithesis. Lady Middleton was probably one of those girls whose education has raised her enough above her parents' manners so that she feels horror and embarrassment at them, and who lacks the intelligence and good sense to make her, as she gets beyond the teen years, revise that early judgment. Lady Middleton's beauty and elegant clothes and superficial good manners have enabled her to marry a baronet, and she is not going to admit her own origins. All the Jennings's money, which seems to be considerable, was earned in trade and in the City and the Jennings girls grew up a step or two away from the warehouses where their merchant father's goods were stored while the money was

7 For a detailed consideration of Mrs. Jennings, see Chapter 4.

piling up. While Lady Middleton tolerates her mother, Sir John, her husband, *adores* his mother-in-law, who is like him in her boisterous good humour and her pleasure in society; there are wonderful scenes in the novel of the good fun that mother and son-in-law have together, well captured in the 1995 film with Emma Thompson.⁸ But, as for Mrs. Jennings and Lady Middleton, there is no intimacy between them; Lady Middleton spends all her time ‘humouring her children’ and trying to control her husband’s sociability and her mother’s speech, without too much expenditure of energy (unlike her mother she is indolent except where her children are concerned).⁹ When Mrs. Jennings learns from twelve-year-old Margaret Dashwood, who is an active but unmalicious gossip (Mrs. Jennings is always winking out information from children and servants) that Elinor’s suitor’s name ‘begins with an F’, Marianne anticipates the ‘raillery’ that will follow and tries ‘with great warmth’ to silence Margaret (I xii 72). There is then a neat pincer movement as Lady Middleton and Colonel Brandon, she from squeamishness, he from a kind wish to spare Elinor embarrassment, try to change the subject to the weather ‘and much was said on the subject of rain by both of them’ (I xii 72). I think—this is an early work, and it is not quite perfect, perhaps, but it is wonderfully economical with dialogue—that there is not a single example in the novel of an exchange between Mrs. Jennings and her eldest daughter.

With her younger daughter, though, with plump, pretty Charlotte, now married to Mr. Palmer, a rising MP, she is much more intimate. Here is a second example of a daughter being like her mother, and this similarity bringing them close: Mrs. Palmer’s likeness to her mother is expressed as a complete *dissimilarity* to her older sister, Lady Middleton, who is ‘totally unlike her in every respect’ (I xix 123). Here are mother and daughter together:

8 *Sense and Sensibility*, dir. by Ang Lee (Sony Pictures Releasing, 1995).

9 In Volume I, Chapter vii, Austen briskly accounts for different ways of spending time: ‘Sir John was a sportsman, Lady Middleton a mother. He hunted and shot, and she humoured her children; and these were their only resources. Lady Middleton had the advantage of being able to spoil her children all the year round, while Sir John’s independent employments were in existence only half the time’ (I vii 38). Later, in Chapter xxi, we are told that the Miss Steeles also devote a lot of time to humouring Lady Middleton’s children: ‘With her children they were in continual raptures, extolling their beauty, courting their notice, and humouring all their whims’ (I xxi 138).

Mrs. Jennings, in the mean time, talked on as loud as she could, and continued her account of their surprise, the evening before, on seeing their friends, without ceasing till every thing was told. Mrs. Palmer laughed heartily at the recollection of their astonishment, and every body agreed, two or three times over, that it had been quite an agreeable surprise.

‘You may believe how glad we all were to see them,’ added Mrs. Jennings, leaning forwards towards Elinor, and speaking in a low voice as if she meant to be heard by no one else, though they were seated on different sides of the room; ‘but, however, 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 upon 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!’

Mrs. Palmer laughed, and said it would not do her any harm.

‘She expects to be confined in February,’ continued Mrs. Jennings. (I xix 124)

Mrs. Palmer is about six months pregnant, at a time when pregnancy was beginning to be an awkward subject in mixed company.¹⁰ The Dashwoods, though not encouraging, are polite about this, but ‘Lady Middleton could no longer endure such a conversation’, and struggles to change the subject, while her younger sister laughs and her mother chatters inextinguishably on (I xix 125). In this novel about sisters which uses dialogue so carefully, there is, again, not a single exchange of dialogue between this pair of sisters: Lady Middleton says not a word to either of the women with whom she spent her childhood and adolescence. Although, unlike her mother and sister, Lady Middleton is not a great comic figure, comedy arises in the novel from time to time because, though the Dashwood sisters have quickly found that Lady Middleton is so ‘cold and insipid’ that it is impossible to get to know her, her icy good breeding is sometimes welcome just as a relief from the noise and innuendoes of Mrs. Palmer and Mrs. Jennings.¹¹ I’ll say more

10 For further discussion of the awkwardness of pregnancy, see Jenny Davidson, *Reading Jane Austen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108367974>, pp. 124–25.

11 Austen’s summary is: that ‘the cold insipidity of Lady Middleton was [...] particularly repulsive’ to the Dashwood sisters (I vii 41). Interestingly, Elinor believes that Marianne’s warmth forces her to project these characteristics onto Edward Ferrars: “‘You decide on his imperfections so much in the mass,’” replied Elinor, “and so

about the way Mrs. Jennings's good qualities, and even Mr. and Mrs. Palmer's, gradually become apparent, as we look at the more important mother and daughters in the novel, the Dashwoods.

Because I love Jane Austen's heroines, I especially love *Sense and Sensibility*, in which you get two. As well as the entertaining minor figures we've been looking at, there is the beautiful, bereft, grieving Dashwood family, two teenage sisters and one little girl, and their attractive, charming, sensitive mother, a widow in her early forties, for as I've already said, *Sense and Sensibility* begins with a death, the death of Mr. Dashwood, a death which leaves his wife and children—and the novel makes no bones about this—nearly impoverished, homeless, living on the income of ten thousand pounds. Dying, Mr. Dashwood extracted a promise of aid for them from his son from his first marriage, John, but the reader learns as soon as Chapter ii that that promise means just nothing, which is what John and Fanny will do for 'half blood' or 'half sisters' (I ii 9–10). Since we have already discussed how Fanny can gleefully countenance the disinheriting of her actual brother, Edward, we should not be surprised that half-sisters don't rate a share of her scanty goodwill: "'They will have no carriage, no horses, and hardly any servants; they will keep no company [...] Only conceive how comfortable they will be!'" she purrs contentedly (I ii 14).

We spend most of the novel with the two Dashwood sisters, and especially with Elinor, but how did two sisters so close in age, so fond of each other, so alike in intelligence and refinement and sensitivity (this is not the kind of contrast we see in the Bennet family, where the younger daughters seem to have come from a different gene pool), how did these two close, affectionate sisters, come to be such different beings? Let's backtrack: Elinor, at nineteen, is the advisor to her mother, whose 'eagerness of mind' means that at forty or so Mrs. Dashwood 'had yet to learn' that self-governance Elinor has acquired: 'The resemblance between [Marianne] and her mother was very great' (I i 7).

much on the strength of your own imagination, that the commendation I am able to give of him is comparatively cold and insipid" (I x 61). Coldness and insipidity, however, remain firmly attributed to Lady Middleton: 'Lady Middleton was equally pleased with Mrs. Dashwood. There was a kind of cold hearted selfishness on both sides, which mutually attracted them; and they sympathized with each other in an insipid propriety of demeanour, and a general want of understanding' (II xii 261).

This is the pattern we saw in the Jennings family, too, where the eldest daughter forms herself in contrast to her mother and the younger in similarity. Of course, the Dashwoods are serious and not comic characters, though I think there is comedy in them, also, in the mother's eagerness. Her rapid reactions, her disgust at Fanny Dashwood's arrogance, wonderfully combine a sympathetic presentation of a woman who has to see herself supplanted by another woman in her own home, and a satirical one, as she impractically starts to throw her things into a suitcase as soon as Fanny arrives, and almost every time Fanny's passive hostility turns aggressive, and has to be reasoned with by nineteen-year-old Elinor, who knows they have nowhere to go. Or Mrs. Dashwood's impulsive assumption that because Edward seems to like Elinor that they will be married; above all, her equally impulsive trust that, as the novel progresses, Marianne, who is sixteen going on seventeen, can make all her own decisions about her romantic life. This is both looked at with a kind of analytic concern—she is a likeable woman throughout—and made funny.

Let's look at her as Marianne's mother, then as Elinor's. Like Mrs. Ferrars and Mrs. Jennings, whom she does not resemble in other ways, she finds it easiest to sympathize with the daughter who most 'resembles her'. When Marianne, as is characteristic of her sixteen-year-old's self-absorption, murmurs, "'the more I know of the world, the more I am convinced that I shall never see a man whom I can really love. I require so much!'", Mrs. Dashwood responds encouragingly:

'Remember, my love, you are not yet seventeen. 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!' (I iii 20–21)

More like a friend than a mother, Mrs. Dashwood does not seem to have the word 'caution' in her vocabulary. Not a word is heard, between these pretty impoverished women, of anything practical about what might be desirable in a marriage partner in the way of profession, family or fortune; of course this means that nothing mercenary is ever said, either, and heroines in Jane Austen must walk a tightrope between their beliefs, in love and honour, and the cold facts of their need for financial security. Unlike Fanny Dashwood and her husband, who talk

about nothing but money, they must manage this with only the faintest acknowledgement of their financial predicament.

When Marianne *does* meet a man who satisfies all that she requires, both she and her mother approve him without hesitation, but also without vulgar husband-hunting. Marianne meets Willoughby in the most romantic way possible—he rescues her after a fall on a storm-tossed hill and carries her home in his arms—and when the Dashwoods hear that he is “‘very much worth catching’”, Mrs. Dashwood disavows her daughters’ desire to ‘catch’, not just Willoughby, but any man: “‘It is not an employment to which they have been brought up. Men are very safe with us, let them be ever so rich’” (I ix 52–53).

Only Elinor has any reservations, and Elinor is uncomfortably aware her reservations about Willoughby might be founded in her own uncertainties about Edward and might even involve some envy that ‘this was the season of happiness to Marianne’, as she and Willoughby tear around the country in his gig, which has room only for two, and openly seek each other’s company without reserve or hesitation (I xi 64). But Elinor is worried. She thinks it is wrong for them, with no official engagement, to show so openly their preference for one another; wrong for them to show, also quite openly, their indifference to the opinion of others and their sense of happy superiority to less glamorous figures such as Colonel Brandon, who also, quietly, unsuccessfully, loves Marianne. Mrs. Dashwood, though, at least a quarter of a century older and more experienced than Elinor, is not troubled: ‘Mrs. Dashwood entered into all their feelings with a warmth which left her no inclination for checking this excessive display of them’ (I xi 64). Even when Willoughby suddenly and inexplicably leaves for London, without making his intentions clear to Marianne or to her family, Mrs. Dashwood will not question Marianne as to whether they are engaged: “‘I would not attempt to force the confidences of anyone, of a child much less’” (I xvi 98). Marianne will suffer in her self-imposed silence for months, will in fact nearly die of the after-effects of this suffering, and her mother will still cling to this sense of romantic delicacy about her daughter’s feelings. And not only Marianne’s: when it becomes evident that Elinor and Edward are not heading straight toward marriage, either, indeed, when it becomes known that he has long been engaged to another girl, Mrs. Dashwood is still too delicate-minded to bring up the subject.

We might want to ask, isn't there an element of cowardice in her not seeking more confidence from Marianne or from Elinor? What do we think about her maturity and responsibility as a parent? She never becomes an unsympathetic figure, never loses her charm, does she? But I feel the novel really wants us to scrutinize her behaviour here. I wonder whether, especially in the case of Elinor, there is not real neglect as well as cowardice. Even Elinor, so good at forgetting herself, wonders if her mother ever does remember her earlier hopes for herself and Edward. Though Elinor continually tries to play down her own sufferings, she is surprised at the ease with which her subterfuge succeeds at convincing her mother!

Throughout the novel there will be contrasts between the Dashwoods' extreme sensitivity to each other's feelings, a sensitivity which amounts to 'reserve', a quality Jane Austen is ambivalent about, does not wholly approve, and the boisterous openness of, on the one hand, Mrs. Jennings and Sir John ("let's have no secrets between friends") and, on the other, the two husband-hunting Steele sisters, who display an interesting combination of apparent openness—they know each other's secrets—and slyness—one way they know this is by listening at doors. But the combination in Mrs. Dashwood of unrestrained admiration for feeling as a guide, and restraint about investigating where that feeling has taken her favourite child, is very nearly lethal.

When Mrs. Dashwood finally becomes practical it is with a vengeance, as, after Marianne's illness she begins to plan her marriage to Colonel Brandon, which is accompanied by a shocking disregard for the facts of the past ("there was always a something—if you remember,—in Willoughby's eyes at times, which I did not like") and the earlier comment among the Dashwood women that "thirty-five has nothing to do with matrimony" is conveniently forgotten now (III ix 383; I viii 45). She continues the tunnel vision about Elinor's feelings for Edward. Having so much else to worry about, Mrs. Dashwood does not find it convenient to worry about Elinor, too, and when the supposed news of Edward's marriage to Lucy breaks upon them she sees, almost stunned, 'that in Elinor she might have a daughter suffering almost as much' as Marianne (III xi 403). There is a wonderful scene when Mrs. Dashwood and Elinor sit together in silence while Mrs. Dashwood takes in not only

how much Elinor has suffered, but how much she has chosen to ignore that suffering.

Mrs. Dashwood, whether or not she is a good mother, is a marvellous creation on Jane Austen's part: a woman who aims at a kind of heroic, romantic closeness with her children but who is often prevented by her own powerful fantasies from being in any real contact with either of them. The happy ending that comes for both daughters is as much good luck for her and for them (as opposed to good sense) as are the happy endings of *Pride and Prejudice*. In that novel, published in 1813 'By the Author of "Sense and Sensibility"', we have one of the most famous mothers in literature: a mother not charming or clever, and floridly, vividly comic; and again a mother who has favourites among her children, and whose favouritism is even more dangerously bestowed than in *Sense and Sensibility*.

Mrs. Bennet, like Mrs. Jennings, is vulgar, and obsessed with marriage, but there the resemblance ends: for Mrs. Jennings is as happy as Mrs. Bennet is fretful and plaintive. In contrast to Mrs. Jennings's plump contentment is Mrs. Bennet's 'nervousness'. Mrs. Jennings has good sense: at the stage in the novel when everyone, with a variety of emotions, thinks that the disinherited Edward Ferrars is going to marry Lucy Steele, Mrs. Jennings is realistic about the fact that with an income of only a couple of hundred pounds a year they would only be able to afford 'a stout girl of all works', rather than the two or three servants that a larger income could maintain (III ii 314). Mrs. Jennings is thus commonsensical, in her way, but Mrs. Bennet is not. Mrs. Bennet is a lawyer's daughter who cannot be made to understand the nature of an entail, even though an entail was one of the commonest of legal arrangements for landed property, and she must have grown up hearing the term. As a companion, Mrs. Bennet is peevish (scolding one of her daughters for coughing); and as a neighbour she is competitive, boasting embarrassingly that her daughters are prettier, her drawing room larger, and her cuts of meat better cooked than those of the other inhabitants of Hertfordshire.

Because she is such an embarrassing mother, making it clear to everyone whom she meets how desperate she is to have her daughters married to rich and eligible men, it is the sensitive, discerning daughters, Elizabeth and Jane, whom one most often thinks of her as failing: she

wishes Lizzy to marry the dull, plodding, silly and selfish Mr. Collins, whom she cannot love; she wants Jane to marry the man she does love, but only because he is rich; and yet, keen as she is for them to be married, it is her 'want of connection' as Mr. Darcy says, coupled with her 'total want of propriety', to quote Mr. Darcy once more, which again and again jeopardize their chances to marry anyone at all (II xii 220).

But then: let's think about marriage and mothers in both novels. In *Sense and Sensibility* there is a contrast between the romantic and delicate Mrs. Dashwood who has not brought her daughters up to be husband-hunters; but, since at the time it was almost impossible to bring them up for any other profession, it feels as if her thinking on the topic was insufficiently clear—even what is today called 'being in denial' and then was known as being deluded. Commonsensical Mrs. Jennings, having married off her two daughters, 'had now therefore nothing else to do but to marry all the rest of the world [...] she was always anxious to get a good husband for every pretty girl' (I viii 43). This generosity is in strong contrast to Mrs. Bennet's concern only with her own family of daughters. But Mrs. Jennings's situation is unusual in Jane Austen: most of the mothers we meet are anxiously looking out for husbands for their daughters even if, like Mrs. Dashwood, they pretend, most of all to themselves, that they are not.

The other mother with whom Mrs. Bennet most often compares herself is Lady Lucas, the wife of Sir William Lucas, and the mother of Elizabeth's friend Charlotte, and because the Lucas girls are so plain, and are often stuck in the kitchen making mince pies (and presumably learning how to run a household, which none of the Bennet girls has been taught), Mrs. Bennet feels securely superior in her relationship with Lady Lucas, who is not rich and is 'not too clever to be a valuable neighbour to Mrs. Bennet' and not likely to get the jump on her as mother of the bride (I v 19). With what horror, then, does Mrs. Bennet see Charlotte Lucas step into the breach left by Lizzy's refusal of Mr. Collins, becoming Mrs. Collins. Neither Mrs. Bennet nor Lady Lucas seems to see Mr. Collins's stupidity as a drawback, but then, unlike Mrs. Bennet, Lady Lucas is herself married to a very stupid man, and presumably knows it has its compensations, as Charlotte's later depicted contentment seems to suggest, and of course among those compensations, in this particular case, is that Charlotte will be Mrs. Bennet's successor as mistress of

Longbourn! Lady Lucas and her plain daughters are able to turn the tables very effectively on Mrs. Bennet and her pretty ones.

And there is that other 'her ladyship' in *Pride and Prejudice*, who is also the mother of a daughter: Lady Catherine de Bourgh. I am going to close with even more discussion of the weaknesses, as a mother, of Mrs. Bennet, but before I do let us examine Lady Catherine, also seeking a husband for her daughter, though Miss de Bourgh is independently wealthy and therefore has no financial need for one. Though more partial to, and more praising of, her only daughter than any other mother in Jane Austen, even doting Mrs. Dashwood or boastful Mrs. Bennet, Lady Catherine, continually makes remarks such as, "'Anne would have been a delightful performer, had her health allowed her to learn'" (II viii 197). This sort of daunting, inhibiting, exacting praise, it would seem, has crushed the life out of the poor girl—'thin and small [...] sickly and cross'—since in the novel this poor cipher never utters a word! (II v 180). Her mother does all the talking for her, and does almost everything else for her also, substituting her own prodigious energy for her daughter's lack of it, and one really has to wonder whether that volcanic maternal energy is not the source of the daughter's exhaustion? My own best wish for Miss de Bourgh is that she and Charlotte should form a close female friendship which will give some life to the poor dejected young girl and provide an outlet for Charlotte aside from pigs and poultry!

But it is worth making the comparison between Lady Catherine and Mrs. Bennet, for though Mrs. Bennet constantly shames her two eldest daughters she has not squashed them as Lady Catherine has hers. Jane and Elizabeth have somehow grown up intelligent, confident, and, what is more, morally discerning young women, who judge rightly (Elizabeth most of the time, Jane always) about the difference between right and wrong. However, Mrs. Bennet is not only the mother of Jane and Elizabeth, but of three younger girls, and I want to end by looking at those three girls as daughters, and in particular, since Kitty is something of a nonentity, a pale, coughing copy of Lydia, at two of them, at Lydia and Mary, those total opposites, who, it would seem, are equally the victims of their mother's, or their parents', bad parenting.

Lydia is another example, like the younger Jennings and Dashwood daughters in *Sense and Sensibility*, of a daughter who is prized because she is like her mother. And through Lydia we see what might have

drawn Mr. Bennet to make his tragic error in marriage, for though Lydia is not a great beauty as Mrs. Bennet must have been—Jane has inherited that—Lydia is full of life and energy, *joie de vivre* and something the novel rather doubtfully calls ‘high animal spirits’ but we might want to call VA VA VOOM! (I ix 49). Ready to dance, to laugh, to lark about at the drop of a hat, impulsive and with little ability to control her impulses. Again, like Marianne, she is a very full portrait of one type of adolescent girl, but it’s a type for which the world of Georgian England offers little scope aside from dancing and flirting. And, because her mother (and her father) have somehow left out of her education the fate that can befall a woman who takes flirting too far and risks engaging in sex outside marriage, that energy, that lack of self-control, could mean for her a terrible fate: without Mr. Darcy’s intervention and his money, to make Wickham marry her, she would ‘have come upon the town’ as a camp-follower, a prostitute abandoned by her first lover (this does happen, and to a gentleman’s daughter, in *Sense and Sensibility*) (III viii 342). Lydia’s brush with ruin is as much due, as Mr. Bennet and his two thinking elder daughters know, to the fact that no one has attempted to instil any principles, or even any realistic dread of consequences, in her while she was growing up in a gentleman’s family in the genteel south of England. Mrs. Bennet, who is delighted her daughter will be married at sixteen, to no matter whom or after no matter what an unseemly period of living together unmarried, and, as the narrative emphasizes, is more outraged that Lydia has no new clothes than that she almost had no husband, has no real principles; but Mr. Bennet has (III vii 343). He simply has not bothered to impart them to his younger children. Lydia has been allowed to bring herself up.

Mary, of course, full of ‘observations of thread-bare morality’ would seem to be the opposite case, but is she not equally neglected, particularly by her father? (I xiii 67). And not only neglected, but mocked and undermined as she attempts—and this is painful to the re-reader—as she is clearly attempting to gain her father’s approval (it can’t be her mother’s!) by what the novel rather dismissively calls ‘the solidity of her reflections’ (I v 21). Mary is plain like the Lucas girls, but unlike them is not taught housewifely skills, and tries instead to shine via the dangerous arena of accomplishments. She doggedly practises the piano, reads worthy books, and (presumably) keeps

a journal or a commonplace book no one else will ever want to look into, in order to record her reflections on what she reads, and probably to chalk up her hours of practice. But, as her father is also bookish, it seems unquestionable that what she wants is a little attention and approval from him—and this she never gets. At the novel's end she is left unmarried, uninvited to Pemberley or to Jane's house or even to the Northern army camps where Lydia has set up her tent, and has become, by default, her mother's companion and not her father's. The very last words about her in the novel contain a characteristic Mr. Bennet shrug: 'it was suspected by her father that she submitted to the change'—from the steady pursuit of accomplishments to the society of her mother and the 'world' of the Meryton neighbours—'without much reluctance' (III xix 428). Again, this is a talk about mothers and not fathers, but I am never quite sure whether the novel shares this lack of interest in Mary or condemns Mr. Bennet for it.

I'll end here by asking why, in Jane Austen's novels, there are so few sensible mothers? The thoughtful older women we meet are either, like Mrs. Croft in *Persuasion*, childless, or like Mrs. Gardiner in *Pride and Prejudice*, the parents of children not yet old enough to be on the marriage market. Mothers of marriageable daughters are in almost every case woefully inadequate at providing guidance for their daughters, and in the novels we have looked at closely they not only do no good but actually do harm to the daughters they profess to, or really do, love. I'll remind you again that Jane Austen did not become a mother herself, and just slip in the rather interesting fact that she was, like Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, something of a daddy's girl herself. Her father had such a belief in the first, epistolary, version of *Pride and Prejudice* that, though it was by his teenage daughter, he took it upon himself to send it off to a publisher—who sent it back by return of post. Mrs. Austen, once the business of bringing up children and running a large household was behind her, seemed to drift more and more into a rather vaguely defined invalidism, though of course it was her husband who died suddenly and unexpectedly, and then her gifted daughter who fell ill and died at just past forty. It is not certain, but it is sometimes suggested, that one of the reasons her sister Cassandra destroyed most of Jane Austen's letters could be that they contained—not unloving, probably, because the whole family was very close and affectionate,

but perhaps unguarded—remarks about a mother who, because of her delicate health (though she survived her daughter by over ten years) commandeered the sofa in the drawing room at Chawton Cottage, while Jane Austen, writing *Sanditon*, and herself dying, was obliged to put up with an arrangement of ‘two or three chairs’.¹² For those of you who have not read the wonderful fragments that are left of *Sanditon*, it is a satire about hypochondria.¹³

12 ‘Her reasons for this might have been left to be guessed, but for the importunities of a little niece, which obliged her to explain that if she had shown any inclination to use the sofa, her mother might have scrupled being on it so much as was good for her’. J. E. Austen Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen by her Nephew* (London: Folio, 1989), p. 147. For further discussion of hypochondria, see Chapter 6.

13 For further discussion of *Sanditon*, see Chapter 13.

