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# A Study of Women through 18th-Century Literature: as Reflected by the Works of Jane Austen, Or, a Re-visioning

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A Study of Women through 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature: as Reflected by the Works of Jane Austen,  
Or, a Re-visioning

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Bridgewater State University

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A Study of Women through 18<sup>th</sup>-Century Literature: as Reflected by the Works of Jane Austen,  
Or, a Re-visioning

Two styles of writing dominate eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British literature and drama: Restoration comedies—which characterize the former half of the century—followed by vastly different sentimental comedies—which characterize the latter half of the century. This shift in style is most evident in the dramatic representations of females and femininity which drastically change throughout the course of the century. Typically, the earlier Restoration comedies feature willfully independent and bawdy heroines who unabashedly engage in sexually explicit affairs. The latter sentimental comedies, on the other hand, feature cautious, dependent, and explicitly chaste heroines, who—much unlike their lascivious counterparts—engage in few self-serving activities. Such dramatic shifts in art, including the aforementioned transformation in representations of femininity, are a direct result of macro-level revolutions in culture expressed through changes in social norms—or accepted normative behavior. Thus, this particular shift in literary representations of femininity is indicative of a similar shift in cultural expectation. In this way, the slow progression toward the greater cultural subjugation of women is encapsulated and preserved through literature. Accordingly, modern-day readers of eighteenth-century literature encounter vastly divergent heroines who exhibit dissimilar

personalities, engage in differing conflicts, and exhibit diverse ambitions as the status of women changes. Such incongruent representations of femininity are formed through an ongoing process of recreation in which the created self may either comply with or rebel against larger socio-cultural definitions of acceptable femininity.

Of *all* the literary representations of eighteenth and early nineteenth century femininity, those of Jane Austen are perhaps most exemplary of the conflict surrounding female gender ideology in eighteenth-century society. Her value in this respect results from her ability to formulate and explore dichotomies—as is reflected in her diverse heroines. Put more simply, Austen is able to create both the *proper lady* and her *monstrous counterpart*. She is able to generate heroines who conform to the social norm and by the same pen also create heroines who rebel against the social norm; thus she offers a wholly integrative exploration of the concept of femininity by exploring the culturally ideal as well as the culturally taboo. The diverse montage of heroines that is encapsulated in an entire century is also encapsulated in the collective works of Austen alone. In particular, Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice* is emblematic of the, then taboo, outspoken heroine of the Restoration comedies while Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park* is emblematic of the, then ideal, meek heroine of the sentimental comedies. As such, Elizabeth and Fanny stand in direct contrast: Elizabeth is loud and forceful—as women were once *allowed* to be during the cultural era of the Restoration comedies, while Fanny is quiet and docile—as women were, at the turn of the nineteenth century, now *expected* to be in the cultural era of the sentimental.

As a result of the extreme variations in the basic character of her heroines—including their thoughts, behaviors, emotions, drives, and interactions—Austen's fictive novels collectively conform to *and* rebel against the dominant cultural ideals of the time. Austen both effectively

propagates *and* dismantles normative social behaviors through her novel writing. However, this is perhaps unsurprising in that Austen's lifestyle itself both conforms to and quietly rebels against the cultural ideal of the *proper lady*. Austen held a unique social position, as Mary Poovey recognizes in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, in which she was both a proper lady *and* a woman writer—where identification as a woman writer was technically acceptable, yet ultimately frowned upon. In this sense female writers such as Austen were acceptable *de jure*, or by law, yet unacceptable *de facto*, or by custom (Professor Diana Fox). In fact, there are many instances of discrepancy between that which is *theoretically* acceptable and that which is *actually* acceptable in society, as discovered through an examination of the texts *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Ultimately, Austen's personal struggle with adherence to, and rebellion against, the cultural feminine ideal is reflected in these two particular novels, and, ideological tensions are blatantly evident in their comparison.

As is the case with Restoration comedies and sentimental comedies, the cultural evolution of femininity is most evident through an examination of the heroines of each novel. The growing tensions surrounding the *proper lady* ideology of the eighteenth century are most pronounced through a comparison of the basic character traits of each heroine. Even more specifically, an in-depth exploration of the pivotal, parallel, *rejection scenes* found in each novel—where Elizabeth *and* Fanny both reject marriage proposals from male suitors—is necessary to properly understanding *how* each heroine's basic character traits are formulated, internalized, and perpetuated. Finally, a similar examination of each heroine in relation to the patriarchal authority of the novel in which she appears will ultimately reinforce the reader's overall understanding of gender politics in eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century British society by revealing the subtle ways by which women were able to integrate the cultural

feminine ideal without entirely forfeiting their personal identities—however vague such personal identities may appear as a result of the shadow cast on them by the *proper lady*. Ultimately, as Austen reveals in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*, even the most virtuous *proper lady* was able to maintain an alternate personal identity apart from the cultural ideal—despite how vague and imperceptible such an alternate identity may, in some instances, initially appear.

Before exploring the obvious tension in Austen's work and the less obvious means by which it is alleviated, it is essential to first determine the social definition of a *proper lady* according to eighteenth-century cultural codes of propriety. For this a consultation with the literature of Mary Poovey is essential. Poovey offers explanations of cultural codes of conduct in: *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen*, and ultimately concludes that women in the eighteenth century were taught from infancy to exhibit both a lack of "vanity" and a general lack of "passion" (Poovey 21). Put more realistically, women were expected to appear unnaturally humble and emotionally docile (Poovey 21). Essentially, the ideal woman possessed absolutely no "assertive self" at all," and Poovey goes on to argue that this "definition" of proper feminine conduct was "reinforced" by nearly every social "institution" in existence (Poovey 21). As such, almost every female social "experience" was somehow designed to aid in conformity to the ideology of the *proper lady* so that, eventually, to "define oneself [according to] some other [behavioral] category" was to effectively "move wholly outside of social definition" as it existed at the time and, in turn, to "risk" being "designated a 'monster,'" as opposed to a woman (Poovey 23).

The social repercussions of rejecting the feminine ideal and "mov[ing] wholly outside of social definition" are perhaps much more severe than the modern-day reader may comprehend.

Such an ostracized individual would, upon acquiring the designation of social "monster," become a *non-person* and, in that sense, metaphorically cease to exist. Poovey's claims about the severity of nonconformance to culture and exclusion from society are restated by anthropologist Morton Klass. Klass posits that the deciding factor which separates humans from animals is the invention of culture, which subsequently arises from participation in social interaction, or, inclusion in society. Thus, Klass reveals in an integrative discussion on culture, society, and personhood the difference between an *individual* and a *person*. According to Klass a human "*individual*" is a single, semi-conscious entity that is part of a collective whole, while, a human "*person*" is a much more complex entity with multiple levels of consciousness, exhibited in extensive awareness of self and other during social interaction. Klass then goes on to reveal more explicitly that: that which "transforms a human *individual* into a human *person*" is the acquisition of culture incumbent upon inclusion in a society (Klass 17-36). Put more simply, social inclusion is imperative to the creation and maintenance of *personhood* in the individual.

And so, the late-eighteenth-century woman was required, in the extreme sense of the word, to—at least outwardly—embody the social ideal of modesty, reserve, virtue, piety, charity, and meekness, as envisioned by the male. To be deemed otherwise was not merely socially unacceptable, but resulted in a very literal social death by means of ostracism where personhood was ultimately revoked by society. Thus, the undesired creation of such "monster[ous]" women was controlled by the dominant social institutions of the time—some of which have been identified by the discipline of sociology. According to David Newman in *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life*, sociologists define social institutions as those dominant institutions which oversee the implementation of established rules of behavior in a given society. Some active social institutions at the time were: the family, education, religion, politics, and

economics—all of which combined to repress women (Newman 121-215). For instance, in tandem with these oppressive social institutions, constant bombardment from conduct books, magazines, periodicals, sermons and other forms of eighteenth-century social media propagated the ideal—*proper lady*—to the feminine public. As a result, the majority of women experienced an internalization of social norms, in a process that anthropologists and sociologists describe as a *colonization of the mind* where the ideal (in this case the feminine ideal) is normalized and accepted by the oppressed.

Nevertheless, a small minority of women arose during the eighteenth century who not only protested against but also attempted to effectively dismantle the male-constructed ideal of the *proper lady*; thus there existed even at this time a feminist counterculture whose ideals existed in direct contrast to those of the majority. Among these learned female radicals termed "bluestockings" by their male contemporaries and larger society were Mary Robinson, Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelly, and, some would argue, Jane Austen—among others (Poovey 37). Such women openly criticized the restrictive female gender norms of the time, rebelling against the "custom from the earliest periods of antiquity" that has to this day "endeavored to place the female...in...subordinate ranks" (Robinson, *A Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination*). Austen, however, though seemingly similarly "concern[ed]" with many of the same "issues" as her outspoken contemporaries, nevertheless ultimately "spent her entire life in the very heart of propriety" (Poovey 172). This unique social position, as both conformist and non-conformist is evident in the much more subtle critique of society offered through her novels as compared to the less subtle and radical critiques of her contemporaries (Poovey 172). In fact, her unique social circumstances undeniably reflect the uncertainty she may have felt and may account for the conflicting social ideals symbolized and propagated by



the heroines in *Mansfield Park* and *Pride and Prejudice*. Nevertheless, while some readers may question Austen's allegiance to the feminist cause of the eighteenth century in light of her social position and at times misinterpreted narratives, a close examination of Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price reveals Austen's critique of the ideology of the *proper lady*.

And so Austen's fictive—or perhaps not-so-fictive worlds—as inhabited by Elizabeth Bennet and Fanny Price appear a means by which Austen is able to exercise the control otherwise denied to her by the patriarchal society in which she lived. Her novels may even serve as a re-envisioning of society in which women are afforded genuine powers of authority and control; if so however, *Mansfield Park*, with its overtly submissive female protagonist, Fanny Price, appears a strange protest against patriarchy. If anything, its meek female protagonist initially appears to reinforce patriarchal assumptions about femininity. In fact, Professor Stephanie Eddleman highlights Fanny's obvious weaknesses in the article "Mad as the devil but smiling sweetly: repressed female anger in *Mansfield Park*," where she specifically describes Fanny as no more than a "timid little pushover" (Eddleman). However, Eddleman goes on to attribute such character traits as "timidity" to the direct repression of anger promoted as idyllic of the *proper lady*. Eddleman reveals the means by which Fanny's self-repression and resultant character traits directly originate in eighteenth-century idyllic notions of femininity.

As discussed above, certain social institutions at the time served to culturally condition eighteenth-century Britons—both males and females alike—to believe that it was not merely highly "inappropriate, unladylike," and even "sinful" for females to "express anger" or in fact *any* overly passionate emotion at all but also literally unnatural (Eddleman). It is for this reason that Fanny first *contains* and then *internalizes* not only her anger but also her other passionate emotions in a process Eddleman describes as "de-selfing," which results in the "loss of self" or

personhood (Eddleman). In other words, through the process of “de-selfing”—by which an individual first *contains* personal thoughts and emotions and then *internalizes* socially-acceptable thoughts and emotions until, ultimately, those of the society become those of the individual—the “person” of which Klass describes is effectively stripped of their personhood until they become little more than a sterile “individual.”

As such, both Klass and Eddleman reveal that the eighteenth century-feminine ideal—the *proper lady*—in truth, lacked all forms of personhood or personality. This entire process of containment and internalization resulted in the creation of a meek and emotionally repressed non person—or by eighteenth—century standards of femininity: the ideal woman. According to Eddleman Austen's *Mansfield Park* therefore serves as a "virtual parable of the life of a woman in a patriarchal society." Its heroine Fanny Price appears to entirely possess the qualities of the proper lady in that she is “exceedingly timid and shy...shrinking from notice” into the background of life at Mansfield (Eddleman and Austen *Mansfield Park* 28). Eddleman also concludes through an examination of Miss Price in regards to the cultural context from which she arose, both fictive and real, that women in a highly patriarchal society are unable to outwardly express anger and so, after first internalizing it, as does Fanny, women then rationalize their thoughts and emotions as arising from personal fault or failing. It is for this reason that Fanny's "rationalizations” of her every reprimand “place the blame squarely on her own shoulders and allow her anger to remain unexpressed" and directed toward the self (Eddleman). This troubling phenomenon of containment and internalization, requisite of the ideal woman, is most accurately depicted in the pivotal scene in *Mansfield Park* in which Fanny refuses Henry Crawford's proposal of marriage, as presented by her uncle and guardian, Sir Bertram, to his own (Sir Bertram's) vehement anger and disappointment.

Sir Bertram—the commanding head of house who symbolizes the whole of patriarchy in the authority he wields over all inhabitants of the novel—is aroused to anger at Fanny's rejection of Crawford's suit despite the fact that it is theoretically acceptable for an eighteenth-century woman to refuse a suitor. This rejection practice is acceptable *de jure*, or by law, yet unacceptable *de facto*, or by custom. Thus, to his detriment, Fanny effectively exercises her atypical form of "power" known as "her negative," or, her right to "resist," even "reject, the proposal of a suitor" (Poovey 29). Again, as depicted by the events of the novel, such a denial, while acceptable in theory, is ultimately unacceptable in practice at the time (Poovey 29). It is for this reason that when Fanny exercises "her negative" in *Mansfield Park* by rejecting Mr. Crawford's suit, however weakly, her uncle Bertram finds her behavior not merely "unaccountable" but also "disgusting" and utterly "offensive" in that she has committed an offense against custom, if not against law (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 261-262). In truth, the very fact that Fanny shows, however inadequately, that she "can and will decide for [her]self" is, to her uncle, "wilful[y] perverse" and a "gross violation" of the "duty and respect" owed him as a result of his familial benevolence in taking her in and acting as her guardian (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 262).

Perhaps Sir Bertram's upset over Fanny's refusal results from the responsibilities he has acquired upon her adoption to care for her both socially and financially until either her death or her marriage—at which point such responsibilities would then become the social and financial burden of her husband as women were deemed utterly incapable of thinking, let alone caring, for themselves. Such responsibility is inescapable to Sir Bertram as the patriarchal head of Mansfield Park, thus "in her uncle's house there would have been a regulation," a strict "propriety," an unwavering "attention towards everybody" (Austen *Mansfield Park Introduction*

4). Ironically, however, even as upholder of familial order there are many truths that the presumably omniscient and omnipotent Sir Bertram, patriarchal symbol of authority in the novel, either intentionally refuses to acknowledge *or* unwittingly remains in ignorance of, particularly the hidden truths behind Fanny's adamant refusal of Mr. Crawford's suit. The most important reason for her denial, in fact, pertains to her awareness of Crawford's hidden character, apparently evident only to Fanny herself, and the reader of course, but not Sir Bertram.

Fanny and the reader alone are privy to that which the other characters remain either willingly or, as presumed in the case of Sir Bertram, unwittingly ignorant of: particularly, Mr. Crawford's ill intent. When, after a prolonged flirtation with her engaged cousin Maria, Crawford inevitably discovers an interest in Fanny he approaches her "offering himself, hand, fortune" and "everything to her acceptance" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 250). Nevertheless, she ultimately "considers it all nonsense, as mere trifling and gallantry...meant only to deceive for the hour" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 250). After all, as Fanny has previously come to realize before the others in the novel, who are easily charmed by both Crawford siblings: "such were his habits" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 250). "Such were his habits," in fact, that Crawford displays little regard for the effect of his recent disfavor on the engaged Maria which is a result of increasingly-evident favor of her cousin Fanny. In accordance with his selfish character, which Fanny's astute observations allow her to comprehend much earlier than the others, Crawford regards his recent rejection of Maria as, to her, no more than "a bitter pill" that is "like other bitter pills" which will "have two moments ill flavor, and then be swallowed and forgotten" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 247-250). Crawford's insensitive presumptions indicate that not only have his favors been previously bestowed upon, and similarly revoked from, other women—but also that this has most likely occurred many times in the past. Thus Maria is presumably not the

first woman forced to swallow the "bitter pill" of Crawford's insincere flirtation, nor the first woman forced to suffer its "ill flavor" once his attentions have turned elsewhere. Thus, Fanny's "exceeding distress" experienced at the forceful presentation of his suite of marriage by her uncle and himself is, to the reader and Fanny herself at least, unsurprising and expected (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 250). In fact, her accurate estimation of his character proves her powers of discernment as more astute than not only her pitiable cousin Maria but also her supposedly superior uncle.

What *is* known, to the reader alone however and not to Fanny herself, is that despite her uncle's accusations regarding Fanny's supposedly detested "'willfulness of temper'" and "'self conceit,'" as well as her possession of that "independence of spirit which [*supposedly*] prevails so much in... young women, and which in young women is [not only] offensive [but also] disgusting beyond all common offense," is that she is in truth contrary to all of his accusations. In fact, her very physical and emotional reaction to her uncle's displeasure during the encounter, in which her refusal is spoken in a weak voice and accompanied by shivering of fear, inevitably prove otherwise (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 263). Yet, like most of the other characters in the novel, Sir Bertram suffers from self-imposed ignorance in regards to her true character. And so, along with describing Fanny as foolishly "self-willed" he continuously deplores her as "obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 263). In truth, however, blinded by his own inability to see the true character of either Crawford or Fanny, Sir Bertram is unable to comprehend the obvious: that Fanny is none of these things and is instead a *proper*, demure, lady—much more so in fact than his own willfully disobedient daughters, whose true natures he discovers by the conclusion of the novel.

During the rejection scene Fanny is described as replying to her uncle's queries

concerning her refusal of Crawford in a "faint" voice, and she is depicted as "looking down with fresh shame...for not liking Mr. Crawford," regardless of the logic of her ill regard (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 260-263). In fact, her shame ultimately increases during the encounter, especially after "such a picture as her uncle had drawn of him" as a most honorable and respectful suitor, had been presented to her despite its faultiness (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 260-263). Contrary to her exclusive knowledge of Mr. Crawford's *true* and *hidden* character as a nefarious individual—ultimately self serving and inarguably immoral—Fanny is nevertheless *outwardly* swayed to feelings of real and heartfelt, however momentary, "shame," even for an individual who she truthfully knows to be "evil" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 263). Despite her astute understanding of Crawford, in that "such were his habits, that he could do nothing without a mixture of evil," Fanny apparently ends the confrontation with her uncle unsure and ashamed of her correct assumptions about Crawford—such is the force of Sir Bertram's patriarchal influence and authority (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 263).

Nevertheless, Fanny's inherent intelligence, as proven by her estimation of Crawford, is—*presumably*—stripped of her through the patriarchal process known as the *colonization of the mind* in which her comprehensions are inevitably demeaned and undervalued as little more than willfully ignorant feminine fancy by her patriarchal uncle, who, as the dominant male authority in her life, wields control over her *very thoughts* (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 251). Thus, this scene allegedly depicts Fanny in the process of submitting to a colonization of the mind in which Sir Bertram's thoughts and opinions, reflective of patriarchal society as a whole, become her own. His intimidating power and control *is* evident in the physical responses he engenders in Fanny, which indicate the beginning of her assumed colonization of the mind. During the confrontation with her uncle, Fanny "sits trembling in wretchedness" and experiences her "heart s[i]nk under

the appalling prospect of [more] discussion, explanation, and probably non-conviction" (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 261). Thus, Sir Bertram appears to first exercise control over her emotions and body by engendering the involuntary physical responses indicative of fear, a fear which in turn influences her very thoughts and actions. In fact, by the conclusion of the conference with her uncle Fanny is "crying so bitterly" that it is as if her "heart" has literally been "broken by such a picture of what she appeared to him" regardless of how inaccurate "such accusations, so heavy, so multiplied, so rising in dreadful gradation!" are (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 263).

As a result of such emotional turmoil Fanny then ostensibly suffers a complete colonization of the mind when her thoughts begin to echo those of her uncle Bertram—at least momentarily. In fact, by the conclusion of the scene "such a picture as her uncle had drawn of him" began to form in Fanny's mind and made her "ashamed" of her refusal, even though such an image as is created by her uncle is known by her to be faulty (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 260-263). Thus, Sir Bertram conquers and enslaves Fanny's mind as easily as he enslaves the captives forced to work his plantation in the Indies and ultimately the final shame results from Fanny's understanding that her uncle, himself, truly "thought her all this;" to him she had "deceived his expectations; she had lost his good opinion," and so, she had similarly, temporarily, lost the good opinion of herself (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 263).

However, the privileged reader, unlike the now-desolate Fanny or the ignorant uncle Bertram, is well aware that her uncle's accusations concerning her supposed heedless independence appear utterly ludicrous. This is especially evident through a deeper examination of Fanny's physical and emotional responses to her uncle's ungrounded attack. Essentially, willfully independent women do not "sink" nor do they "tremble" as Fanny meekly does at the prospect of confrontation. This is evident in the actions and behaviors of the "bluestockings," or

the radical eighteenth century feminists who neither “sink” nor “tremble” in their assertive rejection of patriarchy. Similarly, neither do such willfully independent women perceive accusations of autonomous thought or action as "heavy" or "dreadful" crimes as does Sir Bertram and, after a colonization of the mind, as does Fanny. Again, this is evident in the writing of feminist bluestockings of the time. If anything, self-concerned women are unconcerned with causing offense to others and ultimately do not suffer over a perceived loss of the "good opinion" of those who seek to degrade or devalue them, and invariably rob them of the personhood patriarchal society seeks to withhold from them. Finally, young women with no regard or respect for their guardians or benefactors certainly do not fret over "deceiv[ing]" the "expectations" of those upon whom they depend, for, ideally, they depend wholly upon themselves and require neither a patron nor a benefactor.

Ironically, just as Fanny is seemingly robbed of personhood by the institution of patriarchy, Sir Bertram is robbed of comprehension. Sir Bertram's uncontested omnipotence, afforded him by the institution of patriarchy, comes at a great cost in that it directly robs him of a competent understanding of female characters in the novel such as Fanny. Essentially, as a patriarchal figure in the novel Sir Bertram, like Fanny, has himself internalized the cultural construction of the *proper lady* and thus underestimates his female daughters and his female niece. It is obvious that both males *and* females internalize gender ideologies and socially sanctioned gender normative behaviors which influence their perceptions of the opposite sex. It is for this reason that Fanny's defiant behavior is incomprehensible to Sir Bertram who can devise no logical explanation for his niece's adamant refusal to acquiesce to his demands. Ultimately, his stereotypical understanding of the supposed submissive and incompetent nature of female thought and behavior, results in an understanding of Fanny's refusal as utterly



"unaccountable" (Austen *Mansfield Park* 263). In truth, he cannot imagine Fanny to have a plausible explanation for her refusal—he neither thinks of nor asks about her reasoning, expecting her to have none. He perceives her refusal of Crawford's suit despite his obvious desire for their advantageous union as a direct and maliciously intended attack against his overall male authority. Thus, by the same stereotypical modes of thought, Sir Bertram's culturally imposed patriarchal ignorance similarly blinds him to Fanny's "faint" and "trembling" demeanor. If anything, her fearful inability to communicate with and justify to her uncle the rationale behind her actions and emotions, to him, solidifies her subservient social position.

In this way a destructive cycle is created in which Fanny's reactions sanction Sir Bertram's stereotypical ideology concerning femininity and Sir Bertram's stereotypical ideology of femininity engenders Fanny's expected behaviors. Ultimately, Fanny *continues* to display the expected male-formulated "virtues" of the socially ideal woman when she "patien[tly]" and with "docil[e]," and frightened, "good-humor" submits herself to her uncle's unprecedented attacks against her good character and reveals the disheartening "flexibility" of her personal thoughts and emotions which are so easily swayed to unnecessary feelings of shame by her controlling uncle (Poovey xi). Congruently, Sir Bertram continues to regard such "virtues" as ideally feminine.

Most interestingly, the same pen used by Austen to create such heroines as the outwardly meek, yet incredibly intelligent, Fanny Price was also used to formulate oppositional heroines such as the outwardly aggressive Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*. In truth, Elizabeth displays *none* of the "virtues" of "patience, docility, good-humor, [or] flexibility" obvious in Fanny. In fact, according to professor of English Laura Dabundo in "The Feminist Critique and Five Styles of Women's Roles in *Pride and Prejudice*," Elizabeth Bennet is instead accurately

described as a "progressive," "radical" character much like the "bluestockings" who exhibit all of the characteristics and behaviors condemned by and highly threatening to the stability of the feminine social ideal-of the *proper lady* (Dabundo 42). Elizabeth is at once shockingly "independent" and "strong-willed" as well as "fiercely self-reliant" and "outspoken" (Dabundo 39). As such she effectively "parts company from her unenlightened, traditional-minded sisters" in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* who are much akin to Price and thus "securely mired" in the ideology of the "eighteenth century" (Dabundo 50). This is most evident in the comparable rejection scene in which Elizabeth vehemently dismisses Mr. Darcy's first admittance of affection and proposal of marriage as a result of the initial arrogance and self superiority evident in his suit.

Accordingly, when Mr. Darcy approaches Elizabeth for the first time in order to propose he not only expresses the extent by which he "ardently...admire[s]" and "love[s]" her, he *also* reveals that despite such feelings he is ultimately aware of her obvious social "inferiority" and openly acknowledges the personal "degradation" that will result from such a union with not only herself but also her unconventional family (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 243-244). Obviously, such a suit not only fails to arouse flattery or affection in Elizabeth but instead understandably causes her to feel nothing but "resentment" towards Darcy as a result of his deprecating "language" regarding herself and her family. However, while Darcy's observations result in Elizabeth's evident anger they also result in grudging acceptance of the inescapable truths he observes regarding the social deficiencies of her relations (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 244). Nevertheless Elizabeth quickly "los[es] all compassion" for him as a result of her rapidly growing "anger," which is both openly acknowledged and openly expressed, unlike Fanny's which is alternately unacknowledged and unexpressed, negatively internalized and repressed

(Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 244).

As further insult Elizabeth is annoyed that "he," Darcy, evidently "had *no* doubt of a favorable answer" despite his unapologetic demeaning of her family and ultimately herself; all the while his "countenance...expressed real security" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 244 my emphasis). Evidently, like Sir Bertram, Darcy has been conditioned to believe that—as notions of femininity dictate—*all* women desire little other than a wealthy husband and comfortable living. Thus, while "it is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," it is inversely *a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman must be in want of a husband in possession of a good fortune*, or so Darcy would assume. Therefore, much to his surprise—yet in accord with the assumptions of the reader, aware of Elizabeth's independent character—despite the social and financial prosperity that would be awarded to her from such a union Elizabeth easily rejects Darcy. In fact, her "intentions" throughout the entire encounter "d[o] not vary for an instant"—where Fanny's visibly sway—and by the conclusion of the scene Elizabeth bluntly, and rather harshly, refuses Darcy in obvious "energ[etic]" "anger" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 247-248). She then caustically informs him that: "*you* could not have made me the offer of your hand in any possible way that would have tempted me to accept it" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 248-my emphasis).

Obviously, as has already been established, Elizabeth's rejection stands in direct contrast to Fanny's meek refusal: it is full of evident and openly expressed anger, as opposed to contained and internalized anger. Again, Fanny, unlike Elizabeth, is described in her comparable scene in *Mansfield Park* as "start[led]" by the encounter that she is "forced" to endure with her uncle Bertram (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 259-261). The unwanted interaction elicits obvious feelings of

disquiet on her part as evidenced by the narrative detail provided regarding her emotions during the scene: she is described as experiencing feelings of “anxiety,” “shame,” and “wretchedness”—all of which combine in obvious physical manifestations: she is observable to her uncle and the reader alike as “trembling” from the onslaught of distressing emotion. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 259-261). Fanny, unlike the outspoken Elizabeth, is further described as “unable to articulate,” at least properly, her thoughts, emotions, or a proper defense of her actions, and so, once her incomprehensible excuse for an explanation is attempted “in a faint voice” she is easily defeated by her overpowering uncle and “could [thereafter] say no more” and, in turn, from that point on “dared not lift up her eyes” at her uncle's displeasure (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 259-261). Again, Elizabeth Bennet, much unlike Fanny Price, neither *contains* nor *internalizes* her anger but instead fully, and forcefully, expresses it both verbally and physically.

Accordingly, where *Mansfield Park* is acknowledged as a “virtual parable of the life of a woman in a patriarchal society,” *Pride and Prejudice*, its antithesis, is Austen’s literary realization of an independent, self-willed woman who exists at least in the bounds of literature if not yet in the bounds of reality. And so, Elizabeth displays in full glory all of the “willfulness of temper,” “self-conceit,” and “independence of spirit” so “offensive” and “disgusting” to both Sir Bertram of *Mansfield Park* as well as eighteenth-century patriarchal England as a whole. In fact, in this incredibly short scene alone Elizabeth is twice described as “angry” and synonymously “resent[ful]” (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 243-249). In conjunction her “energ[etic]” and “tumult[uous]” emotions are exhibited through obvious physical manifestations, as indicated by the rising “colour” flushing her face—observable to Darcy and the reader alike (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 243-249). Thus, Austen has purposefully created literary descriptions and images which combine to purposefully emphasize Elizabeth’s

increasing anger and resentment, or the indulgence in passionate emotions forbidden a true *proper lady*, which marks her as anything but.

And yet, perhaps even more disturbing to eighteenth-century readers than Elizabeth's overtly passionate denial of both Mr. Darcy *and* her rejection of the crippling ideal of the *proper lady* is the knowledge that Elizabeth effectively gains control over Mr. Darcy in this particular scene and casts him, the supposedly superior male, into an inferior role. In fact, Darcy is extremely "surprised" at the unbridled resentment apparent in Elizabeth's response to his suite and as a result his "complexion," akin to Fanny's, becomes observably "pale" as the "disturbance of his mind" becomes otherwise increasingly "visible in every feature" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 245). So great is his agitation in fact that he continually "struggl[es] for the appearance of composure" throughout the confrontation (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 245).

Essentially, Elizabeth casts him into a submissive role similar to Fanny Price's. In fact, the similarities in their physical and emotional descriptions during the corresponding confrontation scenes are painfully obvious. As in the scene between Fanny and Sir Bertram, Darcy, like Fanny, is never allowed to gain *any* semblance of composure, let alone an accumulation of power in any form during the attack (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 245). Ultimately, as a result of the command Elizabeth wields over her thoughts and words, which Darcy and Fanny lack, she effectively unnerves and embarrasses him during their verbal repartee. And so, he continually "change[s] colour," not as a result of anger, as does Elizabeth, but instead as a result of absolute "mortification" (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 248). It is for this reason that after Elizabeth finishes speaking, Mr. Darcy "hastily" leaves the room; in other words he runs away—much like Fanny would have had she been able. As a result of his "disturb[ed]" "mortification," evident embarrassment, and his hasty retreat the "pale" Mr. Darcy inarguably

assumes an inferior position in relation to the "energetic" and "tumultuous" Elizabeth (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 243-249). Elizabeth's quick wit and passions have undeniably allowed her to *best* Mr. Darcy in a verbal duel of animosity.

Nonetheless, while heartening when compared with the historical reality of oppression forced upon females at this time, Elizabeth's apparent attainment of female power and authority is ultimately belittled once her seemingly empowering attributes are considered in relation to the context of the novel as a whole—particularly as regards its lack of centralized male authority. Much unlike Austen's *Mansfield Park*, with its clear representation of patriarchy symbolically embodied in the person of Sir Thomas Bertram, a similarly symbolic embodiment of patriarchal authority is entirely absent in *Pride and Prejudice*. Both the expected and anticipated male authority of the novel, by eighteenth-century standards, Mr. Bennet is anything but a traditional husband and father unfailingly guided by the principles of patriarchy. In fact, Mr. Bennett's atypical nature is emphasized from the onset of the novel when he is described, upon introduction to the reader, as a unique individual composed of a rather "odd...mixture" of parts, so odd in fact that even his wife of "three and twenty years" cannot fully comprehend nor anticipate his unconventional "character" and atypical behavior (Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* 14).

However his at first merely unexpectedly embarrassing unconventionality, which often makes the sensible Elizabeth "blush" with both "shame and vexation" when displayed publically, is quickly revealed as absolute disinterest in the affairs of his wife and daughters—an indifference which later proves lethal to the family's social standing, further lessening the small amount of social prestige they had managed to accumulate (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 132). Thus, Mr. Bennet is faulted for his self-proclaimed "wise" practice of "leaving the girls to their trifling

amusements" so that he may, for a short time, be "rid" of them all and able to "have his library to himself," for it is solely "in his library [that] he ha[s] always been sure of his leisure and tranquility," especially since he was "often to meet with folly and conceit in every other room of the house" as inhabited by one or more of his daughters (*Austen Pride and Prejudice* 94-96). Obviously, therefore, Mr. Bennet is both aware of the "folly" and "conceit" exhibited by almost all of his daughters, with the exception of Elizabeth and Jane, as well as conscious and aware of his desire to avoid such folly and conceit in favor of the quiet "tranquility" of his library; in other words, Mr. Bennett's resolute disinterest in his daughters is even more heinous as a result of his consciousness of it (*Austen Pride and Prejudice* 94-96).

Ultimately, he has no inclination to either guide or control them in any way; a phenomenon of neglect that eventually creates many problems for the entire family throughout the novel. Given this new understanding of her father, Elizabeth's forcefully independent nature may now come as no surprise to the reader in that, unlike Fanny Price, she has never suffered the scathing reprimands or intimidating rebukes of a domineering patriarchal father-or in the case of Fanny, a father figure. Thus, Elizabeth is afforded the luxury of independent thought and action as the result of a lax father-a luxury not otherwise afforded to the meek and docile Fanny, who is, arguably, forced to be so. Such a revelation ultimately lessens some of the power and authority Elizabeth has stolen from Darcy in the rejection scene, and from all of her male contemporaries, in that such power and authority has ultimately been afforded to her by no more than lucky circumstance, or, the chance of a disinterested and atypical father.

Similarly, since Darcy's evident infatuation with Elizabeth influences his perception of her and inevitably alters his treatment of her, it is easily argued that, if anything, the only figure of authority with whom Elizabeth can truly be said to battle against within the novel is Darcy's

aunt, Lady Catherine De Bourgh, intimidating as a result of her "high rank" as a "great lady" who "likes to have the distinction of rank preserved" and thus in command of money and social influence (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 90-94 and 207). Aside from her rank, however, Lady Catherine does not appear to possess any other authoritative attributes, at least in the eyes of Elizabeth who notes at their first acquaintance that "she had not heard anything of Lady Catherine that spoke her awful from any extraordinary talents or miraculous virtue, and the mere stateliness of money and rank, she thought she could witness" at their initial encounter "without trepidation" (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 207). And so, the "increasing" "alarm" and lack of "calm" Lady Catherine invokes in her social inferiors, which might be mistaken for power and authority of the masculine type is, in the realistic words of Elizabeth no more than the false "stateliness" of "money and rank" (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 207). Elizabeth again lacks confrontation, of any sort, with the embodiment of patriarchal authority; even Lady Catherine De Bourgh, her only true opponent in the novel, does not truly possess any power and authority, as Elizabeth reveals; she merely possesses the semblance of it. Yet again, the supposed power and authority Elizabeth appears to wield, when she defies the often intimidating Lady Catherine and marries her nephew Darcy despite her explicit wishes, is once again demeaned in that, according to her own summation of Lady Catherine, she does not defy a great figure of authority, merely a woman with the trappings of "money" and a false perception of "prestige" (Austen *Pride and Prejudice* 207).

Given the insights offered by an in-depth examination of the patriarchal roles of authority in *Pride and Prejudice*, a further examination of the patriarchal roles of authority in *Mansfield Park* is similarly necessary for an informed reading of Fanny Price's character and temperament. As is the case with Elizabeth, a deeper examination of Fanny in regards to the larger patriarchal



context of the novel leads to realizations initially unapparent to the reader. In *Mansfield Park* Sir Thomas Bertram exists as the highly obvious role of patriarchal authority in the novel. Unlike Mr. Bennet, Sir Bertram's interest in and authority over his children is neither unconventional nor indifferent. In fact, his fatherly investment in Fanny's welfare is obvious from the onset of the novel in which he "debated and hesitated" with his wife and sister-in-law undertaking the great responsibility that would accompany Fanny's adoption (Austen *Mansfield Park* 23). As he reveals "it [is] a serious charge [and] ought not be lightly engaged in" in that "a girl so brought up must be adequately cared for," and he and his family "must secure the child, or consider ourselves engaged to secure to her hereafter, as circumstances may arise, the provision of a gentlewoman" (Austen *Mansfield Park* 23-24). Thus, Sir Bertram is not only conscious of, but also prepared to undertake, the responsibility of caring for Fanny should she be adopted, recognizing such an affair to require extensive consideration as his family and himself will be required to bestow upon their adopted child the "provision of a gentlewoman" should they decide to adopt her.

However, despite his inclusive conversation with his wife and sister-in-law concerning the shared responsibility of raising an adopted child, Sir Bertram reveals himself to the reader as "fully resolved to be the real and consistent patron of the selected child" (Austen *Mansfield Park* 25). And so, his minor hesitancy, which arises from the "delicacy of [his] notions, which, indeed, are quite of a piece with [his] general conduct," as Mrs. Norris reveals, is easily surmounted and the decision to adopt Fanny is finalized (Austen *Mansfield Park* 24 Austen *Mansfield Park* 23). Thus, Sir Thomas, in that he is well aware and accepting of the responsibilities and requirements of adopting Fanny, is neither an unconventional nor absentee father, as is Mr. Bennet. If anything, his attention to the welfare of his children is so extreme

that he is aptly described by his children as overbearing. As a result, when he is forced to leave the family in order to travel to Antigua so that he may secure his business there from failing, the reader discovers the Miss Bertram's "were much to be pitied" at his departure, "not for their sorrow, but [instead] for their want of it" (Austen *Mansfield Park* 44). In fact, so strict was his authority in governing the moral and social behavior of his children that, as a result of his stringency, upon his departure it is revealed to the reader that, according to the Miss Bertrams:

Their father was no object of love to them; he had never seemed the friend of their pleasures, and his absence was...most welcome. They were relieved by it from all restraint; and without aiming at one gratification that would probably have been forbidden by Sir Thomas, they felt themselves immediately at their own disposal, and to have every indulgence within their reach (Austen *Mansfield Park* 44).

Thus, Sir Bertram is revealed to exhibit sole control over the lives and behaviors of the young inhabitants of Mansfield Park especially since "'mothers,'" according to Miss Crawford, even in all of their love and care "'certainly have not yet got quite the right way of managing their daughters'" (Austen *Mansfield Park* 57). And so, Sir Bertram serves as the strict patriarchal figure that, unlike the mother, is capable of "managing [his] daughters"—thus resulting in the lack of "love" exhibited towards him by his daughters since, he is never the "friend of their pleasures" but instead the guardian of their virtue (Austen *Mansfield Park* 44). However, as the sole upholder of propriety, upon his departure the Miss Bertram's feel "relieved from all restraint," a freedom they use to indulge in their ultimate "gratifications" (Austen *Mansfield Park* 44).

Upon his unannounced return the youth of the house felt "absolute horror" at the prospect

of being caught in their indulgences and upon his entrance “every...heart was sinking under some degree of self-condemnation or undefined alarm, every...heart was suggesting, ‘what will become of us? What is to be done now?’” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 152). “It was...terrible” to consider with “many fears...Sir Thomas’s disapprobation when the present state of his house should be known” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 152). Sir Bertram is thus revealed as not merely the scrupulous *upholder* of etiquette and morality but also its fearsome *enforcer*, and as so, quite “awful in his dignity” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 154).

Accordingly, the “exceeding distress” Fanny experiences when she is forced to refuse acceptance of Crawford’s marriage proposal despite her uncle’s desire for such a match is, *now*, neither incomprehensible nor completely indicative of Fanny’s character. For instance, *all* of the Bertram children—both male and female alike—equally find themselves “sinking under some degree of self-condemnation or undefined alarm” at the thought of his wrath. In fact, they all react with “absolute horror” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 152). Thus, Fanny’s reaction is normal and to be expected in the face of such ferocity. In fact, if anything, Fanny may have more courage than any of the other inhabitants of Mansfield Park—none of whom feel confident or strong enough to refuse Sir Bertram’s any request. And so, while Fanny may “tremble” at the disapprobation of Sir Thomas, she does not yield—a feat unaccomplished by others in the novel. In this sense, the reader has misjudged Fanny; as Austen likely knew the reader would. It is as a result of this very assumption that she intentionally cautions us multiple times throughout the novel that Fanny’s “feelings were very acute, and too little understood to be properly attended to” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 29). In truth, Austen makes such claims multiple times throughout the novel, yet, nevertheless the reader becomes guilty of the same undeserving assumptions indulged in by the inhabitants of the novel in regards to Fanny and so: “her motives [are] often...

misunderstood, her feelings disregarded, and her comprehension undervalued” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 136). Fanny herself recognizes the insignificant role others attribute to her in her recognition that “I am unlike other people I dare say” (Austen *Mansfield Park* 169).

And so, it appears that in our underestimation of Fanny the reader has also potentially underestimated Austen herself. Thus, it *appears* that in her novels, Austen has ultimately, purposefully or not, created a world in which both "conservative and radical meet," or, a fictive place where the authoress herself is allowed to simultaneously explore the "conservative" *and* "radical" aspects of her own thoughts and ideas regarding eighteenth-century gender norms, as is evident in the contrasting ideas of femininity depicted through Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park* and Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* (Dabundo 40). However, such ideological tensions as apparent in Austen's work are both natural and expected since she is ultimately "no better or worse than her times" (Dabundo 44). Or, in other words, like her heroines Fanny Price *and* Elizabeth Bennet, Jane Austen is ultimately a "product of her times, even as she looks beyond them" (Dabundo 47). It is for this reason that her corpus of literature subsequently displays conflicting views regarding the concept of eighteenth-century femininity and the ideology of the *proper lady*. And yet, the reader must be careful *not* to make assumptions about Austen in that, as she has already proven through *Mansfield Park*, she is highly capable of manipulating her reader's thoughts and reactions through her written work.

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