

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Women in their Worlds of Objects: Construction of Female Agency
through Things in the Novels of Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell

being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of PhD

in the University of Hull

by

Pei-Ching Sophia Huang, MA (University of York)

July 2015

Abstract of Thesis

This thesis argues that Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell employ textually important objects to explore women's demeaning status in patriarchal societies and their construction of agency in such circumstances. In their novels, both Austen and Gaskell portray female characters as interacting in various ways with material things: the characters experience objects through their five senses, create them, recycle them, inhabit them, or purchase and possess them. It is true that not every item connected with the novels' heroines bears the same significance, but those that play a prominent part in the plot or receive unusual descriptive attention convey messages that the novels do not express explicitly.

This thesis follows thing theorists' call for a reading that begins with objects, in particular the paradigm Elaine Freedgood offers of recovering literary objects' materiality and socio-historical backgrounds before incorporating those veiled meanings into novelistic interpretation. Nevertheless, this work also differs from the thing theory studies by which it is informed in that it is centred upon the perception that the meanings of things are gendered and relies heavily on the narrative framework of a text in its choice of objects for discussion. In my five chapters, I investigate each of the two novelists' object worlds and focus on things with which their female characters directly engage, mainly domestic interiors and luxuries. My examination follows a rough chronological order, beginning with Austen's six major works before moving on to Gaskell's novels. This thesis suggests that Austen and Gaskell, despite the separation of three decades, use objects in their writing to explore an issue that is relevant not only to their female characters but also to women in general: the construction of agency within the existing patriarchal structure.

Table of Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	v
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vi
Things and Women: An Introduction	1
Varieties of Thing Theory.....	3
Gendered Meanings of Things.....	9
Pairing of Austen and Gaskell	11
Chapter One: Women and Pictures: Painting Traditions and Female Agency in <i>Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and Emma</i>	38
Elizabeth Bennet’s Picture-Viewing Tour of Pemberley.....	41
Elinor Dashwood’s Private View of a Miniature	56
Emma Woodhouse as a Portrait Painter	64
Chapter Two: Women in the House: Interior Design and Gender Roles in <i>Northanger Abbey, Mansfield Park, and Persuasion</i>	82
Catherine Morland’s Quest for the Gothic Style	84
Fanny Price and her East Room.....	98
Anne Elliot as a Visitor to Different Parlours	111
Chapter Three: Women and Luxuries: Gifts and Gendered Power Relations in <i>Mansfield Park and Emma</i>	122
Fanny Price as a Recipient of Clothing and Jewellery.....	124
Fanny Price as a Giver and a Consumer.....	139
Jane Fairfax and her Broadwood Piano.....	147
Chapter Four: Women beside and beyond the Hearth: The Home and Women’s Prospects in <i>North and South</i> and <i>Wives and Daughters</i>	158
Margaret Hale in the Drawing-Room.....	160
Molly Gibson’s Tour of Houses	177
Molly Gibson at Home	191
Chapter Five: Women and Gifts of All Sorts: Gift Exchange and Patriarchal Symbolism in <i>Ruth</i> and <i>Sylvia’s Lovers</i>	202
Ruth Hilton and her Miscellany of Gifts	204
Sylvia Robson and her Gifts of Garments and Accessories	234
Philip Hepburn’s Object Lesson	252

Conclusion	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	266

List of Illustrations

- Fig. 1:* An eye miniature by an anonymous British artist, watercolour on ivory, about 1790-1810 <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/2136>> [accessed 13 May 2013]..... 54
- Fig. 2:* A parlour in the Rococo Revival style. From *Le Garde-meuble, ancien et moderne*, livraison 74, No. 212. c. 1850. Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Branch, New York. <<http://www.sil.si.edu/DigitalCollections/Art-Design/garde-meuble/images/b/sil12-2-465b.jpg>> [accessed 23 May 2014]..... 164
- Fig. 3:* James Hadley, Antique Royal Worcester Parian Mrs Hadley's Hand Vase, porcelain, 1850. Xupes. <<http://www.xupes.com/Antiques-Fine-Art/Product-Details/5898/ROYAL-WORCESTER-MRS-HADLEYS-HAND-VASE/Antique-Royal-Worcester-Parian-Mrs-Hadleys-Hand-Vase-by-James-Hadley-19th-C.html>> [accessed 23 May 2014]..... 171
- Fig. 4:* Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, parian porcelain, 1862 [CIRC.90-1968]. <<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O69128/the-greek-slave-figure-powers-hiram/>> [accessed 23 May 2014]..... 173
- Fig. 5:* The hen-and-chicken daisy. George Nicholson, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Gardening, Div. VI* (London: L. Upcott Gill, 1884). <http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/81800/81816/81816_daisy_hens.htm> [accessed 13 May 2015]..... 244
- Fig. 6:* The sweet briar rose. From *A Collection of Flowers* (1795) by John Edwards. Held in the Botany Library at the Natural History Museum, London. <<http://piclib.nhm.ac.uk/results.asp?image=037424>> [accessed 13 May 2015] 246

Acknowledgements

This thesis could not have been written without the support of many people. I am profoundly indebted to the Ministry of Education, Taiwan, for granting me a Studying Abroad Scholarship (2012-14), without which commencing this degree might never have taken place.

I am especially grateful to my supervisor, Professor Valerie Sanders, for sustaining me with her inspirational guidance and constant encouragement. She has nurtured my interest in Austen's and Gaskell's object worlds ever since our first email exchange. I wish to acknowledge with particular gratitude the meticulous reading and constructive criticism of my examiners, Dr Josie Billington and Dr Anna Fitzer. Their searching questions and carefully constructed commentaries have helped me improve this thesis. Many thanks also to Dr David Kennedy and Dr Jane Thomas for sending me on the track of ekphrasis and the theory of the gaze in feminist film studies. Although I did not venture into the territory of film adaptations as a result, I have developed a sensitivity to the genderedness of looking in my reading. Dr Catherine Wynne, who once chatted with me about Margaret's falling bracelet in *North and South*, also gave me a valuable insight into Gaskell's descriptive power.

My greatest debt is to my parents, who have willingly made sacrifices to support my academic pursuit. For this and much more, I am forever thankful. Finally, I would like to thank my fiancé, Kevin Shih, who has provided me with the most steadfast emotional support, given me 'things' with no other motives than that of making me happy, and put up with the anxiety of a long-distance relationship with forbearance and unfailing love.

Things and Women: An Introduction

‘My dear! you could never laugh at her prim little curls or her pink bows again, if you saw her as I have done.’

– Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* (1853)

In the opening story of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Cranford* (1853), Miss Matty reproaches the narrator, Mary Smith, for her prejudice on the grounds of fashion against Jessie Brown, a newcomer to the Cranford community. What Miss Matty says may at first appear to raise the issue of snobbishness, a characteristic female folly often comically represented in *Cranford*, but on closer examination it also testifies to multiple layers of complex gender struggles. Mary’s gentle mockery of Miss Jessie’s ‘juvenility of dress’ can be seen as siding with the dismissive view generally held in her society of womanly concerns.¹ While being sympathetic towards the Cranfordians, Mary does not refrain from judging their habits from a mainstream perspective, a perspective with which *Cranford*’s professed metropolitan readers can identify. As the journal in which the Cranford stories were first serialised, Charles Dickens’s *Household Words*, implied a well-educated, middle-class readership, the view that the narrator of *Cranford* and her original audience shared would have been one that reflected the period’s dominant gender ideology. Viewed in this light, the fact that the usually submissive, diffident Miss Matty speaks up for another gentle female character is remarkable. She specifically claims the right to present her view, which recognises femininity but pleads for an understanding of femininity that is not defined by male-centred convention.

¹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Cranford* (1853), ed. by Elizabeth Porges Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 11.

Indeed, the relationship between things and women in nineteenth-century fiction is often not straightforward, and in recent years Victorian paraphernalia and objects chiefly noted as indices of commodity culture have to a certain extent shaken off their negative connotations of triviality and consumerism, rising to prominence in general interest as well as in academic studies.² Objects are common features in disciplines such as archaeology and history. *A History of the World in 100 Objects* as a series title to the joint project of BBC Radio 4 and the British Museum in 2010 hardly sounds surprising. What is noteworthy is that the rising trend of an object-centred approach has also spread to the field of literature. The latest Jane Austen biography, *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* (2013) by Paula Byrne, is innovatively object-based in its structure, with chapters organised around objects related to Austen's life and work. The image of Austen is fleshed out, whether accurately or imaginatively, with pictures of her vellum notebook, her topaz cross and her laptop writing box. A book intended for non-specialist readers may be less hesitant about celebrating 'small things', but in literary criticism things have also ceased to be treated as peripheral. The change of attitude towards objects in academic studies is owing largely to the emergence of 'thing theory' a decade ago,³ which began as an attempt to counter Marxism and has since gathered strength. Attachment to material objects is favourably re-evaluated,⁴ and thing theorists, despite variations in their approach to scrutiny of people's object relations, all use material objects as the starting point in their methodology.

This thesis follows the call for a reading that begins with objects. It explores the

² During the course of this thesis, 'object' and 'thing' are used interchangeably, though in some cases the word 'thing' is deliberately chosen to highlight the materiality of objects.

³ 'Thing theory', though a relatively new term in literary criticism, has gained recognition in academic circles and appears in recent works with neither capitalisation nor inverted commas. As the use of the term 'thing theory' is generally accepted, references to it hereafter will not be capitalised or enclosed in commas. It has to be noted, however, that the form the term takes in scholarly works is not yet standardised. Some critics continue to use inverted commas when referring to thing theory. See, for example, Jennifer Sattaur, 'Thinking Objectively: An Overview of "Thing Theory" in Victorian Studies', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40 (2012), 347-57.

⁴ See, for example, Patricia Spyer, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

material worlds of Jane Austen's and Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, particularly how they relate to their heroines. Both Austen and Gaskell portray women who interact in various ways with material things: these female characters experience objects through their five senses, create them, recycle them, inhabit them, or purchase and possess them. It is a contention of this thesis that an increased sensitivity to the 'cultural biography' and textual frameworks of things in Austen's and Gaskell's works better enables us to understand their investigations of women's demeaning status in patriarchal societies and their construction of agency in such circumstances.⁵ However, this thesis differs from previous thing theory-informed studies in many respects. The main departure is that it revolves around the genderedness in things' associated meanings. In this light, discourses of commodity culture and exchange, as opposed to other object-based enquiries, are not excluded from my discussion. By being more inclusive in its critical investigation, this thesis offers a new framework for looking at Austen's and Gaskell's thing art, in other words, their respective knacks of registering and questioning the institutionalised conception of gender relations through fictional objects.

VARIETIES OF THING THEORY

'Thing theory' as a term emerged from an essay of Bill Brown that bears the same name,⁶ although before and after him there was, and still is, a strong tradition of extensive research into material culture in the Victorian era and in the modern period in general.⁷ While scholars of material culture do not necessarily comment on the

⁵ Igor Kopytoff in 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64-91, proposes that 'A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories' (p. 68).

⁶ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22 (p. 1).

⁷ See, for example, Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, rev. edn (Stroud: Sutton, 2003); Deborah

significance of objects in novelistic interpretation, Brown and other thing theorists view objects from the standpoint of literary criticism and place them at the forefront of their debates. Brown urges readers to relinquish the Marxist ideologies of production and consumption and confront the materiality of things: to look *at* objects rather than look *through* them.⁸ In *A Sense of Things*, a monograph about his proposed new approach to late-nineteenth-century American literature, Brown explains that he is interested in texts that ‘ask why and how we use objects to make meaning, to make and re-make ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections, to sublimate our fears and shape our fantasies’.⁹ Although Brown’s emphasis on the power an object exerts on the human subject results in a metaphysical way of reading that this thesis does not pursue, his perception of the agency of objects in people’s self exploration and interpersonal relationships enlightens my investigation of how Austen and Gaskell represent things and women.

Since Brown’s coinage of the term ‘thing theory’, the power of objects has gained recognition in academic circles, which is shown in an array of works written about things in literature. Critical responses to literary objects, however, are not unanimous or non-controversial. Another prominent thing theorist, Elaine Freedgood, has proposed an approach that has attracted followers as well as detractors. In the same vein as Brown’s practice of ‘looking *at* objects’, Freedgood delays applying metaphors and allegories until she ‘tak[es] fictional things literally’.¹⁰ In other words, she ‘begin[s] with objects rather than with subjects and plots and stay[s] with them a bit longer than novelistic interpretation generally allows’ (p. 4). What she argues for is a ‘strong, literalizing, or

Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Thad Logan, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Andrew H. Miller, *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993); and Philippa Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁸ Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, p. 4.

⁹ Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 4.

¹⁰ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 5. Subsequent references to this work will appear in the text.

materializing, metonymic reading’, in which ‘the object is investigated in terms of its own properties and history and then refigured alongside and athwart the novel’s manifest or dominant narrative—the one that concerns its subjects’ (p. 12). She uses such a method to trace the ‘fugitive meanings’ behind literary objects (p. 4). Three major examples in her book are the histories of deforestation and slavery hidden in the mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre* (1847), the stories of nineteenth-century global cotton markets uncovered from the checked curtains in *Mary Barton* (1848), and the unnameable horror of genocide in Australia encoded in the negro-head tobacco of *Great Expectations* (1860-61).

Freedgood’s approach has its weaknesses. One that she acknowledges herself is the uneven interpretability of things. She notes that a ‘rhetorical hierarchy’ exists in texts—some literary objects are by nature more interpretively significant than others—but remains vague about what determines her ‘rhetorical hierarchy’ (p. 2). Moreover, she offers no effective ways of distinguishing the interpretable from the uninterpretable: while conceding that ‘it remains difficult [...] in the richly developed world of the novel to discern which things are really important and which are “merely” description’, she thinks that the interpretive importance of a novelistic object cannot be evaluated until after one starts looking into the object’s historical and social contexts (pp. 18-20).

Even in cases where Freedgood manages to identify interpretable objects and uncover their hidden meanings, unresolved problems remain. Critics have pointed out that Freedgood tends to dig into the history of an object to such an extent that the acquired extra-textual knowledge seems out of place in the literary text. David Trotter indicates that the story of imperial exploitation in *Jane Eyre*’s mahogany furniture that Freedgood is at pains to unearth bears no clear relevance to either a specific character or

the novel's theme.¹¹ Freedgood's reading of mahogany is also criticised by Clare Pettitt, who notes that 'Freedgood is more interested in what things bring with them into the texts than what meanings the text assigns to them'.¹² As cultural meanings are also more or less assigned, it is perhaps impossible to draw a clear distinction between an object's extra-textual associations and its unique textual significance. Nevertheless, Pettitt makes a key point about Freedgood's approach: Freedgood in her attempt to credit fictional objects with meanings that are not sufficiently recognised sometimes loses sight of literary interpretation.

Despite these deficiencies, Freedgood's attention to literary objects' materiality and socio-historical backgrounds is the backbone of many object-based literary studies, and her approach also offers a paradigm of looking at things that I adopt in this thesis. Moreover, Freedgood's notion of a 'rhetorical hierarchy', when further developed, can be applied to the selection of fictional things to avoid the risk of replacing novelistic interpretation with discoveries that may be materially and socio-historically important but are not necessarily textually relevant, a weakness of Freedgood's that critics have rightly pointed out. Building on Freedgood's methodology but placing greater emphasis on a work's textual context than she does, I use the narrative framework of a novel to determine the interpretability of its literary objects. Rather than trace the histories of every object in a novel to see if I can 'start them into interpretive life' (p. 20), I concentrate my attention on objects that resurface during the course of a novel or those that female characters directly engage with. In other words, I accept what Austen and Gaskell chose to highlight, whether subtly through repeated references to the same thing or openly through a detailed narrative of a character's interaction with an object. This way of examining things can keep material and socio-historical enquiries within the

¹¹ David Trotter, 'Household Clearance in Victorian Fiction', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008), 1-19 (p. 5)

<<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/472/332>> [accessed 18 May 2013].

¹² Clare Pettitt, 'On Stuff', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008), 1-12 (p.6) <<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/474/334>> [accessed 18 May 2013].

bounds of the textual world and make extra-textual knowledge meaningful to the text's interpretation. It is of course undeniable that such a method still has its limits, but in the cases of Austen and Gaskell, it opens up new possibilities of investigating their object worlds.

John Plotz's *Portable Property* represents yet another strand in the study of things. Although what Plotz focuses on in the book is more about nineteenth-century novels than the objects described in them, his recognition of the simultaneous existence of dual properties in things is in keeping with thing theorists' shared concern about discovering multiple layers of meanings. In investigating how nineteenth-century novels became sentimental as well as marketable objects and thus came to be endowed with 'a fiscal and a transcendent value at once',¹³ Plotz introduces a key concept into thing theory: people's emotional attachment to things. As he explains, he shares with Freedgood the 'wish to bring back into view a distinctively Victorian way of understanding what it might mean to be attached, or overly attached, to objects for reasons unrelated to their status as commodities'.¹⁴ This sentimental dimension is useful in my discussion of women's relationship with things, which as I will reveal in the chapters that follow is often complexly shaped by the dual forces of monetary and emotional values.

In response to the above thing theorists, other critics have also proposed their ways of reading things. Believing that Freedgood's approach risks hitting an interpretive impasse but accepting her conception of a 'rhetorical hierarchy', Trotter calls for a shift of attention to genre and argues that

rather than use an historical knowledge of the production of an object or substance in order to unsettle the hierarchy which has (in theory) hitherto obscured its significance, we should investigate the history of the formation of that hierarchy:

¹³ John Plotz, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 1.

¹⁴ Plotz, p. 189.

that is, the history of the development of the novel as a genre.¹⁵

The fictional things in which Trotter is interested are those that are, in his words, ‘objects levelled down to matter or stuff’ and,¹⁶ according to Freedgood, objects situated in the lower end of the ‘rhetorical hierarchy’. While Trotter’s proposal to examine how such a hierarchy came into being is helpful for investigating the status of literary things in fiction as a whole, his method does not suit the purposes in this thesis, which aims to interpret those objects with which characters engage within the framework of a given text.

In addition to Trotter, Juliet John also seeks to engage with the ‘rhetorical hierarchy’ Freedgood neglects in her argument. In her article on Charles Dickens’s interest in the relationship between things and the words that represent them, John contends that for Dickens, ‘meaning, value and proportion depends on lateral as well as hierarchical modes of differentiation’.¹⁷ What John terms a ‘lateral’ mode of differentiation is exemplified by Dickens’s ‘awareness of the mutually constitutive relationship between stories and/ or histories and things’: an object’s immaterial worth depends on the personal and cultural memories that are invested in it, just as an abstract value is often expressed through a concrete object.¹⁸ This proposition is also central to Austen’s and Gaskell’s explorations of subject-object relationships and will emerge in later chapters.

The latest critical interest in thing theory concerns objects that occupy the lower end of Freedgood’s ‘rhetorical hierarchy’. For example, *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians* features a collection of essays that discuss objects that are ‘narratologically

¹⁵ Trotter, ‘Household Clearance’, p. 6.

¹⁶ Trotter, ‘Household Clearance’, p. 9

¹⁷ Juliet John, ‘Things, Words and the Meanings of Art’, in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by Juliet John (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 115-32 (p. 117).

¹⁸ John, pp. 122-23.

dismissed – of peripheral interest and yet resonantly central'.¹⁹ It is perhaps understandable that in this book Austen makes no appearance and Gaskell gets only a fleeting mention because their representations of objects differ from those of the writers that comprise the book's main concern: chapter titles contain names such as Thomas Hardy, Robert Browning, M.E. Braddon, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. Although the focus on insignificant things in *Literary Bric-à-Brac* is contrary to this thesis's highlighting of textually meaningful objects, the book's exploration of mid- to late-Victorian literary trivialities helps place the investigation of Austen's and Gaskell's thing art in the context of the long nineteenth century.

GENDERED MEANINGS OF THINGS

This thesis is therefore deeply rooted in material culture studies and informed by several varieties of thing theory. However, it departs from other object-based criticism in that it is centred around the perception that the meanings of things are gendered. Naomi Schor, commenting on the tension between 'general' and 'particular' in eighteenth-century aesthetics, notes that in neo-classical aesthetic representation the detail was negatively and exclusively associated with women. In her words, 'the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine'.²⁰ Although not all literary objects connected with women in the works I examine in this thesis have steady feminine qualities, things, or the process of how things take on meanings, are indeed gendered. Both Austen's and Gaskell's portrayals of women evince the gendered conventions of domestic objects and commodities. Therefore, enquiries into the significance of objects in relation to female characters have to take into account the gendered meanings of

¹⁹ *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities*, ed. by Jonathon Shears and Jen Harrison (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), p. 4.

²⁰ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Methuen, 1987), p. xlii.

things.

Scholars interested in the relationship between women and things have recognised the gendered properties of objects. Deborah Wynne has explained that Victorian women's attachment to trivialities is an indication of their lack of control over money and real property.²¹ In her investigation into the complicated pattern of women's ownership of relatively cheap goods, Wynne argues that things such as ornaments and articles of clothing 'could be as important as real property to Victorian women, functioning as tangible aids to identity at a time when for men the identity of the property owner conferred voting rights'.²² Following Wynne, Katherine Osborne examines Victorian writers' representations of women's 'multiple, gendered ownerships' and discusses the roles of objects in female characters' heterosexual and homosocial relationships.²³ She explores how Victorian female protagonists, through forming intricate relationships with heirlooms, luxurious commodities, handiwork, and cosmetics, develop patterns of marriage and female friendship that are unexpected or unconventional.

I share Wynne's and Osborne's views on the genderedness of female possession and their sensitivity to the role of objects as a medium for interpersonal relationships represented in fiction. However, my discussion differs from theirs in many ways. As my focus on women's engagement with things shows that Austen's and Gaskell's female characters do not possess all the objects that they interact with, female ownership constitutes only a part of the enquiry in this thesis. In addition, because affective meanings carried by an object in relation to women cover a wider spectrum of relationships than those between spouses and same-sex friends—things can express heterosexual friendships, sibling relationships and parent-child relationships, for

²¹ Deborah Wynne, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp. 7-8.

²² Wynne, p. 10.

²³ Katherine D. Osborne, 'His, Hers, and Theirs: Gendered Ownership in Victorian Marriage and Friendship' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kentucky, 2010), p. xi.

example—I do not divide the objects investigated in this thesis along the lines of the categories used by Osborne. Based on an understanding of the gendered meanings of things and a focus on objects that female characters interact with, this thesis also draws on other object-related concepts apart from thing theory. Ideas such as the power politics of spectatorship, the gendered use of space, and gift relations will be incorporated wherever appropriate. These ideas will be explained in the chapters that concern them.

PAIRING OF AUSTEN AND GASKELL

In focusing on Austen and Gaskell, this thesis addresses an area generally overlooked by thing theorists. In the case of Austen, one explanation for scarce attention on her thing art is the relative bareness of her fictional worlds. While novels written in the middle and towards the end of the nineteenth century leave their readers with at least a clear impression that there is furniture in rooms and that characters wear such and such clothes, Austen's fiction does not strike readers as particularly full of objects. One may remember upon finishing Gaskell's *North and South*, Margaret Hale's aversion to pink and blue wallpaper, but it would be next to impossible to imagine what Elizabeth Bennet's parental home looks like in *Pride and Prejudice*, as Austen simply does not provide such details. Another reason for academic critics' reservation about examining Austen's literary objects may be, as Claudia Johnson has pointed out, Austen's popularity among amateur readers and enthusiastic Janeites.²⁴ Showing an interest in what gowns Austen's characters wear or what food they eat seems to be more like what an overzealous fan wishing to step into Austenland would do. Although there has been

²⁴ See Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) for an examination of Austen as both an academic subject and a pop culture icon.

an increase in the number of studies about Austen and her material things, including the biography by Byrne to which I have earlier referred, these works are of importance more in biographical and historical terms than in literary terms.²⁵

Compared with Austen, Gaskell has received more critical attention from object-minded scholars and is often discussed alongside her contemporaries. As a novelist whose active years fall within the period of the nineteenth century more readily associated with a distinctive tradition of material culture, Gaskell has been considered by thing theorists as one of the most abundant resources for discussing Victorian society. Freedgood has explored the hidden history of checked curtains in *Mary Barton*; *Cranford's* (1853) material world run under the system of what the Cranfordians term 'elegant economy' has also received considerable critical attention;²⁶ and Osborne has devoted an entire chapter to women's handiwork and homosocial relationships in *Wives and Daughters* (1864-66).²⁷ Nevertheless, Gaskell still does not feature as prominently as other Victorian writers in object-centred discussion, as seminal studies of Victorian literary objects are more interested in the second half of the nineteenth century.

It is understandable that thing theory critics dwell more on mid- and late-Victorian novels than those written in the first part of the nineteenth century, as it seems that on the whole, the object worlds of fiction became richer—or more cluttered, depending on one's perception of the material world—as the century progressed. Indeed, works composed around and after the mid-century are fertile ground for thing theory studies. Freedgood, the critic who sparked the most wide-ranging thing-related debate, dedicates

²⁵ Works such as Nikolaus Pevsner, 'The Architectural Setting of Jane Austen's Novels', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 31 (1968), 404-22; Patrick Piggott, *The Innocent Diversion: A Study of Music in the Life and Writings of Jane Austen* (London: Douglas Cleverdon, 1979); and Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen and Food* (London: Hambledon Press, 1995) enumerate Austen's references to material things—be it houses, musical instruments, or culinary practices—in her oeuvre to illuminate her culture and life rather than further a better understanding of her novels. Robert K. Wallace's *Jane Austen and Mozart: Classical Equilibrium in Fiction and Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983) is more unusual in that it compares Austen's novels with Mozart's piano concertos. This interdisciplinary study of two disparate artistic forms is, however, outside the bounds of literary discussion.

²⁶ Talia Schaffer, 'Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and "The Cranford Papers"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 221-39; Christina Lupton, 'Theorizing Surfaces and Depths: Gaskell's *Cranford*', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 50 (2008), 235-54.

²⁷ Osborne, pp. 85-130.

one chapter each to Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot in her inspiring *The Ideas in Things*. Although Freedgood points out that the method for analysing fiction she proposes cannot be applied to novels written in the late Victorian period, critics after her have found ways to read literary objects in works that she considers not fruitful for thing theory enquiries. Freedgood thinks that towards the end of the nineteenth century, writers such as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy began to reduce and restrict the meanings a literary object can bear. In response to her, Osborne has examined the material properties and cultural meanings of emeralds, miniatures, and turquoise to explore Dorothea Brooke's and Gwendolen Harleth's interior lives in Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) respectively;²⁸ and several contributors to *Literary Bric-à-Brac* have discussed the significance of apparently insignificant things in works of the late Victorian era, including the nails in Hardy's *The Woodlanders* (1887).²⁹ Even thing theorists not in direct dialogue with Freedgood also focus their attention on mid- and late-Victorian works. Plotz in *Portable Property* concentrates on Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871), and R. D. Blackmore's *Lorna Doone* (1869); Wynne in *Women and Personal Property* mainly discusses Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53), Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), and Henry James's major works; and apart from Gaskell's last unfinished novel, Osborne in 'Gendered Ownership' concerns herself with Eliot, Dickens, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, and L. T. Meade. Gaskell's lower profile in thing theory studies, as opposed to the limelight enjoyed by several of her contemporaries and near-contemporaries, may indicate that her use of literary objects bears less affinity to other prominent Victorian writers than one would expect, and it is this thesis's contention that in terms of investigating the way material details function within a given text, reading Gaskell alongside Austen would shed a new light on each author's thing

²⁸ Osborne, pp. 1-44.

²⁹ See David Trotter, 'On the Nail: Functional Objects in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*', in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians*, pp. 115-27.

art.

Juxtaposing Gaskell with Austen is not a novelty in literary criticism. Although Austen's productive years were three decades ahead of Gaskell's—Gaskell's first published work, 'Libbie Marsh's Three Eras', appeared in *Howitt's Journal* in 1847, thirty years after Austen embarked on her last novel 'Sanditon'—and Austen wrote about a far narrower range of subjects than Gaskell, traditions of scholarship often compare them on account of their common interest in seemingly insignificant subjects, including feminine pursuits and the everyday. W. A. Craik, when commenting on the trial scene in Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, posits that '[I]ike Jane Austen, though not by Austenian methods, Elizabeth Gaskell reveals the universal significance of the apparently minor'.³⁰ In addition, *Cranford* is widely perceived to read like an Austenian world, and brief references to the resemblance between the characters and practices Gaskell and Austen portray are too numerous to be fully enumerated here.³¹ Even Gaskell's and Austen's similar backgrounds, with one being the daughter of a Unitarian minister and the other the daughter of a Church of England clergyman, are a basis for comparison.³² While these features can constitute a basis of Gaskell and Austen's affinity, what is more important for this thesis's comparative study is the ways in which their fictional objects function in relation to their female characters. In order to better understand Gaskell's and Austen's representations of women's object relationships, however, it is necessary to observe first the literary and social contexts in which they wrote, as their writings coincided with a time in literary history when the status of

³⁰ W. A. Craik, *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 15.

³¹ For example, Janine Barchas in 'Mrs. Gaskell's *North and South*: Austen's Early Legacy', *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 30 (2008), 53-66, analyses how *North and South* can be viewed as an adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*. W. A. Craik also points out several affinities between the two writers' works. She compares Gaskell's Margaret Hale with Austen's Emma Woodhouse (p. 94), and, when discussing Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*, suggests that 'the Gibsons have reminded most readers of the Bennets in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Cummins may echo the Middletons in *Sense and Sensibility*, [and] the Hamleys have links possibly with the Crofts [...] in *Persuasion*' (p. 241).

³² See Patrick Parrinder, 'Tory Daughters and the Politics of Marriage: Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell', in *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 180-212.

details was undergoing changes.

The detail, as Naomi Schor indicates, ‘has until very recently been viewed in the West with suspicion if not downright hostility’.³³ She further explains that ‘[t]he censure of the particular is one of the enabling gestures of neo-classicism, which recycled into the modern age the classical equation of the Ideal with the absence of all particularity’.³⁴ Cynthia Wall suggests that a change of attitude took place in ‘about the middle of the eighteenth century’, when ‘an old, deep suspicion of description as something that got in the way of narrative’ mutated ‘to accommodate and then absorb the ornamental into the contextual’.³⁵ Before such a change happened, she argues, ‘apparent visual scantiness’ was the norm in literature.³⁶ In her discussion of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), she points out that ‘[e]arly novelistic descriptions were essentially *implied* descriptions (or simply tags), calling upon the reader’s presumed visual knowledge and shared cultural contexts to supply imaginative vividness’.³⁷ In Dorothy Van Ghent’s words, the object world of an early novel such as *Moll Flanders* (1722) is not, for example, ‘a world rich in physical, sensuous textures—in images for the eye or for the tactile sense or for the tongue or the ear or for the sense of temperature or the sense of pressure’.³⁸ Towards the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, fictional details still constituted a relatively small portion of a work. For example, Fanny Burney, despite her references to many late-eighteenth-century consumption activities, rarely stops to describe a particular space or dress. Although exactly when literary details rose to greater prominence cannot

³³ Naomi Schor, p. xlii.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Cynthia Wall, ‘The Rhetoric of Description and the Spaces of Things’, in *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections on Occasional Forms: Essays in Honor of J. Paul Hunter*, ed. by Dennis Todd and Cynthia Wall (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), pp. 261-79 (p. 261).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Wall, p. 266. It has to be added that Wall also thinks the physical details in *The Pilgrim’s Progress* serve more than allegorical purposes. She argues that ‘the spatial and situational details of Christian’s escape from Giant Despair’s dungeon spill beyond the requirements of allegory’ and function as ‘the architectural *means* of movement, transition, narrative itself’ (p. 267, italics in original).

³⁸ Dorothy Van Ghent, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 35.

be ascertained, it is clear that nineteenth-century fiction contains more extensive references to the particular than its eighteenth-century counterpart, which may explain a general absence of thing theory enquiries about novels written before the Victorian period.³⁹

The status of objects in literature changed as the nineteenth century progressed. Its importance can be seen in Chapter 17 of Eliot's first full-length novel *Adam Bede* (1859), in which the voice of a novelist at the beginning of her career intervenes and expounds on the principle of her novel writing:

I find a source of delicious sympathy in these faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence, which has been the fate of so many more among my fellow-mortals than a life of pomp or of absolute indigence, of tragic suffering or of world-stirring actions. I turn without shrinking, from cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls, and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner, while the noonday light, softened perhaps by a screen of leaves, falls on her mob-cap, and just touches the rim of her spinning-wheel, and her stone jug, and all those cheap common things which are the precious necessaries of life to her.⁴⁰

Two key components of realist writing are encapsulated in the first sentence quoted above. Here Eliot manifests her allegiance to ordinary subject matter and meticulous description, which in her words are 'faithful pictures of a monotonous homely existence'. To show that she does practise what she preaches, she then fleshes out her

³⁹ Mark Blackwell argues that eighteenth-century men of letters were not interested in investigating the dynamic relationships between objects and subjects. He suggests that we turn to the subgenre of it-narratives to discover eighteenth-century thing theory. See *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. by Mark Blackwell (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. by Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 177.

ideal subject in art with a rich array of material objects: there are this imaginary old woman's 'flower-pot', her 'mob-cap', her 'spinning-wheel', and her 'stone jug'. Eliot takes pains to supply several details as if she were afraid the wrong image of her old woman would appear in her readers' minds.

Indeed, failure to help the reader envision the character a novelist introduced was an artistic fault as far as Victorian realism was concerned. G. H. Lewes, in criticising *Tom Jones* (1749), lays out a view of novelistic composition that echoes Eliot's writing. According to him, 'the fact that in the novel the persons are *described* instead of being *seen*, renders it necessary that the author should supplement as far as possible this inferior vividness of presentation by a more minute detail, both physical and moral' (italics in original).⁴¹ Applying such standards to Austen's novels, Lewes laments her absence of detail, which to him is the main reason for her limited popularity among general Victorian readers. Citing as an example the highly recognizable comic character Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*, Lewes is disappointed that

all we hear of this fatuous curate is, that "he was a tall heavy-looking young man of five-and-twenty. His air was grave and stately, and his manners were very formal." Balzac or Dickens would not have been content without making the reader *see* this Mr. Collins (italics in original).⁴²

Austen's failure to cater to the Victorian taste for visual details led Lewes even to hazard a guess about her short-sightedness:

As far as any direct information can be derived from the authoress, we might

⁴¹ [G. H. Lewes], 'A Word about Tom Jones', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 87 (1860), 331-41 (p. 335).

⁴² [G. H. Lewes], 'The Novels of Jane Austen', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 86 (1859), 99-113 (p. 106).

imagine that this is a purblind world, wherein nobody ever saw anybody except in a dim vagueness which obscured all peculiarities. [...] It was not stated whether she was shortsighted, but the absence of all sense of the outward world—either scenery or personal appearance—is more remarkable in her than in any writer we remember.⁴³

To Lewes, Austen's realist forte does not lie in her physical details, but in her 'dramatic ventriloquism', or her ability to let her characters 'reveal themselves'.⁴⁴

It is true that Austen often dismisses her silly characters after a few brief comments and portrays their relationships with things in an uncomplicated, comical way to show their shallowness. Mr Collins's calculation of the windows at Rosings in *Pride and Prejudice*, Robert Dashwood's fuss about choosing a toothpick-case in *Sense and Sensibility*, Mrs Elton's reiteration of her brother-in-law's barouche-landau in *Emma*, and Mr Rushworth's relish for his costume of a pink satin cloak in *Mansfield Park* all present these characters as being vain and pompous. However, Lewes's attack on Austen's lack of physical details indicates an intrinsic contradiction in his comments on her realism. In the same article that he criticises her for her bareness of description, he also connects her works with miniatures, a genre supposedly known for meticulous attention to detail. Such inconsistency may be due to the same mixed reputation shared by literary details and 'lower' genres such as Dutch painting and miniatures. As Ruth B. Yeazell argues, the painting metaphor alluded to by nineteenth-century literary critics had 'a whole set of connotations'.⁴⁵ In the nineteenth century, features of Dutch painting such as the representation of common subjects, the abundance of detail, and the focus on the home were praised as well as denigrated: common subjects could denote

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lewes, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', p. 105.

⁴⁵ Ruth B. Yeazell, *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 9.

vulgarity, attention to detail could mean deficiency in conveying serious ideas, and depiction of the home could be negatively connected with triviality due to its association with women.⁴⁶ Therefore, no matter how much admiration it received, Dutch painting in the genre hierarchy of the arts was considered to be inherently inferior to Italian history or religious painting.

In realist writing as in such ‘lower’ genres as Dutch painting and miniatures, the very particularity of detail, despite its greater significance in the nineteenth century, was also a reason for its own negative associations. Just as Dutch still lifes were deemed intrinsically inferior to Italian history or religious paintings, description was long considered to play second fiddle to narrative in literary history. In both cases, minuteness—despite its growing recognition in the nineteenth century—was connected with the low and the trivial.⁴⁷ More importantly for the purposes of this thesis, such discrimination was highly gendered. As Naomi Schor is at pains to point out, the detail and more specifically ‘the *detail as negativity*’ should be considered in the contexts of how it is ‘bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose “prosiness” is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women’ (italics in original).⁴⁸

Viewed in the light of artistic genres’ various implications, some of the favourable expressions used by nineteenth-century commentators to assess Austen and Gaskell become equivocal. Walter Scott’s review of Austen’s *Emma* (1815) is one such example:

The author’s knowledge of the world, and the peculiar tact with which she presents characters that the reader cannot fail to recognize, reminds us something of the

⁴⁶ For the mixed perception of Dutch painting, see Yeazell, pp. 9-13.

⁴⁷ The correspondence between nineteenth-century fiction and Dutch painting is more complicated than I refer to here. For a detailed discussion of how the collective phrase ‘Dutch painting’ came to be applied to realist writing, see Yeazell, pp. 1-23.

⁴⁸ Naomi Schor, p. xlii.

merits of the Flemish school of painting. The subjects are not often elegant and certainly never grand; but they are finished up to nature, and with a precision which delights the reader.⁴⁹

Here Scott draws an analogy between Austen's writing and Flemish painting—or Dutch, as nineteenth-century critics did not discriminate between the two, invoking pictorial images through words associated with the actual practice of painting. The word 'finish', with the senses of 'to perfect finally or in detail' and 'to put the final and completing touches to (a thing)' (*OED Online*), casts Austen's mental labour in a tangible form, and the word 'precision', though primarily referring to preciseness in language, is associated with minute details, which can be abstract as well as physical. Scott's critique appears admiring, but it actually carries a slight sneer precisely where praise is expressed, as the basis of his analogy, Flemish painting, is in a tradition where details have ambiguous connotations. Given the nineteenth century's contradictory notions of Flemish painting's defining characteristics, then, Scott's praise is highly qualified, simultaneously placing Austen in the lower end of the artistic hierarchy and extolling her achievement.

More significantly, the way in which Scott uses an artistic format to concretize Austen's intellectual work is deeply gendered, as the dichotomy between high and low genres, the general and the detail, was conventionally mapped onto sexual stereotypes. Thus in describing Austen's subjects as 'not often elegant' and 'certainly never grand', Scott is not only setting the boundaries beyond which he thinks Austen could not reach but also implicitly marking her off from the male domain. The word 'elegant' here requires further explanation, as it might not denote the qualities of gracefulness and refinement commonly recognised today and often intuitively associated with Austen. According to the *OED Online*, the adjective, when used to describe a person, can denote 'having superior taste or discernment'. The *OED Online* specifies that 'elegant' in this

⁴⁹ [Walter Scott], 'Review of *Emma*', *The Quarterly Review*, 14 (1815), 188-201 (p. 197).

sense is now used only in ‘elegant scholar’, a gender-neutral term in our modern understanding, but examples given from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show that ‘elegant’ meaning possessing a shrewd intellect was exclusively associated with men. By negating Austen’s ability to portray ‘elegant’ and ‘grand’ characters, which by convention would have required intellectual capacities more associated with men than with women, Scott denies her participation in the male—and hence usually superior—area of writing. Instead, he limits her achievements to the female—and hence inferior—realm by stressing her power to ‘delight’ the reader.

On a later occasion, Scott was careful to distinguish his descriptive style from Austen’s. In a journal entry written in 1826, he explicitly contrasts himself with Austen in his critical assessment of her:

That young lady had a talent for describing the involvement and feelings and characters of ordinary life which is to me the most wonderful I ever met with. The Big Bow-wow strain I can do myself like any now going, but the exquisite touch which renders ordinary commonplace things and characters interesting from the truth of the description and the sentiment is denied to me.⁵⁰

Here Scott not only draws a clear line between his ‘Big Bow-wow strain’ and Austen’s ‘exquisite touch’ but also emphasises his inability to write like her. Again, Scott uses the language rooted in genre and gender hierarchies to describe Austen’s style. Just as he stresses her ability to ‘finish’ and ‘delight’ in the review of *Emma*, here he singles out her ‘exquisite touch’. Such a phrase, which calls to mind marks left by a paintbrush, is reminiscent of the finer details in painting, and as details were conventionally feminised and implicitly looked down upon, Scott’s praise here is again limited. In addition, his effort to preserve his distinction from Austen clearly indicates his participation in a

⁵⁰ Quoted in Parrinder, p. 164.

gendered tradition of literary criticism.

Richard Whateley, an early nineteenth-century critic, also observes that Austen's writing can be compared to the 'accurate delineation of events and characters' in Flemish paintings.⁵¹ The word 'delineation' may not imply the slightly condescending attitude Scott evinces through his use of 'exquisite touch', but Whateley's alignment of Austen's literary style with that of the Flemish painter suggests that such a painting metaphor had become a critical norm by his time. G. H. Lewes, who had a clear view about what a good novel should be like, also shared Scott's idea of the gendered hierarchy of literary and artistic genres when appraising Austen's novelistic style. In an essay mainly dedicated to raising Austen's profile among his contemporary intelligentsia, Lewes sets the tone of his subsequent discussion by first establishing Austen's inferiority to Scott:

It is intelligible how the blaze of Scott should have thrown her into the shade, at first: beside his frescoes her works are but miniatures; exquisite as miniatures, yet incapable of ever filling that space in the public eye which was filled by his massive and masterly pictures.⁵²

Lewes's comparison of the two authors is characterised by a clear gender binary. While Scott is in a position to act, to dazzle according to Lewes's figurative terms, Austen can only take a passive role, that of being thrown 'into the shade', in the imaginary contest where Lewes places her. The contrast between an active male and a passive female is then translated into the hierarchical as well as gendered review of artistic genres. In maintaining the resemblance between Scott's writing and 'massive and masterly pictures', Lewes accords Scott the superior status of an Italian historical painter. By

⁵¹ [Richard Whateley], 'Review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*', *The Quarterly Review*, 24 (1821), 352-76 (p. 353).

⁵² Lewes, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', p. 99.

contrast, he places Austen on the level of miniaturists with his allusion to her ‘miniature’-like works. Such a painting analogy, in the same vein as Scott’s review of Austen and his own self-evaluation, taps into the mixed perception of artistic genres in his time. Despite their popularity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, miniatures with their diminutive form and wider availability could not compare with portraits in artistic standing in the public mind. In addition, their acceptance as a genteel feminine pursuit distanced them further from the kind of masculine, professional status oil painting enjoyed.⁵³ Despite ranking Austen among the best novelists in English literature and even drawing on Austen’s merits to criticise Charlotte Brontë,⁵⁴ Lewes in his assessment of Austen’s achievement follows the same line of argument as that used by Scott. Both critics implicitly connect Austen’s works with a lower art form when praising her.

Gaskell’s writing was also subjected to the critical voice that was rooted in a gendered view of artistic genres and women’s writing. Lewes’s comment that Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) ‘paints for us at once the psychological drama and the scenic accessories with so much vividness’ is itself a language in which commendation is discounted.⁵⁵ Although Lewes’s painting metaphor conveys a clear message of positive evaluation, the intrinsic hierarchy of artistic genres suggests that the ‘scenic accessories’, ‘vividness’, and attention to detail are inferior artistic qualities. In addition to Lewes, several of Gaskell’s reviewers also chose to highlight her delineating talent, and in doing so, ensconced her in a womanly place. It is in this vein that Frederick Greenwood, the editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*, evaluates Gaskell’s literary merits in his note published with the unfinished *Wives and Daughters* after Gaskell’s

⁵³ Katherine Coombs, *The Portrait Miniature in England* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), pp. 104-07.

⁵⁴ According to Brontë’s letter to Lewes in 1848, he condescendingly advised her to ‘“learn to acknowledge her [Austen] as one of the greatest artists, of the greatest painters of human character, and one of the writers with the nicest sense of means to an end that ever lived”’. See *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 100.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Hugh Witemeyer, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 3.

sudden death in 1865. Having sketched a speculative ending for *Wives and Daughters*, Greenwood goes on to comment on Gaskell's portrayal of characters using examples from the novel. Cynthia is the character Greenwood singled out:

Cynthia is one of the most difficult characters which have ever been attempted in our time. Perfect art always obscures the difficulties it overcomes; and it is not till we try to follow the processes by which such a character as the Tito of *Romola* is created, for instance, that we begin to understand what a marvellous piece of work it is. To be sure, Cynthia was not so difficult, nor is it nearly so great a creation as that splendid achievement of art and thought – of the rarest art, of the profoundest thought. But she also belongs to the kind of characters which are conceived only in minds large, clear, harmonious and just, and which can be portrayed fully and without flaw only by hands obedient to the finest motions of the mind.⁵⁶

For Greenwood as for Lewes, Gaskell's merit lies in the small. While Lewes emphasises her gift of painting 'scenic accessories', Greenwood commends her for her ability to paint with 'hands [that are] obedient to the finest motions of the mind'. As can be expected from the double-edged reputation of the detail in the arts, however, Greenwood's compliment is undercut by condescension. Like Lewes, who in his comparison of Austen and Scott assigns Austen a passive role by figuratively placing her under the shadow of Scott, Greenwood phrases his evaluation in a way that highlights Gaskell's passivity: the 'hands' that produce the words are rid of their agency when they are described as being 'obedient'. Also, like Scott when he states that Austen's subjects are neither 'elegant' nor 'grand', Greenwood assesses Gaskell with the assumption that her writing has to be judged by a different standard. In saying that

⁵⁶ Quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), ed. by Pam Morris (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 651.

Gaskell's creative power cannot compare with 'the rarest art' and 'the profoundest thought' demonstrated in Eliot's works, Greenwood establishes a hierarchy, in which Eliot's art belongs to the arena of artistic achievement and intellectual endowment, while Gaskell's is commendable only in aesthetic and moral terms such as 'large, clear, harmonious and just'.⁵⁷ Such a hierarchy is gendered, as women in the period were more associated with the beautiful and the moral than with the intellectual.

Greenwood's diction remains in the same vein a few lines later when he turns his attention from Gaskell's depiction of Cynthia to that of Osborne Hamley: 'Mrs Gaskell had drawn a dozen characters more striking than Osborne since she wrote *Mary Barton* but not one which shows more exquisite finish'.⁵⁸ The phrase 'exquisite finish' calls to mind Scott's comment on Austen's 'exquisite touch'. Both phrases, though intended as praise, label female writers' art as 'feminine' and, by convention, inferior. Such a gender-biased view of Gaskell was shared among many subsequent commentators. For example, Lord David Cecil, employing the same metaphor of painting used by Lewes and Greenwood, condescendingly points out that Gaskell cannot 'draw a full-length portrait of a man'.⁵⁹ In highlighting Gaskell's talent for describing minutiae, then, these male critics reinforce her femininity and produce a diminutive image of her capabilities.

In linking Austen's and Gaskell's works to Dutch paintings or miniatures, and in employing painting metaphors to materialise their practices of writing, then, the male reviewers I have discussed thus far are utilising the ambiguous and gendered status shared between literary objects and 'lower' artistic genres to assess women writers' works in a way that recognises as well as depreciates their value. Treating women writers' works with condescension had an established tradition in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary criticism. Mary Poovey has noted that 'the critical

⁵⁷ Of course, George Eliot also suffered from the nineteenth-century presumptions of appropriate 'male' and 'female' literary styles, but further discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁵⁸ See above at n. 56.

⁵⁹ Lord David Cecil, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934), p. 209.

vocabulary applied to women's writings calls for special interpretation'—one example she gives is that 'to say that a lady's novel is "in the main correctly written" is to praise grammar and spelling rather than ideas'—. ⁶⁰ As the foregoing examples show, women writers' works were associated with things that were considered to be less serious even when the connections made appeared to present a positive evaluation. Hannah More might have been keenly aware of women's subjection to being unfairly judged on a material basis when she comments on men's appraisal of women's literary efforts in *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799):

Men of learning, who are naturally apt to estimate works in proportion as they appear to be the result of art, study, and institution, are apt to consider even the happier performances of the other sex as the spontaneous productions of a fruitful but shallow soil; and to give them the same sort of praise which we bestow on certain sallads [sic], which often draw from us a sort of wondering commendation; not indeed as being worth much in themselves, but because by the lightness of the earth, and a happy knack of the gardener, these indifferent cresses spring up in a night, and therefore one is ready to wonder they are no worse. ⁶¹

For Austen and Gaskell, whose novels are commonly examined in the tradition of realism, ⁶² the issue of a mixed conception of women and things is more complicated than the connection between female literary creations and salad referred to by More. Because of the rise of realism, fictional details acquired a more legitimate status in

⁶⁰ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 39.

⁶¹ Quoted in Poovey, *Proper Lady*, p. 39.

⁶² While Gaskell's realism is more recognisable, Austen's status as a realist novelist may be a borderline case. It is not my aim in this thesis to enter into discussions about what realism means and how 'realistic' Austen is. Suffice to say that I accept Austen as a realist writer for her focus on characters drawn from life. In fact, Walter Scott's comment on the subjects chosen by Austen has led William Galperin in 'Austen's Earliest Readers and the Rise of the Janeites', in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, ed. by Deidre Lynch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 87-114, to suggest that 'Walter Scott may well have been the first to install Austen as the realist par excellence' (p. 96).

nineteenth-century literary criticism. While earlier fiction tended to contain fewer objects, by the nineteenth century the prevailing aesthetics had gravitated towards minuteness. Austen and Gaskell were thus writing against a literary background in which details could be at once valued and suspected. Behind such mixed perceptions of literary objects was an 'uneven' ideology, a concept Poovey has explored in her book about how the ideology of gender was involved in the social and political developments of mid-Victorian England. According to her, an ideology was uneven

both in the sense of being experienced differently by individuals who were positioned differently within the social formation (by sex, class, or race, for example) and in the sense of being articulated differently by the different institutions, discourses, and practices that it both constituted and was constituted by.⁶³

Following Poovey's observation, I argue that the paradoxical qualities of details that provided nineteenth-century male critics with words to praise Austen and Gaskell while implicitly placing them in an inferior position also allowed them to interrogate the issue of gender through objects. Poovey has indicated that women's literary career opportunities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were bound up with restrictions emanating from society's expectation of proper female behaviour, and writing in such circumstances, women writers had developed strategies for self-expression that could be accommodated by the dominant ideology.⁶⁴ Austen's and Gaskell's ways of using their fictional details, I suggest, may be such strategies.

The ways in which nineteenth-century women writers dealt with their social restrictions were varied, but distinct patterns could still be observed. Sandra Gilbert and

⁶³ Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 3.

⁶⁴ Poovey, *Proper Lady*, pp. 35-44.

Susan Gubar have noted ‘a distinctively female literary tradition’ in nineteenth-century British and American women writers, arguing that a ‘coherence of theme and imagery’, especially ‘[i]mages of enclosure and escape, fantasies in which maddened doubles functioned as asocial surrogates for docile selves, metaphors of physical discomfort manifested in frozen landscapes and fiery interiors’ and ‘depictions of diseases like anorexia, agoraphobia, and claustrophobia’ could be found in the works of such authors as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë.⁶⁵ While Gilbert and Gubar’s focus on common plot features and character types reveals a more or less consistent pattern in women’s writing throughout the nineteenth century, my emphasis on literary objects shows a different picture. It is my contention that Austen’s and Gaskell’s responses to established gender ideology resembled each other more than they resembled other prominent female novelists writing in the nineteenth century such as Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot.

First, the ways in which Brontë and Eliot established their writing identity were distinctly different from those employed by Austen and Gaskell. As Poovey has noted, rules of propriety led women writers in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary worlds either to publish anonymously or, when they used their own names, to justify their professional writing by moral reasons.⁶⁶ Compared with these strategies, Brontë’s and Eliot’s were bolder in the sense that they both wrote under male pseudonyms and were at one point noted for producing unfeminine works. Brontë persisted in using ‘Currer Bell’ throughout her writing career, even after her real gender identity had been established; Eliot, who was baptised Mary Anne Evans, was—and still is—best known by her male pen name, but Austen and Gaskell did not take this route.

Austen’s name, real or assumed, did not appear in any of her published works. She even seemed to be content with her inferior womanly place when she looked back on

⁶⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. xi.

⁶⁶ Poovey, *Proper Lady*, pp. 38-39.

her literary career, accepting the role of a miniature painter Lewes was to assign to her. In a letter to her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh on her last birthday in 1816, Austen draws an analogy between her writing and the practice of miniature painting:

What should I do, my dearest E. with your manly, vigorous sketches, so full of life and spirit? How could I possibly join them on to a little bit of ivory, two inches wide, on which I work with a brush so fine as to produce little effect after much labour?⁶⁷

Here Austen situates her works in exactly the same framework Scott and Lewes were to use to judge her. Her words about her nephew's 'manly, vigorous sketches' are similar to Lewes's use of 'massive and masterly pictures' to refer to Scott's writing. For describing her own art, however, she rests with the small and the exquisite. Gaskell's perception of her writing follows a similar pattern. She invented the pseudonym 'Cotton Mather Mills' only to abandon it soon after. *Mary Barton*, *Ruth*, and *North and South* were published anonymously; the name 'E. C. Gaskell' that appeared on the title page of her biography of Brontë does not clearly signal the author's gender; and it was not until her unfinished novel was published after her death that the name 'Mrs Gaskell' was associated with her in print.⁶⁸ While Brontë and Eliot consciously adopted a male persona in choosing and sticking to a male pseudonym, Austen and Gaskell did not actively seek to conceal their gender.

Such a fundamental difference in the perception of writing identity is reflected in the divergent ways in which Brontë, Eliot, Austen, and Gaskell approach things and women in their works. Brontë's and Eliot's fictional objects, more often than Austen's

⁶⁷ Quoted in Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 7.

⁶⁸ Deirdre d'Albertis explores Gaskell's multiple forms of self-representation in 'The Life and Letters of E. C. Gaskell', in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 10-26.

or Gaskell's, tend to serve as indices of a female character's mind. For example, the red-room in *Jane Eyre* is strongly linked with the heroine's distraught mental state, and in *Adam Bede*, Hetty's earrings are mentioned alongside the narrator's explorations of Hetty's social aspirations. Whereas Brontë and Eliot place more emphasis on the relation between things and characters' psychology, Austen and Gaskell interrogate women's object relationships in a more textually- and materially-oriented way. Craik has indicated the similarity between Austen and Gaskell in this respect, arguing that in a Gaskell novel, as well as in an Austen one, 'there is no detail that does not contribute in some way towards the pattern and the development of the themes'.⁶⁹ In Austen's case, she carefully weaves plots around her fictional objects and, when investing them with significance, draws on their material characteristics and social implications. The passage in which Austen compares her novels to miniatures has been read as indicating her ironic self-depreciation or her awareness of her womanly limitations, but perhaps Austen is elucidating her composition strategy using the same gendered, contradictory codes that were prevalent in the conventionally male-dominated domain of literary criticism. Viewed in this light, the ways in which she describes things and their connections with women in her novels may be her means of turning her society's inconsistent associations of women and objects into interrogations of women's status and explorations of possibilities for female agency.

Gaskell, as a firmly-established realist novelist, portrays fictional worlds that are far richer than Austen's. There is no doubt that Gaskell describes her houses and clothes with the degree of attentiveness that is commonly expected of typical Victorian fiction. The Thorntons' house in *North and South* and the young Sylvia's outfit in *Sylvia's Lovers*, for instance, are two examples in which details seem mainly to serve as background information and can be skipped over in terms of advancing the plot. Roland Barthes has noted the 'reality effect' as a feature of nineteenth-century fiction, arguing

⁶⁹ Craik, p. 51.

that certain details do not need to be interpreted at all, as they signify nothing beyond the general real: ‘Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door finally say nothing but this: *we are real*; it is the category of ‘the real’ [...] which is then signified’.⁷⁰ However, many of Gaskell’s objects are similarly tactfully embedded in her narratives like Austen’s, and this thesis concerns how Gaskell, like Austen, masquerades her enquiries into women’s place as innocent references to women’s preoccupations with trivial things.

Austen’s and Gaskell’s ways of using literary objects are in need of a thing theory approach that is different from those applied to other female writers such as Brontë and Eliot. While Brontë’s rich variety of textile imagery in *Shirley* calls for an enquiry that takes into account the *bric-à-brac* quality of disparate collections⁷¹ and Eliot’s tendency to specify her details as clearly as possible makes her literary objects less ideally suited to Freedgood’s ‘metonymic reading’,⁷² Austen’s and Gaskell’s textually framed objects are promising for the method I adopt for this thesis: a thing theory reading that is based on Freedgood’s metonymic reading but relies, more heavily than Freedgood proposes, on objects’ interaction with their narrative frameworks. This way of looking at Austen’s and Gaskell’s literary things will benefit from knowledge of material and cultural backgrounds as well as an active readerly engagement with the text. With this method, I wish to retrieve the wealth of meanings associated with objects that Austen’s and Gaskell’s readers may not instantly recognise, and shed light on the

⁷⁰ Roland Barthes, ‘The Reality Effect’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; repr. 1989), pp. 141-48

⁷¹ See Deborah Wynne, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s Frocks and *Shirley*’s Queer Textiles’, in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians*, pp. 147-62.

⁷² Freedgood, drawing examples from *Middlemarch* (1871-72), argues that George Eliot’s narrator ‘dictates transfers of meaning, and no particular meaning can inhere in a thing if that meaning derives from a symbolic system beyond the novel’s pages’ (p. 116). In Freedgood’s view, 1870 marked the end of metonymy in realist fiction, but Osborne holds a different opinion: in discussing the significance of Dorothea’s relationship with her mother’s emeralds, Osborne employs Freedgood’s approach to prove that Eliot does not stabilise the meaning of every object in her novels. Perhaps it is safer to say that the increasing quantity and growing determinacy of literary objects in the second half of the nineteenth century make identifying things suited for Freedgood’s method of reading more difficult. For Osborne’s reading of *Middlemarch*, see ‘Inherited Emotions: George Eliot and the Politics of Heirlooms’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 64 (2010), 465-93.

significance of their references to seemingly trivial things.

In each of the novelists' object worlds, I investigate mainly two categories of things: domestic interiors and luxuries. On the whole, Austen and Gaskell represent women whose interactions with things are restricted to the domestic realm, and my focus on female characters' involvement results in a woman-thing pattern that may appear monotonous and predictable. However, this seemingly coherent structure is disturbed in some individual texts and will be dealt with where the disruptions occur. One anomaly that needs to be explained here is that the part on Austen contains an extra chapter on portraits and miniatures. Although strictly speaking pictures can be filed under the name of domestic interiors, and the section on Gaskell's fictional houses does discuss portraits and miniatures, Austen's references to pictures are so nuanced that they need to be investigated in a separate chapter.

As my methodology concerns analyses of narrative frameworks, I have chosen to discuss only works that are fully-developed. Thus I have excluded, in Austen's case, her juvenilia and unfinished pieces, and, in Gaskell's case, her idiosyncratic *Cranford* and her short stories. These omissions do not arise from any consideration that the object worlds in these works are less exciting than those I discuss, but because carefully composed, full-length novels are central to my concentration on textually significant things. In fact, but for its loose and episodic format, *Cranford* with its rich and varied references to feminine concerns, would have made a useful text for this thesis. I would like to point out, in addition, that the fragment of *Sanditon* registers a richer range of materials than Austen's published novels and thus gravitates more towards the degree of minuteness one would expect to find in Victorian fiction. It would be fascinating to

know whether the whole-length portrait of Sir Denham and one miniature of Mr Hollis in Lady Denham's sitting room would have been developed if Austen had lived to finish *Sanditon*, but such matters can only remain speculative.

One other novel I have not interpreted is Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. Freedgood's discussion of checked curtains in the novel indicates that it is a valuable text in thing theory studies. The reason for its exclusion from this thesis is my focus on middle-class characters. The definition of the middle class was unstable, and investigating all the complexities connected with the term is beyond the scope of this thesis.⁷³ I simply note that Mary Barton, as the daughter of a millworker, is not as confined to the domestic environment as Gaskell's other economically vulnerable middle-class women. Among the characters I discuss, Ruth and Sylvia are the two characters who most resemble Mary in their social status. Both are farmers' daughters and therefore not strictly 'middle-class'. However, for the most part of the novel Ruth moves among genteel circles, and Sylvia's life is explicitly restricted to the home after she marries a shop owner. In comparison, if Mary can be described as being 'middle-class', it must be the Mary who is married to Jem Wilson, an engineer who is stepping up the social ladder over the course of the novel. As the novel does not describe Mary's married life until the last chapter and, when it does, situates its description in the New World, I consider Mary to be different from Ruth and Sylvia.

My examination follows a rough chronological order and begins with Austen's object world. Chapter One, 'Women and Pictures: Painting Traditions and Female

⁷³ Although historians have established that the term 'middle class' entered common usage in the late eighteenth century, they have indicated that it denotes different social groups at different points in time. More commonly known as 'the middling sort' during the eighteenth century, the middle class between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, according to John Seed, were 'distinguished from the landed aristocracy and gentry by their need to generate an income from some kind of active occupation(s) and differed 'from the labouring majority by their possession of property' (p. 115). This occupation-based definition has its limitations, as Seed also discusses the overlap of economic activities among the middle class in 'From "Middling Sort" to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century England', in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. by M. L. Bush (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 114-35 (pp. 117-118). Apart from economic criteria, political and religious allegiances also played a part in shaping the concept of 'middle class' in the early nineteenth century. See Simon Gunn and Rachel Bell, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl* (London: Phoenix, 2003), pp. 10-15, for further discussion.

Agency in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*', explores the gendered hierarchy of artistic genres, the material and social meanings of portraits and miniatures, and the practice of portrait painting in Austen's time to understand more fully her references to pictures at key narrative moments in her novels. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet's final union with Darcy is considered in the light of her encounter with a series of paintings at Pemberley before she finally becomes its mistress. Austen illustrates Elizabeth's agency by setting her personal experience of the paintings against the verbal accounts offered by the housekeeper, Mrs Reynolds, whose name evokes the prominent portrait painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Elizabeth's potentially egalitarian relationship with Darcy is best embodied in the scene where she sees his portrait. I suggest that Austen draws on the genre of the eye miniature in her description of the complicated power struggles involved in the act of gazing in this scene. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy Steele's unconventional use of miniatures and other sentimental memorabilia brings to the fore the question of Elinor Dashwood's 'selflessness'. In *Emma*, the scene where Emma paints a portrait of Harriet, when considered within the framework of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portrait painting, suggests Austen's investigation into the complexities of heterosexual unions. These instances indicate that Austen exploits the material and social traditions of portraiture to address the issue of women's quest for agency.

Chapter Two, 'Women in the House: Interior Design and Gender Roles in *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*', examines the relationships between women, interior decoration, and ideal marriages in *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* in the contexts of Georgian furnishing styles and gendered use of space. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland's seemingly silly idea of discovering Gothic elements in General Tilney's classically-furnished house can be read as a woman's attempt to disrupt powerful patriarchal symbols by means of mundane materiality. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price's acquisition of personal

fulfilment within the framework of patriarchy is articulated through her ingenious way of constructing a personal space in Sir Thomas's house, a representation of the rigid patriarchal system he upholds. In *Persuasion*, Sir Walter's mirrored Kellynch Hall and the dull drawing rooms of the two Musgrove families are examined alongside the personalised space of Captain Harville's house at Lyme. Anne Elliot's fascination with the naval officer's domestic arrangements and her observation of his collaborative relationship with his wife indicate that the relationship Anne is going to form with Captain Wentworth by marrying him will depart from those seen in her original circles. By delineating women's affinity with specific domestic interiors and men's roles in these settings, Austen explores possible patterns of interaction between husbands and wives which differ from the established stereotypes.

Chapter Three, 'Women and Luxuries: Gifts and Gendered Power Relations in *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*', draws on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century consumer cultures to examine the gendered power relations involved in the practice of gift-giving in Austen, especially in the works where gifts contribute to women's emotional turmoil. In *Mansfield Park*, men's gifts – a ball gown from Sir Thomas and two gold chains from Henry Crawford and Edmund Bertram respectively – are compared with the silver knife Fanny Price buys for her sister Betsey. Fanny's agency is presented through her success in transforming the problematic meanings of male gifts and through her ability to initiate a different gift relation. In *Emma*, the piano and sheet music that Frank Churchill purchases for Jane Fairfax is examined alongside the speculation among the Highbury community about the identity of the sender that these gifts prompt. Both instances reveal Austen's exploration of how women could withstand their awareness of male dominance hidden in luxuries given by men.

While the first three chapters explore Austen's portrayal of women and things, the last two chapters focus on Gaskell's way of representing objects. Chapter Four, 'Women beside and beyond the Hearth: The Home and Women's Prospects in *North and South*

and *Wives and Daughters*', investigates women's subordinate status in the home through the lens of nineteenth-century furnishing styles and compares Gaskell's use of spatial details to that of Austen. In *North and South*, Margaret Hale's connection to different drawing-room objects signifies her objectification in the domestic sphere, but the final scene, also set indoors, reveals possibilities of unconventional power distribution. In *Wives and Daughters*, different forms of women's objectification are embodied in the houses Molly Gibson visits, and her relatively less housebound state is discussed in the context of the traditional association of women with domestic objects. The two heroines' strong interest in the world outside the home suggests Gaskell's endorsement of women's participation in a wider variety of activities.

Chapter Five, 'Women and Gifts of All Sorts: Gift Exchange and Patriarchal Symbolism in *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers*', draws on the cultural meanings of things in order to understand the troubled relationships Gaskell's vulnerable female characters have with gifts. In *Ruth*, the presents Ruth receives from men, such as the white muslin from Mr Bellingham and the silk gown from Mr Bradshaw, represent male dominance, while gifts from women, including a wedding ring from Faith Benson and two widow's caps from Sally, bring acceptance and solidarity. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, the gifts Sylvia Robson receives from her parents, her lover Charlie Kinraid, and her cousin-turned-husband Philip Hepburn signify patriarchal society's tendency to control women through material objects. These two texts are unique in that new relationships with objects are explored in the heroines' doubles: Jemima Bradshaw in *Ruth* and Hester Rose in *Sylvia's Lovers*. This arrangement shows Gaskell's exploration of more possibilities of prospects for women.

Taken together, these chapters illustrate how Austen and Gaskell draw on the gendered qualities of things to question society's restrictions on women and to push boundaries in ways that operate more subtly than the dominant ideological power. Thing theory suggests that objects are likely to be the centres of political critique, and I argue

here that Austen and Gaskell challenge the conventions of patriarchy through the use of things in their works.

Chapter One:

Women and Pictures: Painting Traditions and Female Agency in *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and *Emma*

Pictures in the language of nineteenth-century literary criticism, as I have suggested in the Introduction, often appeared as a figure of speech to designate the overall style of an author's oeuvre. G. H. Lewes referred to Scott's works as 'frescoes' and Austen's as 'miniatures', and Austen also described herself as a miniaturist. In Austen's novels, however, pictures serve a more nuanced purpose than symbolically representing her, or for that matter any other author's, literary merits. It is significant that in Austen's generally bare fictional worlds, portraits and miniatures take centre stage in several pivotal scenes: Elizabeth's encounter with Darcy's portrait in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Lucy's display of Edward's miniature to Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and Emma's painting of Harriet in *Emma* (1816) are three instances in which pictures feature prominently. Captured in, or refracted through, these scenes are moments when the heroine experiences a tension between what she has been thinking of the hero and what she is about to be made to recognise. Elizabeth sees Darcy in a new light in the gallery at Pemberley; Elinor is confronted with the fact that the man she thought was in love with her is actually secretly engaged to another woman; Emma presents an idealised image of Harriet with the intention of marrying her off to a suitable husband only to find that her protégée and the very man she has always loved might have their eye on each other.

As these conflicting moments all involve the need for these characters to reshape their personal beliefs and acquire more enlightened views about social conventions, critics tend to discuss pictures in Austen's novels in the vein of the female

Bildungsroman. Alexander Bove analyses the portrait scene in *Pride and Prejudice* to show how Elizabeth is at a loss to picture Darcy's true character,⁷⁴ and Joe Bray brings to the fore the debate over 'likeness' in early-nineteenth-century aesthetics of portrait painting, investigating how Emma puzzles over the real merits and faults of people around her.⁷⁵ What both Bove and Bray focus on is the heroines' recognition of their own faults and how they finally reinstate themselves in the social structure. Such an argument aligns them with those critics who are interested in the balance between individuality and social conformity. Commenting on *Emma*, Kenneth Moler explains that what the novel questions 'is not Emma's position or function in life, but whether something has prevented her from filling her known position properly and performing her given function well'.⁷⁶ Franco Moretti singles out the Pemberley episode and argues that Elizabeth's enlightenment lies in her discovery of a 'handsome' world which 'envelops the ideal of a golden mean, of a clear and reciprocal translatability between the individual and his context'.⁷⁷

Another critic of Austen's fictional pictures has a more positive view of the heroine's agency. Identifying the quality of self-orientation as one of the many parallels shared between the novel and the portrait in their eighteenth-century reception, Alison Conway argues that towards the end of the eighteenth century, the danger of self-obsession people feared both genres could elicit gradually assumed forms that could be accommodated by a society that favoured morality and sympathy.⁷⁸ Though focusing on novels composed between 1709 and 1791, Conway in her afterword briefly comments on Austen's use of portraiture in *Pride and Prejudice*. Calling attention to

⁷⁴ Alexander Bove, 'The "Unbearable Realism of A Dream": On the Subject of Portraits in Austen and Dickens', *ELH*, 74 (2007), 655-79 (pp. 659-62).

⁷⁵ See Joe Bray, 'Belinda, Emma, and the "Likeness" of the Portrait', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 33 (2011), 1-15.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Moler, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1968), p. 6.

⁷⁷ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. by Albert Sbragia, new edn (London: Verso, 2000), p. 37.

⁷⁸ Alison Conway, *Private Interests: Women, Portraiture, and the Visual Culture of the English Novel, 1709-1791* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 14.

Elizabeth's playful admission of her 'interests' in the grounds of Pemberley after her visit, Conway thinks that Austen depicts the portrait 'both as the guarantor of genuine affection experienced by her heroine and as the symbol of all that Elizabeth has to gain as the mistress of Darcy's estate', thus 'allowing irony to subsume some of the interpretive problems the portrait creates in earlier narratives'.⁷⁹

What emerges from the discussions of Bove, Bray, and Conway is that Austen, when referring to pictures in her novels, is utilising her culture's perception of portraiture to explore issues surrounding self and others. While I concur with their views in this respect, I propose that an approach that takes into account the gendered significance of portrait viewing and painting can yield additional insights into Austen's references to pictures in her novels. Although Bove, Bray, and Conway draw on aspects of portraiture's historical significance in formulating their ideas of Austen's fictional pictures, they centre their arguments more on the abstract concepts of early-nineteenth-century aesthetics than on pictures' materiality, social functions, and actual creation. More importantly, they do not consider the role gender plays in the aesthetic framework on which they base their critical positions. While theoretical debate in art is an important factor to consider in discussing pictures in Austen, and I am not trying to exclude such a facet from my reading, I focus more on the physical properties of portraits and miniatures and their gendered associations. Informed by such an understanding, I suggest that the strain on heroines borne out in Austen's painting scenes is more specifically those female protagonists' struggle for agency in their patriarchal cultures.

⁷⁹ Conway, pp. 212-13.

ELIZABETH BENNET'S PICTURE-VIEWING TOUR OF PEMBERLEY

Critics commenting on Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley tend to focus on her encounter with Darcy's portrait in the gallery.⁸⁰ However, if a fuller understanding of Austen's use of portraits in *Pride and Prejudice* is to emerge from an investigation, that climactic moment should be considered in the context of all the pictures to which Elizabeth pays attention at Pemberley and with regard to the heroine's relationship with the Pemberley housekeeper, Mrs Reynolds. Before stepping into the gallery and being confronted with the portrait of Darcy, Elizabeth has, under the guidance of Mrs Reynolds, seen the miniatures of Wickham, Mr Darcy, and Miss Darcy in the late Mr Darcy's favourite room. The location is significant, as it provides an appropriate backdrop against which Elizabeth's exploration of female agency is set. If Pemberley, a country estate, is viewed as a metonym for the patriarchal system it upholds, the room most favoured by the master represents the hub of patriarchal dominance, and the demonstration of such patriarchal power is attested to by the space's dual qualities of privacy and publicity. The fact that a private space serves as an overt sign of its occupant's authority may sound perplexing, but this is connected with the ambiguous attitude towards privacy and publicity among the upper classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The domestic environment of the country house in this period was basically public 'with its absence of corridors and its interconnecting rooms', but 'rooms of retreat' were widely available for those who craved some privacy,⁸¹ and given the fact that the use of space was governed by explicit gender specificity and hierarchy,⁸² it was common for the head of a house to have a room reserved for his

⁸⁰ For a discussion of the visual politics involved in the Pemberley gallery scenes of major film productions, see Joyce Goggin, 'Pride and Prejudice Reloaded: Navigating the Space of Pemberley', *Persuasions On-Line*, 27 (2007) <<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no2/goggin.htm>> [accessed 1 August 2013].

⁸¹ Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, pp. 3-4.

⁸² For the gender associations of different rooms in the country houses of this period, see Gervase Jackson-Stops and James Pipkin, *The English Country House: A Grand Tour* (London: Weidenfeld &

exclusive use. To complicate matters further, however, the prerogative of having individual control over a separate space, and the patriarchal authority such a privilege implied, was in fact reinforced when the room's aura of exclusiveness was disturbed by its public exposure. Occasions on which private lives were interrupted were not odd, as several country houses in the period were open to the public like Pemberley. When described for an audience who were not acquainted with the owner of the house, the personal virtues associated with a specific room had to be presented within the framework of received ideals, and through such a process of public display, personal qualities assumed greater emblematic importance. The blurred boundaries between privacy and publicity thus helped create for the owner an image of the model patriarch.

If the late Mr Darcy's favourite room carries with it a significance that incorporates both private and public meanings and points towards the construction of patriarchal authority, the three miniatures that adorn the room's walls function in a similar way, as they are also endowed simultaneously with individual and social value. As Kate Retford has noted, family portraits of the upper classes in the late eighteenth century were painted not just for the eyes of kith and kin, but for visitors to the Royal Academy exhibitions as well.⁸³ Even if the three miniatures Elizabeth sees at Pemberley never make public appearances in London, the fact that they are regarded by the Darcy family as fit to be shown indicates their participation in a wider social framework. As pictorial records of Wickham, Darcy, and Miss Darcy, the three miniatures are clearly memorials of particular individuals, but as part of the objects for show in a male space, they also serve as emblems of patriarchal power. Indeed, familial hierarchy was so important to the upper classes that family portraits were carefully grouped together and framed to

Nicolson, 1993); for different members' control of the domestic space within a household, see Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

⁸³ Kate Retford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 10.

create ‘an overall narrative that emphasises family history and longevity’.⁸⁴

Such a streamlining operation could efface personal traits, and in the case of the miniatures of Wickham, Darcy, and Miss Darcy, it seems that their social function of signifying patriarchal authority overrides their private purpose of remembering individuals, as no pictorial detail of the pictures is given in the text, and what Elizabeth gets is Mrs Reynolds’s verbal descriptions. Here Mrs Reynolds’s role is noteworthy. Her status as the Pemberley housekeeper has already signalled her part as a subordinate consolidating the patriarchal system she works for, and her surname, if taken into account, further reinforces her position as a commentator on the Darcy family’s familial prestige. As I am about to demonstrate, Mrs Reynolds’s verbal representation of the miniatures is generalised rather than detailed. This practice concurs with what her male namesake Sir Joshua Reynolds, the foremost eighteenth-century portrait painter, states in *Discourses on Art* (1797): ‘The whole beauty and grandeur of the art consists, in my opinion, in being able to get above all singular forms, local customs, particularities, and details of every kind’.⁸⁵ As Sir Joshua Reynolds’s ideas of the general and the particular are rooted in the gendered conceptions of form and matter in Western philosophy,⁸⁶ his emphasis on the overall impression of pictures gives implicit authority to Mrs Reynolds’s abstract commentary on the miniatures at Pemberley.⁸⁷ Mrs Reynolds’s legitimacy as a promoter of patriarchal symbolism is further strengthened by the fact that Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portraits of individuals were often praised for their ability to evoke higher ideals. For example, his portrait of the Ladies Waldegrave was

⁸⁴ Retford, p. 14.

⁸⁵ Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art* (1797), ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 44. Reynolds’s stance against details, as many critics have pointed out, is not as clearly defined as his general argument indicates. However, here I am concerned only with his predominant discourse, which the prevailing aesthetics of his time also values.

⁸⁶ See Naomi Schor, pp. 9-10.

⁸⁷ It has to be noted that although I draw on Mrs Reynolds’s verbal representation of pictures, I do not intend to venture into the field of ekphrasis. Rather, I concentrate on the ways in which Austen weaves her understanding of contemporary discourses on art into her plot. For ekphrastic readings of literary works, see, for instance, James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), and Beth Newman, ‘“The Situation of the Looker-On”: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*’, *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 1029-41.

considered to represent ‘three lovely Graces’, who were meant to ‘set an amiable Example of domestic Employment, to an idle, frivolous, dissipated Age’.⁸⁸ Thus as the creator of such an image, Sir Joshua Reynolds becomes a prescriber of virtues, and in dwelling upon general impressions instead of details, Mrs Reynolds resembles and derives power from her male namesake.

Introduced into a male terrain under the guidance of a woman who bears the name of a man, Elizabeth is presented with portraits that embody a carefully configured patriarchal system. Viewed in this light, the ways in which she attempts to make sense of the pictures at Pemberley can be read as a process in which she navigates her way through male-centred ideologies. The first miniature that Elizabeth encounters is that of Wickham. In this instance, it is a female relative, Mrs Gardiner, who first directs Elizabeth’s attention to the picture and encourages her to give her personal opinion of the portrayed image. Being aware of Elizabeth’s past interactions with Wickham, Mrs Gardiner, with a knowing smile, asks Elizabeth ‘how she liked [his miniature]’.⁸⁹ However, what promises to develop into an intimate discussion between aunt and niece is soon interrupted and replaced by Mrs Reynolds’s authoritative account. Before Elizabeth can make her reply, Mrs Reynolds ‘came forward, and told them it was the picture of a young gentleman, the son of her late master’s steward, who had been brought up by him at his own expence’ (p. 186). It is significant that rather than Wickham’s appearance, which is usually one of the first areas covered in portrait commentaries, the housekeeper dwells on his place in the web of relations that concerns the late Mr Darcy. In fact, her caption expresses more of her late master’s largesse than of Wickham’s character, and as she points to her present master’s miniature and lavishes praise on him at the next opportunity, what she says about Wickham’s miniature is in reality an endorsement of the Darcy patriarchs. In this regard, Wickham’s miniature

⁸⁸ Quoted in Retford, p. 11.

⁸⁹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 186. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

becomes a propaganda tool Mrs Reynolds uses to promote to Elizabeth a specific way of looking at the Darcy family.

In addition to serving as a testament to the success of the Darcys' patriarchal model, Mrs Reynolds's verbal portrait of Wickham also provides a lens into the code of behaviour her society expects individuals to follow. After talking about Wickham's occupation, Mrs Reynolds adds: 'but I am afraid he has turned out very wild' (p. 186). Having been informed of Wickham's unsuccessful seduction of Miss Darcy, the reader must be clear at this point that the word carries a meaning that is more unacceptable than 'acting or moving freely without restraint; going at one's own will; unconfined, unrestricted' (*OED Online*). In fact, because Wickham's conduct is morally problematic, the word 'wild' suggests sexual undertones, as indicated by the meaning 'giving way to sexual passion; also, more widely, licentious, dissolute, loose' (*OED Online*). In using the word 'wild', then, Mrs Reynolds is inviting her guests to examine Wickham by the moral standards of the society with which she identifies.

With a perspective centred on the Darcy family and conventional morality, Mrs Reynolds emerges as a representative of the powerful male viewer. In John Berger's theory of spectatorship, the surveyor, whether a male or a female in real life, is always viewed as a man. In Berger's words, '*men act and women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (italics in original).⁹⁰ What this concept indicates is that because in a patriarchal society agency is given to men, the beholder, as the subject who exercises the power of vision, is perceived to be male and powerful. Moreover, with the power of interpretation that accompanies the act of looking, the beholder also represents a stalwart of patriarchal mores. Such a gendered quality of the gaze, according to Berger, even makes women act as male surveyors of themselves: '[t]he surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself

⁹⁰ John Berger and others, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 47.

into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight'.⁹¹ The gendered complexities inherent in the act of viewing have also led the feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey to make a general, but nevertheless well-founded, statement: 'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female'.⁹² Being subject to Mrs Reynolds's gaze and judgement, Wickham's miniature, and by extension his very person, is kept under the complete control of patriarchal regulation.

If Austen sets Elizabeth's encounter with pictures at Pemberley against a backdrop that in terms of visual conventions is pro-patriarchy, she also explores possible female agency using the same gendered visual conventions. While Elizabeth is encouraged to view Wickham from the standpoint of received moral standards, the reader is presented with an opportunity not only to survey the man in question but also to consider whether Elizabeth can be judged in similar terms, as the word 'wild' that Mrs Reynolds uses to describe Wickham has been attached to Elizabeth on many occasions earlier in the novel. After Elizabeth walks 'three miles so early in the day, in such dirty weather, and by herself' to see her sick sister, Mrs Hurst sneers at her, saying that she looks 'almost wild' (pp. 24-25). Although Elizabeth's 'wildness' is far from being as contemptible as Wickham's, her behaviour demonstrates similar violation of social norms and carries a sexual undertone, which is registered in Darcy's admiration. Though struggling to justify Elizabeth's early solitary walk, Darcy cannot help but admire 'the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion' (p. 24). Here Darcy's admiration is sexually charged, which Elizabeth's rival Miss Bingley may have noticed, imputing sexual transgression to Elizabeth when she comments on her conduct: 'Why must *she* be scampering about the country, because her sister had a cold? Her hair so untidy, so

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 19. Although some feminists working on modern cinematic productions question Mulvey's equation of the viewer with the powerful man, I accept the idea as a dominant norm in nineteenth-century England. For discussions of viewing patterns other than that of men looking at women, see *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, ed. by Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (London: Women's Press, 1988).

blowsy!’ (p. 26, italics in original). Even Elizabeth’s mother considers her ‘wildness’ needs restraining. When she overhears Elizabeth talking freely to Mr Bingley about his character, Mrs Bennet tries to impose social rules on her and severely reminds her:

‘[R]emember where you are, and do not run on in the wild manner that you are suffered to do at home’ (p. 31).

Of course, the kind of ‘wild volatility’ suggested by Miss Bingley is a characteristic more appropriate for describing Elizabeth’s sister Lydia, who writes home from Brighton about seeing ‘such beautiful ornaments as made her quite wild’ and is full of ‘extravagant and wild admiration’ for Wickham (pp. 176, 182, 216). In these two examples, the word ‘wild’ means ‘violently excited’ (*OED Online*). Elizabeth herself certainly does not approve of excessive levels of excitement. Before she visits Pemberley, she has urged her father to dissuade Lydia from going to Brighton. Her attempt to discipline Lydia also shows that she is well aware of what elegant society expects of women, which makes her a competent surveyor of her own behaviour. In this regard, her association with Wickham and Lydia, two major wayward characters in the novel, through the same quality of ‘wildness’, becomes all the more remarkable. Although Elizabeth’s departure from social norms is never as extreme as Wickham’s and Lydia’s, some of her behaviour has clearly caused raised eyebrows. Thus Austen presents to her readers a heroine who knows social expectations of women but, unlike the conventional surveyor depicted in Berger’s terms, does not entirely align her conduct with the way the established social system requires. Juxtaposing Elizabeth with Wickham and Lydia through the word ‘wild’, Austen in the miniature scene invites her readers to reflect on Elizabeth’s ‘wildness’. It is clear that Wickham’s and Lydia’s inappropriate behaviour is self-oriented, but Elizabeth, on the occasion of her unaccompanied walk, disregards propriety because she is eager to meet her ill sister. What such juxtaposition exposes is the problem of letting social conformity reign supreme.

The second miniature that comes Elizabeth's way is Darcy's. Although this picture, unlike Wickham's miniature, is commented on in relation to the subject's appearance, the discussion between the housekeeper and the visitors revolves around the generalised word 'handsome'. Mrs Gardiner notes that 'it is a handsome face', and Mrs Reynolds asks Elizabeth if she thinks him 'a very handsome gentleman' (p. 187). The word 'handsome' is significant because it connotes Darcy's financial power as well as his attractive features. In Darcy's first appearance in the Meryton community, he is noted both for his good looks and for his large fortune: 'Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien; and the report which was in general circulation within five minutes after his entrance, of his having ten thousand a year' (p. 6). The juxtaposition of Darcy's aesthetic and economic value reappears in the Pemberley episode. Before Elizabeth sees Darcy's miniature and portrait, she first sees the house from outside and then some of the rooms inside: the house is 'a large, handsome, stone building'; the dining parlour is 'a large, well-proportioned room, handsomely fitted up'; and other rooms she spots are 'lofty and handsome' (pp. 185-86). Used in this context, 'handsome' means 'of fair size or amount; "decent", fair, considerable, moderately large', and conjures up ideas of the owner's wealth (*OED Online*). In addition to exterior beauty and affluence, 'handsome' also calls to mind 'a quality that evokes moral admiration', as in the word 'magnanimous' (*OED Online*). This last sense of the word links Darcy's miniature to Wickham's, which Mrs Reynolds has just used to indicate the late Mr Darcy's generosity. In fact, although Mrs Reynolds distinguishes Darcy from Wickham by making laudatory comments about the picture of her present master and negative ones about that of her late master's beneficiary, her commentaries in both cases serve the same purpose of projecting the Darcys' patriarchal system in a positive light. With the connotations of moral and economic merits, the word 'handsome' upon which Mrs Reynolds' verbal depiction hinges casts Darcy more in the role of a model land owner than as a particular

individual. In this regard, Darcy's picture is as much a propaganda tool as Wickham's is.

As with Wickham's, Darcy's miniature also allows Austen's readers to view Elizabeth against the established social background through Mrs Reynolds's verbal account. While Elizabeth is connected with Wickham through the word 'wild', she can be compared to Darcy through the word 'handsome'. In terms of appearance, she may not be as good-looking as him, as Mrs Bennet thinks 'she is not half so handsome as Jane' (p. 2). Whether or not Elizabeth is indeed less beautiful than Jane, she appears inferior to her sister in the eyes of Darcy at first sight. In response to Bingley's offer to introduce Elizabeth, Darcy says 'she is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*' (p. 7, italics in original). Given the economic sense of the word 'handsome', Darcy's initial rejection of Elizabeth corresponds closely to the idea that only people from the same social rank make an accepted match. Elizabeth herself is not obsessive about acquiring fine looks or advancing her social position, as Miss Bingley may have done in her place. She is not portrayed as lamenting the inferiority of her appearance, and though she appreciates Darcy's 'handsome' estate and even envisions herself as its mistress, after deliberation she decides to keep what she already has, above all her close relationship with the Gardiners. As she reflects on the imaginary state of being the mistress of Pemberley, she realises 'that could never be: my uncle and aunt would have been lost to me: I should not have been allowed to invite them' (p. 186). The fact that Elizabeth prizes emotionally fulfilling ties above the pursuit of social advancement indicates that a life without the trappings of success defined by society can still be worthwhile. Moreover, as Darcy's declaration of love for Elizabeth takes place before her visit to Pemberley, Austen has shown that a girl who is not 'handsome' in any sense of the word may have a chance of bringing new life to the rigid patriarchal system at Pemberley.

The last miniature that meets Elizabeth's eyes is that of Georgiana Darcy. As with the previous two miniatures, Mrs Reynolds's verbal description dominates the

picture-viewing scene, and what the housekeeper says is more about how well her young mistress performs her social role within the household than about her personal qualities. In emphasising that Georgiana is ‘the handsomest young lady that ever was seen; and so accomplished!—She plays and sings all day long’ (p. 187), Mrs Reynolds glories in Georgiana’s conformity to her society’s expectations of upper- and middle-class women. In fact, for unmarried ladies like Georgiana, accomplishments alone are enough to define what constitutes their worth. As the conversation between Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Darcy at Rosings indicates, Georgiana’s accomplishments are all her aunt cares about, and her brother is not without pride when he speaks ‘with affectionate praise of his sister’s proficiency’ (p. 133). Georgiana may show a musical flair that is similar to Jane Fairfax’s in *Emma*, and Darcy may be genuinely proud of his sister’s piano performances, but Mrs Reynolds’s subsequent comment suggests that the most important end served by Georgiana’s accomplishments is testifying to her brother’s role as a good patriarch. After praising Georgiana’s accomplishments, Mrs Reynolds says: ‘In the next room is a new instrument just come down for her—a present from my master; she comes here to-morrow with him.’ (p. 187) The additional point about Darcy’s gift-giving gesture, like Mrs Reynolds’s earlier remarks about the late Mr Darcy’s financial support of Wickham, casts him in the light of a generous man. Thus what Mrs Reynolds conveys through Georgiana’s miniature is not even her exemplary ladylike accomplishments, but her brother’s prominent patriarchal role.

In this instance, Austen again subtly invites her readers to compare Elizabeth with the subject of the picture she is looking at. Georgiana’s reported accomplishments bring to the reader’s mind the scene at Rosings where Elizabeth is asked by Lady Catherine if she plays and sings. In sharp contrast to Georgiana, Elizabeth makes an impression because of her lack of accomplishments, which causes Lady Catherine to condescendingly encourage her to ‘come to Rosings every day and play on the piano

forte in Mrs. Jenkinson's room' (p. 133). Elizabeth's inability to play the piano, however, becomes her means of proudly asserting her individuality. When she sees that Darcy moves near to look at her, she taunts him and says,

'You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy, by coming in all this state to hear me? But I will not be alarmed though your sister *does* play so well. There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises with every attempt to intimidate me.' (p. 134, italics in original)

Undaunted by Lady Catherine's patronizing attitude, Elizabeth defends her difference by making a statement to Darcy. The comparison between Georgiana and Elizabeth that Austen implicitly encourages her readers to make is significant. Georgiana may garner high praise from people around her, but in conforming to her society's demands of her, she becomes a characterless embodiment of propriety, and her existence seems solely to reflect the glory of the male-dominated world. By contrast, Elizabeth's departure from the image of the ideal lady gains her a distinctive character.

While Austen's portrayal of Elizabeth's challenge to the patriarchal system represented by Mrs Reynolds's commentaries is only implied in the first three miniature scenes, in the final gallery scene she presents an Elizabeth who takes control of her own picture-viewing tour. Unlike the three miniatures in the late Mr Darcy's favourite room, which are brought to Elizabeth's attention by others—Wickham's by Mrs Gardiner; Darcy's and Georgiana's by Mrs Reynolds—and explained authoritatively by Mrs Reynolds, the portrait of Darcy in the gallery is actively sought by Elizabeth and interacts with her before Mrs Reynolds's comments intervene. Once in the gallery, Elizabeth strays from her party and follows a route of her own to look for Darcy's picture. Her initiative suggests a form of power that women of her time rarely enjoyed. As Hilary Fraser has argued, 'given her status as spectacle, and the identification of the

agency of the gaze with male subjectivity, a woman faced particular difficulties in claiming the authority of vision and interpretation in the nineteenth century'.⁹³ In independently seeking and viewing Darcy's portrait, Elizabeth gains control as a producer of meaning, as 'the act of recognition that painting galvanises', according to Bryson Norman, 'is a production, rather than a perception, of meaning'.⁹⁴

Moreover, the way in which Elizabeth interprets pictures is significantly different from that used by Mrs Reynolds, as can be observed in the following passage about her encounter with Darcy's portrait:

Elizabeth walked on in quest of the only face whose features would be known to her. At last it arrested her—and she beheld a striking resemblance of Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen, when he looked at her. (p. 189)

I have argued that Mrs Reynolds, in the spirit of her famous namesake's aesthetic principle, tends to offer general representations: Wickham is wild; Darcy is handsome; and Georgiana is accomplished. No matter whom her subject, the purpose of her description is to project an ideal image of Pemberley's patriarchal structure. In contrast to Mrs Reynolds, Elizabeth singles out Darcy's smile and forms a personal rapport with the painting. According to Mrs Reynolds, the portrait was painted when Darcy's father was still alive, so it is impossible that the smile Elizabeth notices is for her in the first place. By interpreting the portrait in relation to her, Elizabeth opts for a personalised rather than a generalised reading. In this regard, Elizabeth fragments the idea of the whole into particular parts and undermines the uniform picture Mrs Reynolds is at pains to maintain. She sees Darcy as an individual with a unique relationship to her rather

⁹³ Hilary Fraser, 'Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse', *Victorian Studies*, 42 (1999), 77-100 (p. 79).

⁹⁴ Norman Bryson, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. xiii.

than a representative of socially recognised virtues.

The dynamics of Elizabeth's interaction with Darcy's portrait, like the undercurrent of opposition in Elizabeth's and Mrs Reynolds's different approaches to picture interpretation, are similarly charged with gender struggles, but they are played out in a more complex manner through their association with a specific genre of portraiture popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the eye miniature (*Fig. 1*). Eye portraits were painted *ad vivum* 'in watercolor on ivory, or sometimes in gouache on board' and were 'mounted in pins or in brooches encrusted with half pearls or brilliants, set in rings or gold bracelet clasps, or framed on the lids of snuffboxes, toothpick cases, dance programs, book covers, and other containers'.⁹⁵ Unlike portraits, which were usually hung to be publicly displayed, eye miniatures, with their small size, were personal possessions held and gazed at in private. The unique attention to the eyes makes the eye miniature an object to be gazed at as well as a subject that performs the gazing. As Hanneke Grootenboer observes, '[h]aving abandoned nearly all mimetic qualities with regard to the sitter by its exclusive focus on the gaze, an eye picture is not only an object of contemplation, it is the *subject* as well' (*italics in original*).⁹⁶ The way an eye miniature functions as a subject, she goes on to argue, is by returning the gaze of the beholder:

By peering outward—the only act that occurs in these paintings—the tiny eye creates a situation in which the beholder has no choice but to subject himself or herself to the painted gaze, and such a submission is expected.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Hanneke Grootenboer, 'Treasuring the Gaze: Eye Miniature Portraits and the Intimacy of Vision', *Art Bulletin*, 88 (2006), 496-507 (p. 496).

⁹⁶ Grootenboer, p. 501.

⁹⁷ Grootenboer, p. 502.



Fig. 1: An eye miniature by an anonymous British artist, watercolour on ivory, about 1790-1810.

The eye miniature's double status as an object and a subject makes it an appropriate medium to bring out the tension between Elizabeth and Darcy.⁹⁸ Although Darcy's portrait is not an eye picture, the power it exercises over Elizabeth and the way it reminds her of how Darcy looks at her makes it analogous to one. In her search for Darcy's image in the gallery, it is true that Elizabeth sets out to find it, but it might be that it is actually the picture that seeks her out, as in 'arresting' or attracting Elizabeth, the portrait transforms from an object into a subject. Moreover, like the eye miniature, which 'engage[s] viewers by actively confronting their gaze' and thus 'make[s] viewers aware of their viewing position',⁹⁹ Darcy's portrait seems to prompt Elizabeth to shift her attention from the painted smile to the painted eyes, and from the painted eyes to the subject himself. In fact, the gaze that confronts Elizabeth belongs simultaneously to the

⁹⁸ Lance Bertelsen has suggested that in describing Darcy's fascination with Elizabeth's eyes, Austen may have had eye miniatures in mind, but his discussion of the significance of the eye miniature in *Pride and Prejudice* is limited to its role as an expression of love between lovers. See 'Jane Austen's Miniatures: Painting, Drawing, and the Novels', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 45 (1984), 350-72 (pp. 368-69).

⁹⁹ Grootenboer, p. 497.

picture and to Darcy:

[A]s she stood before the canvas, on which he was represented, and fixed his eyes upon herself, she thought of his regard with a deeper sentiment of gratitude than it had ever raised before; she remembered its warmth, and softened its impropriety of expression. (p. 189)

In this passage, it is unclear who is performing the action of fixing Darcy's eyes on Elizabeth. It can be either Darcy or Elizabeth. If it is Darcy, Elizabeth is in a position to submit herself to his influence, while if it is Elizabeth, she retains primary power because it is she that forces the eyes of the portrayed Darcy, and by analogy, Darcy's eyes, to be riveted on herself. In either case, the gaze to which Elizabeth is subjected comes not from the painted image but from Darcy himself. In conflating the eyes of the portrait and the eyes of the subject, Austen reinforces the thought-provoking impact of Darcy's picture, creating a visually dramatic power that mimics the eye miniature's. In addition, the syntactic ambiguity in the phrase 'fixed his eyes upon herself' highlights the dynamic relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy.

Even if Elizabeth is visibly under the influence of Darcy's eyes, she is not totally mastered by them. Instead of being petrified, she is able to perform clear thinking. The first reaction she shows is to think of his regard 'with a deeper sentiment of gratitude'. This seems to indicate Elizabeth has absorbed the kind of patriarchal values Mrs Reynolds upholds. Indeed, Mrs Reynolds's verbal representation of her master has an obvious impact on Elizabeth, as shown in her meditation in front of Darcy's portrait:

The commendation bestowed on him by Mrs. Reynolds was of no trifling nature. What praise is more valuable than the praise of an intelligent servant? As a brother, a landlord, a master, she considered how many people's happiness were in his

guardianship!—How much of pleasure or pain it was in his power to bestow!—How much of good or evil must be done by him! (p. 189)

However, the power balance begins to shift when Elizabeth remembers the ‘warmth’ of Darcy’s attention and softens ‘its impropriety of expression’ (p. 189). Here Elizabeth’s passive reception of Darcy’s regard is replaced by her act of consciously toning down his rudeness, which was manifested through his insulting language regarding her appearance in their first meeting and his dismissive remarks about her relations in the proposal scene. In the end, although Elizabeth is explicitly described as recognising the values of Darcy’s upper-class circles, she does not completely lose sight of her own perspective. Taken as a whole, Elizabeth’s tour of Pemberley with Mrs Reynolds as her guide shows Austen’s subtle way of introducing Elizabeth’s individuality and suggesting her ability to exercise agency within the confines of the patriarchal structure she is about to enter.

ELINOR DASHWOOD’S PRIVATE VIEW OF A MINIATURE

Pictures also play a significant part in *Sense and Sensibility*, especially in the scene which revolves around the miniature of Edward that Lucy shows to Elinor to prove their secret engagement. Mark Blackwell has noted that the novel is full of ‘puzzles, clues, and hunches’,¹⁰⁰ and the scene in which Edward’s miniature is shown captures this spirit of concealment and discovery. In the last chapter of Volume I, Lucy approaches Elinor, informs her of her secret engagement to Edward, and produces evidence to support her claim. In this process of disclosure, Elinor struggles simultaneously to

¹⁰⁰ Mark Blackwell, ‘“The Setting Always Casts a Different Shade on It”: Allusion and Interpretation in *Sense and Sensibility*’, *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 17 (2004), 111-25 (p. 121).

conceal her own emotions and discover the truth. Unlike Elizabeth's tour of Pemberley, in which pictures are the single most important category of objects that point towards Austen's investigation of female agency, the miniature scene key to the exploration of Elinor's situation in *Sense and Sensibility* involves things other than pictures: in addition to Edward's miniature, Lucy also uses his letter and ring to prove to Elinor her status as his fiancée. I want to argue that in addition to constituting a body of evidence that validates what Lucy tells Elinor, these objects also bring to the fore questions of female subjugation and rebellion.

While the miniatures referred to in *Pride and Prejudice* are displayed at home as part of the interior décor, those mentioned in *Sense and Sensibility* are the portable personal belongings of women: Marianne wears a miniature of her great uncle as an ornament, and Lucy carries a miniature of her lover in her pocket. From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, it was fashionable among women of quality to wear miniatures. Worn as part of women's jewellery, miniatures 'were not hidden but placed facing outward as part of their apparel'.¹⁰¹ As Marcia Pointon explains, the miniatures worn as ornaments were highly gendered. They were almost exclusively worn by women and showed pictures of the wearers' husbands or fathers, which marked women's loyalty to the patriarch.¹⁰² Marianne's wearing of her great uncle's miniature falls in with this description, as she wears the miniature to remember his kindness. In Austen's ironic twist, however, Marianne's display of allegiance is not matched by her great-uncle's special treatment. Although old Mr Dashwood enjoyed the Dashwood sisters' company while he was alive, he adhered to primogeniture and passed the estate of Norland down the male line, which consists of his nephew Henry Dashwood, his grand-nephew John Dashwood, and his great-grand-nephew little Henry, and left

¹⁰¹ Marcia Pointon, '“Surrounded with Brilliants”: Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England', *Art Bulletin*, 83 (2001), 48-71 (p. 51).

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 51-53.

Marianne and her sisters 'a thousand pounds a-piece' as 'a mark of his affection'.¹⁰³

This background detail raises doubt about following conventions which place male interests at their core.

In comparison, the way Lucy deals with Edward's miniature is unusual but, as I am going to suggest, indicative of a degree of power that the Dashwood sisters lack. Lucy differs from Marianne in that she does not wear her miniature as a piece of jewellery but carries it in her pocket. The picture itself is simply described as 'a small miniature' (p. 99), which suggests that the portrait is not mounted like the one worn by Marianne. There are two possible explanations. First, the engagement has to be kept secret, so Lucy cannot openly wear Edward's miniature. Second, Lucy may have acquired the picture by devious means. Portraits in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were priced according to size and format. Although painters enjoying a high reputation, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds, would charge as much as two hundred pounds for a full-length portrait, trade cards from this period indicate that a portrait could be painted for as little as three to eight guineas a head. Miniatures, with their head-and-shoulder view, were much less expensive than portraits and served as affordable tokens of gentility among middle-class families, even those with a modest income.¹⁰⁴ The trade card for one Albin Roberts Burt (1783-1842) shows that miniatures on ivory could be had at 3, 5, and 10 guineas each.¹⁰⁵ Edward, whose mother is willing to give him 'a thousand a-year' provided that he marries the lady she has picked for him (p. 168), should not lack the purchasing power to have a miniature mounted for his beloved. Given the fact that Lucy does not have the money to have her own portrait taken, the unmounted picture may have indeed been, as Elinor conjectures, 'accidentally obtained' (p. 102).

¹⁰³ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 4. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

¹⁰⁴ Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 49-50; 'Miniature Portraits', p. 49.

¹⁰⁵ Coombs, p. 98.

Whatever the reason for Lucy's not wearing Edward's miniature, her strategic concealment and exposure of it reveal herself to be a cunning and powerful woman. If the picture has to be kept away from prying eyes, Lucy deliberately displays it to Elinor to mark her 'superior claims on Edward' and warns Elinor to 'avoid him in future' (p. 105). If the picture has been stolen from Edward, which is hinted by Lucy's last name 'Steele', Lucy is indeed artful because she manages not only to twist the truth but also to persuade the victim Edward in return to wear a ring containing her hair. Both cases show it is Lucy that occupies the dominant position in her relationship with Edward. She leads the relationship in the direction she prefers, and Edward seems unable to have any say. In taking control of Edward's miniature, therefore, Lucy shows an ability to cater to her own needs in a society that prioritises male over female interests.

In depriving Edward's miniature of its emotional value, Lucy overthrows the patriarchal connotation inherent in miniatures. As mementoes of attachment, miniatures were constantly gazed at and touched. They reminded the owners of their absent loved ones, so they were invested with sentimental value. However, Lucy is not described as indulging in such affective contemplation. What she associates with Edward's miniature is probably only her opportunity to advance up the social ladder. When confronted with Elinor's confusion as to which Mr Ferrars she is engaged to, Lucy emphasises it is 'the eldest son of Mrs. Ferrars of Park-street' (p. 99). Under the system of primogeniture, Edward, the elder son, will inherit most of his mother's properties and, living in Park-street, Mrs Ferrars may have a large fortune. Lucy's clarifying phrase thus suggests her ambition. By marrying into the Ferrars family, she will be able to rid herself of her humble origins. In addition, Lucy's final clandestine marriage to Edward's brother Robert, who by the end of the novel has become the new heir, proves that her earlier attachment to Edward was insincere. As Elinor points out to Edward when commenting on Lucy's seemingly unflinching love for him after he is disinherited by his mother, Lucy's cultivation of relationships is motivated by self-interest:

‘[A]t any rate, she lost nothing by continuing the engagement, for she has proved that it fettered neither her inclination nor her actions. The connection was certainly a respectable one, and probably gained her consideration among her friends; and, if nothing more advantageous occurred, it would be better for her to marry *you* than be single.’ (p. 279, italics in original)

Lucy’s immunity to the affective power of Edward’s miniature, while indicating her selfishness, also signals her freedom from the social rules imposed by patriarchal society. Examining the representation of miniatures in eighteenth-century paintings, Pointon notes that miniatures ‘are interchangeable with mirrors and letters, playing on the idea of love as a recognition of the subject’s ego in the other’.¹⁰⁶ In other words, the beholder is conscious of how he or she appears in the eyes of the absent loved one. Such consciousness suggests an invisible regulating power that can be invested in things. Although it is true that both men and women owned miniatures, the fact that it was mostly women that wore miniatures shows female subjection to male control. By depriving Edward’s miniature of its emotional significance, Lucy can free herself from the patriarchal power it embodies.

The way Lucy manipulates Edward’s letter and ring is similar to the way she treats his miniature. She does not care if the letter carries the writer’s love. Although she notes that Edward ‘had just filled the sheet to me as full as possible’ (p. 102), she does not seem to be pained by his lack of affection. To her, the letter, like the miniature, is used to mark her entitlement to the status and wealth associated with Edward. As such, she shows Elinor the ‘direction’ of the letter instead of its content (p. 101). Whether or not the content conveys Edward’s love is not important because what matters is that the letter is addressed to her.

¹⁰⁶ Pointon, ‘Miniature Portraits’, p. 63.

Likewise, the ring Lucy gives Edward is used to state her claim on him. Having produced Edward's miniature and letter to prove her engagement to him, Lucy refers to the ring to play her last trump card. By this point she must have already noticed the emotional disturbances she had caused Elinor because after looking at the letter, Elinor almost lost control of herself: '[F]or a few moments, she was almost overcome—her heart sunk within her, and she could hardly stand' (p. 102). These signs could not escape Lucy's attention. If she disclosed her engagement to Elinor deliberately to bar her from him, she would watch her reactions closely. By telling Elinor about the ring, Lucy is attempting to place herself firmly in the position of Edward's future wife. Giving part of one's body as gift was common in the eighteenth-century culture of sentimentality, and locks of hair were usually 'placed under crystal in rings or kept in a locket or other container'.¹⁰⁷ As opposed to hair jewellery given in common practice, Lucy's gift is not a product of sentimentality. Here the hair, which is supposed to evoke the presence of a loved one, becomes quite literally Lucy's means of ensnaring Edward. Indeed, Edward's changed status after Lucy breaks off their engagement is described in the language of 'entanglement' and 'release' in the penultimate chapter: 'He was released without any reproach to himself, from an entanglement which had long formed his misery, from a woman whom he had long ceased to love' (p. 274). The sense of escape conveyed in this chapter is strong, because the word 'release' is repeated five times within the first eight paragraphs. At the end of the previous chapter, Edward is shown to be unconsciously cutting the sheath of a pair of scissors to pieces while informing the Dashwoods of Lucy's marriage to Robert. Examined alongside the language of 'release', this scene presents Edward's success in unlocking Lucy's lock of hair and cutting himself loose from her.

Discussing the more unladylike female characters in *Sense and Sensibility*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out that 'Mrs. Ferrars and her scheming protégée

¹⁰⁷ Grootenboer, p. 502.

Lucy Steele prove that women can themselves become agents of repression, manipulators of conventions, and survivors'.¹⁰⁸ As Lucy's use of Edward's miniature, letter, and ring indicates, her agency is communicated through an inversion of the gendered power relationships between women and objects. Instead of being meekly acquiescent in the patriarchal values invested in things, Lucy turns the gendered symbolic meanings of love tokens to her advantage and utilises them to signal her power of control. If memorabilia given by men tend to suggest conformity and loyalty demanded of the female recipient, as is the case with the miniature Marianne wears, Lucy subverts this convention and makes her male giver the sufferer from such a demand.

Although Lucy's behaviour is publicly detested, her self-serving manoeuvre does not cost her a sad ending in the text. After all, she marries the Ferrars family's new heir and supposedly gets what she wants. Her freedom from punishment sends a covert message that a woman's ability to reverse male control is remarkable. Moreover, her selfishness calls into question Elinor's complete faith in Edward and altruism, virtues in women which are extolled in the novel's male-dominated society. Lucy's revelation of her engagement to Edward, though painful to Elinor, actually forces her to re-evaluate her favourable opinion of Edward. Previously Elinor had 'blind partiality to Edward' when she defended him against Marianne's criticism that he had 'no taste for drawing' (p. 15). She believed that Edward 'has an innate propriety and simplicity of taste, which in general direct him perfectly right' (p. 15). Now Elinor is confronted with evidence of Edward's bad taste: the woman who will become his wife is, in her opinion, 'illiterate, artful, and selfish' (p. 104). The word 'illiterate' with the meaning of 'ignorant of letters or literature' suggests Lucy's deficiency in aesthetic discernment (*OED Online*), so Edward's choice of such a woman as his wife exposes a failure in good taste that Elinor either could not or would not recognise. Elinor's final acknowledgement is implied in a

¹⁰⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 172.

passage delivered in free indirect speech:

The youthful infatuation of nineteen would naturally blind him to every thing but her beauty and good nature; but the four succeeding years—years, which if rationally spent, give such improvement to the understanding, must have opened his eyes to her defects of education. (p. 104)

Through the words of the narrator, the reader is shown that Elinor, who formerly believed in the infallibility of Edward, now has the courage to blame Edward for his 'blindness'. As Elinor's earlier faith in Edward was also 'blind', her recognition of his imperfection indirectly invites the reader to question her idealisation of Edward.

In addition to forcing Elinor to recognise Edward's 'blindness', Lucy's display of the miniature, letter, and ring also stimulates her to consider her position, if only for a moment. For the most part of the novel Elinor is altruistic, focusing only on the comfort of others, be it her mother, her sisters, or even the people she does not like to associate with. When convinced of Lucy's engagement to Edward by the evidence she produces, Elinor overcomes 'every fear of condemning him unfairly' and acknowledges Edward's 'ill-treatment of herself' (p. 103). The truth that dawns on her provokes her into a rare demonstration of self-absorption: 'Her resentment of such behaviour, her indignation at having been its dupe, for a short time made her feel only for herself' (p. 103). Although Elinor soon reverts to her usual self and clears Edward of any wrong doing except 'remaining at Norland after he first felt her influence over him to be more than it ought to be' (p. 103), her rush of strong 'resentment' and 'indignation' should not be overlooked. In this rare moment of self-preoccupation, Elinor feels injured and attempts to assert her right to Edward's heart. She draws evidence and finally arrives at an indisputable conclusion:

His affection was all her own. She could not be deceived in that. Her mother, sisters, Fanny, all had been conscious of his regard for her at Norland; it was not an illusion of her own vanity. He certainly loved her. (p. 103)

While previously Elinor was uncertain about Edward's love for her and cautioned Marianne not to indulge in high hopes, now she, confronted with Lucy's claim on Edward, has developed a firmer belief in her rights as well as her judgement. In fact, whether or not Edward truly loves her is not important. What the passage shows is that Elinor finally acquires some of Lucy's openness and becomes brave enough to acknowledge her own desire, except that what Lucy is after is not Edward's love, but the social advancement and wealth he can provide for her.

EMMA WOODHOUSE AS A PORTRAIT PAINTER

Austen's employment of the portrait in her exploration of female agency takes yet another form in *Emma*. While in both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, the heroines are in the passive role of viewer, in *Emma* the protagonist occupies the position of creator in both the figural and literal senses. After her governess gets married and leaves Hartfield, Emma picks Harriet Smith, a parlour-boarder at Mrs Goddard's school, to be her companion and, to a certain extent, her outlet for creativity. She invests Harriet with qualities she considers fit and attempts to mould her into a potential wife for eligible bachelors in her community. Emma's improvement scheme for Harriet takes a more literal form in the painting scene. She produces an improved image of her protégée, giving her 'the only beauty she wanted' and making her taller than she really is.¹⁰⁹ However, Emma's creativity turns out to be a near debacle because Harriet,

¹⁰⁹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1816), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 38.

having acquired the taste Emma has instilled in her, falls in love with Mr Knightley and transforms from a subordinate into a rival; in addition, the portrait in which Emma takes much pride misleads her as to where Mr Elton's love is bestowed and becomes the locus of confusion.

Emma's role as an artist, especially in the metaphorical sense, has been noted by several critics. W. J. Harvey maintains that in managing the lives of others, Emma is 'like a bad artist'.¹¹⁰ Alistair Duckworth, focusing on Emma's intention to change reality, argues that 'Emma is an artist'.¹¹¹ While both Harvey and Duckworth accept Emma's role as an artist without elaborating on its significance, Cicely Palser Havelly and Eugene Goodheart push further to indicate a link between Emma and her inventor Austen. Palser Havelly connects Emma's drawing skills and talent in plotting others' lives to Austen's novel writing and considers Emma's eventual marriage as the grave of her creative power.¹¹² Goodheart views Emma as Austen's portrait of a generic female artist, but he emphasises Emma's imaginative power without specifying her attempt to paint a picture of Harriet. He concludes that the incompatibility of married life and creative career for women in the period will lead to the inevitable ending in which Emma marries and loses her creativity.¹¹³

While several critics have discussed Emma's artistic ability in terms of its figurative importance, few have commented on her role as an actual portrait painter. Joe Bray has offered a unique literal reading by focusing on Emma's actual creation, Harriet's portrait,¹¹⁴ but he does not dwell on the painting process, which occupies almost an entire chapter in the novel. An examination of the painting scene, I propose,

Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

¹¹⁰ W. J. Harvey, 'The Plot of *Emma*', *Essays in Criticism*, 17 (1967), 48-63 (p. 49).

¹¹¹ Alistair M. Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 158.

¹¹² Cicely Palser Havelly, 'Emma: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 42 (1993), 221-37.

¹¹³ Eugene Goodheart, 'Emma: Jane Austen's Errant Heroine', *Sewanee Review*, 116 (2008), 589-604 (603-04).

¹¹⁴ Bray, pp. 10-13.

would add a new dimension to the metaphorical significance of Emma's artistic role. I want to show that the scene in which Emma paints a picture of Harriet not only exposes the problematic triangular relationship between Emma, Harriet and Mr Knightley; more significantly, it sheds light on the novel's criticism of conventional gender roles and the contemporary institution of marriage.

The painting scene in *Emma* provides a stage on which complex interactions are enacted. Portrait painting in general involves 'a relationship of unequal parties in a contention for power': the painter may occupy a more dominant position on account of his skills, or the sitter may be more influential as a result of his or her status and money.¹¹⁵ Although Emma is an amateur painter whose sitters are drawn from her immediate circle, the power-imbalanced relationship between the painter and the sitter is still encapsulated in the detailed review that Emma gives Harriet of her past sitters before setting out to work on Harriet's portrait:

'I had only my own family to study from. There is my father—another of my father—but the idea of sitting for his picture made him so nervous, that I could only take him by stealth; neither of them very like therefore. Mrs. Weston again, and again, and again, you see. Dear Mrs. Weston always my kindest friend on every occasion. She would sit whenever I asked her. There is my sister; and really quite her own little elegant figure!—and the face not unlike. I should have made a good likeness of her, if she would have sat longer, but she was in such a hurry to have me draw her four children that she would not be quiet. Then, here come all my attempts at three of those four children;—there they are, Henry and John and Bella, from one end of the sheet to the other, and any one of them might do for any one of the rest. She was so eager to have them drawn that I could not refuse; but there is no making children of three or four years old stand still you know; nor can

¹¹⁵ Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, p. 184.

it be very easy to take any likeness of them, beyond the air and complexion, unless they are coarser featured than any mama's children ever were. Here is my sketch of the fourth, who was a baby. I took him, as he was sleeping on the sofa, and it is as strong a likeness of his cockade as you would wish to see. He had nestled down his head most conveniently. That's very like. I am rather proud of little George. The corner of the sofa is very good.' (p. 36)

It is clear from Emma's description that when the balance of power leans towards the sitter, she tends to produce less satisfactory work. In the case of Mr Woodhouse, his unease about sitting for a portrait forces Emma to observe her father secretly and paint quickly, so both pictures in Emma's portfolio fail to reach her standard of resemblance. As for Emma's sister Isabella, she is so eager to have Emma paint her children that Emma can only capture a general, not exact, image of her 'little elegant figure'. Drawing a picture of Isabella's three children is also a challenge. Because they cannot keep still, Emma has difficulty representing the individual characteristics of each child, and on the canvas any one of the children 'might do for any one of the rest'.

On the contrary, Emma is more pleased with her work when she assumes more power in the painting process. In the instance of Emma's pliant former governess Mrs Weston, her alacrity to be the sitter allows Emma to paint three portraits of her, as suggested by Emma's repeated use of the word 'again', and produces no complaint in Emma. Another example of Emma's upper hand in the painter-sitter relationship is presented in her description of how she paints baby George. As a sleeping infant, he best suits the convenience of Emma, who does not encounter any trouble painting a portrait and is thus 'rather proud of little George'.

After reviewing a long list of previous sitters, Emma comes to her best work so far: a sketch of her brother-in-law John Knightley. The distribution of power in this instance is more complicated. John Knightley agrees to have his portrait taken only after Emma

has ‘had a great deal of trouble in persuading him to sit at all’ (p. 37), but just as he seems to be a compliant sitter, allowing Emma to produce a flattering image of him to her immense satisfaction, Isabella interferes to criticise Emma’s painting, which leads Emma to abort her attempt. Emma’s dampened enthusiasm in her drawing of John Knightley’s portrait may explain why she chooses to model her portrait of Harriet on that of John Knightley. In wishing to paint a portrait of Harriet, Emma may be hoping to realise her previous unfulfilled dream of assuming total control in John Knightley’s sitting session.

Indeed, Harriet is an ideal candidate because she has always been submissive in her interactions with Emma. When they first meet, Emma observes that Harriet shows ‘so proper and becoming a deference’ and looks ‘so pleasantly grateful for being admitted to Hartfield’ (p. 19). The language of modesty and gratitude continues when the narrator describes Harriet’s mind as she leaves Hartfield at the end of her first meeting with Emma:

Miss Woodhouse was so great a personage in Highbury, that the prospect of the introduction had given as much panic as pleasure—but the humble, grateful, little girl went off with highly gratified feelings, delighted with the affability with which Miss Woodhouse had treated her all the evening, and actually shaken hands with her at last! (pp. 20-21)

The passage here establishes the basic paradigm of Emma and Harriet’s relationship: Emma occupies a dominant position as the more significant of the two, while Harriet takes a subordinate role, rejoicing over Emma’s condescension in creating an intimacy with her. Emma clearly understands this pattern when she reviews the character of Harriet after their first meeting: ‘Harriet certainly was not a clever girl, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition; was totally free from conceit; and only desiring to be

guided by any one she looked up to' (p. 21). Once again the language of modesty and gratitude brings to the fore Harriet's meekness and malleability.

The yielding Harriet allows Emma to take entire control over the painting session. She is easily persuaded to sit for Emma, and Emma is in charge of every aspect of the painting process, from the selection of the style to the final destination of the painting. In the eighteenth century, it was usually the client who decided on the style of his or her portrait. As Pointon explains, the leading portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds provided his clients with a portfolio containing prints of the portraits he had painted so that they could choose the attitude they particularly liked to be replicated in their own portraits.¹¹⁶ In the case of Harriet's portrait, however, it is Emma alone that selects the size and style after reviewing her previous works; she even decides on the final destination of the finished portrait: 'She had soon fixed on the size and sort of portrait. It was to be a whole-length in water-colours, like Mr. John Knightley's, and was destined, if she could please herself, to hold a very honourable station over the mantelpiece [sic]' (p. 37).

After the painting process begins, Harriet is even more unlikely to express any opinion. The paintbrush is in Emma's hand, and Harriet is at the mercy of Emma, being manoeuvred in whichever way the artist fancies. As Mr Woodhouse observes, Emma places Harriet out of doors in the portrait although it is actually in December that the portrait is painted. Even if Emma cannot be accused of cruelty, as artistic licence must be allowed, she shows a clear intention to present Harriet in a perpetual state of innocence as indicated by Mr Elton's passionate defence against Mr Woodhouse's criticism:

'You, sir, may say any thing,' cried Mr. Elton; 'but I must confess that I regard it as a most happy thought, the placing of Miss Smith out of doors; and the tree is touched with such inimitable spirit! Any other situation would have been much less

¹¹⁶ Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, pp. 42-43.

in character. The naïveté of Miss Smith's manners—and altogether—Oh, it is most admirable!' (p. 39)

Not caring whether or not her work reflects the true season, Emma does not regard accurate representation as high on the agenda. As Mr Elton's hesitant words suggest, what Emma aims to achieve is to capture, or rather to create, Harriet's character: 'her naïveté'. By emphasising Harriet's innocence, Emma infantilises her protégée and demonstrates her power over her.

In addition to indicating the power imbalance between Emma and Harriet, the painting scene also suggests the gendered aspect of their relationship. In the eighteenth century female sitters were confronted with the 'inherent moral dilemma' of subjecting themselves to the gaze of the male artist, as most portrait painters in the period were men.¹¹⁷ Although Emma and Harriet are of the same sex, this gendered tension is still present in the painting scene: 'The sitting began; and Harriet, smiling and blushing, and afraid of not keeping her attitude and countenance, presented a very sweet mixture of youthful expression to the steady eyes of the artist' (p. 37). Here Emma seems to adopt the role of a male painter, as indicated by Harriet's blushing face and her own suggestive gaze. In the field of sociology, blushing is associated with a wide spectrum of emotions, be it embarrassment, guilt, modesty, shame, or shyness, and is believed to be triggered by causes ranging from being the centre of attention to approaching the brink of self-exposure.¹¹⁸ In Harriet's case, blushing is invariably linked to a sexual theme. Prior to the painting scene, Harriet is twice described as blushing, and both occasions involve a potential lover. Harriet first blushes when she refers to Mrs Martin's praise of her son in the account she gives Emma of her visit to the Martins. Harriet's sexual interest in Robert Martin is explicit because she relates Mrs Martin's maternal

¹¹⁷ Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, p. 38.

¹¹⁸ See W. R. Crozier, 'Self-Consciousness, Exposure, and the Blush', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 34 (2004), 1-17.

pride to Robert's credentials as an excellent spouse. Upon hearing Mrs Martin's remark that 'it was impossible for any body to be a better son', Harriet quickly infers that 'whenever he married he would make a good husband' (p. 23), imagining herself as already married to Mr Martin. The connection between Harriet's blushes and her sexual self-consciousness can be observed in yet another instance. After listening to Emma's commendation of Mr Elton and Emma's account of his special attention to her, Harriet 'blushed and smiled, and said she had always thought Mr. Elton very agreeable' (p. 28). Framed by an interest in the other sex, Harriet's blushing in front of Emma is thus endowed with sexual implications.

Emma's adoption of a male part can also be supported by her role as an 'artist' and her appraisal of Harriet. There is only one professional portrait painter in Austen's six canonical novels: the German artist who paints a miniature of Captain Benwick in *Persuasion* (1818). This artist is a man, which reflects the fact that most portrait painters in this period were male. It is true that drawing and watercolour painting were part of a genteel girl's education, but these skills were considered amateurish.¹¹⁹ For example, although Elinor in *Sense and Sensibility* is good at drawing, none of her works is shown, and she is described neither as a painter nor as an artist. In comparison, Emma's appellation as an 'artist' is tinged with masculinity, as the 'very sweet mixture of youthful expression' Harriet presents under the scrutiny of Emma suggests the acts of looking and being looked at typically associated with a male viewer and a female subject (p. 37). The word 'sweet' is used by Emma after her first meeting with Harriet to describe the girl's disposition. In that case 'sweet' refers to Harriet's pleasant manners and amiability. In this instance, however, the word 'sweet', with its appeal to the eyes of Emma, evokes the sensual pleasure of looking. Harriet's appearance has been the key factor that draws Emma to her in the first place: 'Miss Smith was a girl of seventeen whom Emma knew very well by sight and had long felt an interest in, on account of her

¹¹⁹ See Bertelsen, p. 352.

beauty' (p. 19). If in their first meeting Emma's awareness of Harriet's visual appeal is only hinted at, in the painting scene both Harriet's attractiveness and Emma's attention become explicitly sexualised.

It has to be noted, however, that owing to the presence of Mr Elton, the erotic tinge of the painting scene does not belong exclusively to Emma and Harriet. Mr Elton, who is simultaneously looking at Emma and being looked at by Harriet, complicates the sexual tension of the scene. Because he and Emma share the same position within sight of Harriet, Mr Elton can be read as a delegate of Emma's admiring gaze. He is depicted as 'fidgetting behind her [Emma] and watching every touch' (p. 37). The word 'touch' is significant here because in addition to meaning 'an act of touching a surface with the proper tool in painting, drawing, writing, carving, etc.', it refers to 'the action or an act of touching (with the hand, finger, or other part of the body)' in its most literal sense (*OED Online*). Viewed in this light, Emma is performing close body contact with Harriet while painting her picture, and the presence of Mr Elton is to lay bare the sexual undertones hidden in the non-verbal communication between Harriet and Emma.

Emma's role as a male artist has been noted by Joseph Wiesenfarth and Cicely Palser Havelly, both of whom suggest that Emma takes on the role of Pygmalion.¹²⁰ Pygmalion is a character in Greek mythology who carved a statue of a woman. The statue was so beautiful that the sculptor fell in love with his own creation. Aphrodite later gave life to the statue, allowing Pygmalion to marry his ideal woman. The trope of Pygmalion is valid in *Emma* because Emma, Harriet, and Mr Knightley are involved in an intricate network of creation. Mr Knightley is as keen to teach Emma as Emma is enthusiastic about 'improving' Harriet, and both Harriet and Emma 'come alive' to confront their creators in their own ways: Harriet by falling in love with the last man Emma wishes her to marry; Emma, as will be discussed shortly, by calling Mr

¹²⁰ Joseph Wiesenfarth, 'Emma: Point Counter Point', in *Jane Austen Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 207-20 (p. 213); Palser Havelly, pp. 225, 227.

Knightley in ways that deliberately deviate from his wishes and the common practice. Susan Korba has proposed that in playing the male role Emma appears to be a lesbian. She cites Emma's relationships with Mrs Weston and Harriet as examples to indicate Emma's sexual interest in women, and regards Emma's eventual marriage to Mr Knightley as her suppression of her homosexual tendencies.¹²¹ It is clear that in demonstrating power over other characters Emma 'poaches on what is felt to be male turf',¹²² but this may indicate something other than her homosexual sexual orientation. I want to argue that Emma's relationship with Harriet serves more as a foil to her relationship with Mr Knightley.

As shown in my earlier analysis of the painting scene, Emma assumes the role of a domineering man, while Harriet plays the part of a submissive woman. This pattern represents the conventional relationship between husband and wife in the institution of marriage. Ironically, it is Harriet's complete obedience that destroys this relationship. Having acquired Emma's values, Harriet learns to prize Mr Knightley above all other men. On the other hand, however, she also becomes Emma's rival in heeding every word of her advice. Upon hearing Harriet is in love with Mr Knightley rather than Frank Churchill, Emma is shocked, but Harriet's response shows that she practises exactly what Emma has taught her:

'Mr. Frank Churchill, indeed! I do not know who would ever look at him in the company of the other. I hope I have a better taste than to think of Mr. Frank Churchill, who is like nobody by his side. [...] At first, if you had not told me that more wonderful things had happened; that there had been matches of greater disparity (those were your very words);—I should not have dared to give way

¹²¹ Susan M. Korba, '“Improper and Dangerous Distinctions”: Female Relationships and Erotic Domination in *Emma*', *Studies in the Novel*, 29 (1997), 139-63 (p. 141).

¹²² Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 125

to—I should not have thought it possible—’ (p. 319)

In this passage the comparatives ‘better’, ‘more’, and ‘greater’ indicate the success of Emma’s improvement scheme. Emma has been determined to improve Harriet: she wants to ‘detach her from her bad acquaintance’; ‘introduce her into good society’; and ‘form her opinions and her manners’ (p. 19). In thinking no more of Robert Martin and falling in love with Mr Knightley, who according to Emma is the epitome of a fine man ‘with *gentleman* so plainly written’ on him (p. 27, italics in original), Harriet has indeed distanced herself from her ‘bad acquaintance’ and internalised Emma’s attitude. As an invented piece of work, Harriet, like the monster of Frankenstein, turns against her creator.¹²³ In addition, her obedience is ironically turned into the cause of the breakdown of her friendship with Emma. Set in the framework of the conventional marriage institution, Emma and Harriet’s relationship forms a critique of the system that supports domineering husbands and submissive wives.

In comparison, Emma’s relationship with Mr Knightley shows a more balanced pattern. Even if Mr Knightley is much older than Emma and has also acted as Pygmalion to her since she was a child, Emma has never lost her hold on Mr Knightley. As he fondly recalls, Emma has no scruples about intentionally challenging his authority even when she was a child: ‘How often, when you were a girl, have you said to me, with one of your saucy looks—“Mr. Knightley, I am going to do so and so; papa says I may, or, I have Miss Taylor’s leave”—something which, you knew, I did not approve.’ (p. 363) With the meaning ‘insolent towards superiors’ (*OED Online*), the word ‘saucy’ stands in stark contrast to ‘docile’, which is used to describe Harriet’s disposition. Instead of being affronted, however, Mr Knightley treasures Emma’s speeches in ‘affectionate remembrance’ (p. 363), which indicates that Emma’s energy holds him spellbound. Listening to Mr Knightley’s loving account of her childhood

¹²³ Palser Havelly has made the same point on p. 229.

‘fault’, the grown-up Emma responds in a tongue-in-cheek manner: ‘What an amiable creature I was!’ (p. 363) Emma may or may not regret her past folly, but the light-hearted tone she adopts certainly does not show signs of serious contrition. For all Mr Knightley’s effort to guide Emma, he is unable to resist her opposing force, and she does not refrain from demonstrating her power.

The painting scene also gives a clue to Emma’s power over Mr Knightley, even if he is not present at that scene. Among the sitters that Emma names, baby George and Mrs Weston are the only two persons who are entirely under the control of the painter. Being a sleeping infant, baby George does not present any problems for Emma in her drawing. Because he and Mr Knightley bear the same first name, which is probably the result of the former being named after the latter, baby George may be read as a stand-in for the absent Mr Knightley. Such a connection appears more conspicuous if the discussion between Emma and Mr Knightley about his first name is taken into account:

‘“Mr. Knightley.”—You always called me, “Mr. Knightley,” and, from habit, it has not so very formal a sound.—And yet it is formal. I want you to call me something else, but I do not know what.’ [says Mr Knightley]

‘I remember once calling you “George,” in one of my amiable fits, about ten years ago. I did it because I thought it would offend you; but, as you made no objection, I never did it again.’

‘And cannot you call me “George” now?’

‘Impossible!—I never can call you any thing but “Mr. Knightley.” I will not promise even to equal the elegant terseness of Mrs. Elton, by calling you Mr. K.—But I will promise,’ she added presently, laughing and blushing—‘I will promise to call you once by your Christian name. I do not say when, but perhaps you may guess where;—in the building in which N. takes M. for better, for worse.’ (pp. 363-64)

As Mr Knightley points out, Emma has reduced the formality of a formal form of address through frequent use. She also gives her way of addressing him an ironic twist by saying that she will call him by his first name, which indicates familiarity and intimacy, in a formal event such as a wedding. However, he is unable to make Emma adopt a form that he thinks better suits the situation. Like baby George, who in his sleep cannot influence how Emma paints him, Mr Knightley has no power over Emma's way of addressing him. In subjecting himself to Emma's free creativity, Mr Knightley's role as Pygmalion is complicated by his part as Emma's creation. Because a name, like a portrait, stands for the original, the way in which Emma twists the meaning of the phrase 'Mr Knightley' to undermine his authority can be compared to how she enhances Harriet's looks in her portrait to emphasise her innocence. In both cases Emma acts as a powerful artist who exercises total control over her invented works.

It is noteworthy that Emma blushes while stating when she will call Mr Knightley by his first name. Like Harriet, Emma is described as blushing on several occasions in the novel, but unlike the giddy girl, whose blushes are stimulated by romantic visions, Emma blushes mostly because she becomes aware of, and is embarrassed by, her previous wrongdoing. She blushes when recalling her false assumptions about Mr Elton's marriage plans, when taking Mr Knightley's hint that she has not shown Jane Fairfax enough attention, and when being reminded of her silly matchmaking attempt by Harriet's sentimental collection of objects which once belonged to Mr Elton. In comparison, Emma's blushing in the instance of her discussion with Mr Knightley about his first name is of a more complex nature. Her direct reference to the 'building' where the wedding will take place suggests her consciousness of their prospective union and, with consummation as the natural result of a wedding, her erotic desire. Thus Emma's blushing indicates a becoming female propriety. However, her selective quote, 'N. takes M. for better, for worse', from the 'Form of Solemnization of Matrimony' in the Church

of England *Book of Common Prayer* also points towards an ambiguous representation of the power distribution in her envisioned married life. It may be that the letters of 'N' and 'M' are puns on 'Knightley' and 'Emma' respectively, in which case Emma could be consciously conceding the leading role in their relationship to Mr Knightley, but in the context of the *Prayer Book* Emma's 'N' and 'M' should be understood differently. As 'M' is used to designate the groom and 'N' the bride, and during a wedding ceremony it is usually the groom that makes the vows first, Emma's quote bypasses the groom's part in the exchange of vows at an actual marriage service and emphasises instead her own initiative. Given the ambiguity of the phrase 'N. takes M.', Emma's blushing emerges as a statement of female sexuality and power under the cover of playfulness.

In the end, Emma breaks her vow of celibacy and marries. Confronted with Harriet, the perfect outcome of her invention, Emma views her own Pygmalion in a new light. The first thought that comes to her mind after her epiphany is that 'Mr. Knightley must marry no one but herself!' (p. 320). This sentence shows Mr Knightley's obligation rather than Emma's affection, signalling her sway in their relationship. Unlike Harriet, who is likely to become a pliant, submissive wife, Emma has never been entirely under the control of Mr Knightley. In fact, it may be the recognition of her power over Mr Knightley that makes her change her mind. Emma has earlier explained to Harriet about her idea of marriage:

'I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband's house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's.' (p. 68)

This passage implies that if she does marry, she will not like to lose her importance. In

the end Mr Knightley turns out to be the only man capable of fulfilling Emma's criteria. As Emma reflects on her relationship with Mr Knightley, she realises that she has 'been first with him for many years past' (p. 326). In addition, as Mr Knightley's confession indicates, he has loved Emma despite all her faults, which is close to regarding her as 'always right': 'I could not think about you so much without doating on you, faults and all; and by dint of fancying so many errors, have been in love with you ever since you were thirteen at least.' (p. 363). In marrying Mr Knightley, Emma can be sure that none of the sway she prizes will diminish.

The novel ends with a double marriage: Harriet marries Robert Martin, and Emma ties the knot with Mr Knightley. However, these two marriages happen separately and, like the Emma-Harriet and the Emma-Mr Knightley relationships, are fundamentally different. While Harriet will continue to occupy a subservient position in the home of 'security, stability, and improvement' that Martin offers (p. 379), Emma and Mr Knightley join hands on an equal, or unconventional, footing: one indication is that Mr Knightley will leave his home to live with Emma. The contrast between these two couples is made explicit by the narrator at the end of the penultimate paragraph: 'Mr. Elton was called on, within a month from the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Martin, to join the hands of Mr. Knightley and Miss Woodhouse.' (p. 381) While Harriet loses her original identity by taking her husband's family name, Emma seems to be keeping her individuality by remaining 'Miss Woodhouse'. Viewed within the framework of the marriage institution, the power-imbalanced and gendered relationship between Emma and Harriet foregrounded in the painting scene serves as a caricature of the conventional husband-wife relationship. Its breakdown indicates a criticism of the traditional balance of power in marriage and gestures towards an alternative exemplified by the union of Emma and Mr Knightley.

In each of the three novels I have discussed, Austen uses portraits and miniatures to conjure up relationships that involve more than just the hero and the heroine. In *Pride*

and Prejudice, the portraits and miniatures at Pemberley reveal the tension between Elizabeth and Mrs Reynolds as well as the dynamics of Elizabeth and Darcy's love; in *Sense and Sensibility*, Edward's miniature brings to the reader's attention the triangular relationship between Elinor, Lucy and Edward; and in *Emma*, Harriet's portrait exposes the romantic entanglements involving Emma, Harriet and Mr Elton. That said, the way the picture functions in *Emma* is the most complicated of the three novels. Unlike *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, where the scene concerning pictures appears in the middle of the narrative and is related to the heroine's relationship with the hero, in *Emma* the painting scene is installed at the beginning of the novel and not directly linked to the male protagonist. Such an arrangement allows the portrait to engage with the plot in a more intricate way than serving the purpose of acting as a catalyst for questioning gender roles.

As I have argued earlier, the portrait scene in *Emma* paves the way for the suitable union between Emma and Mr Knightley by illustrating an inferior counterpart featuring Emma and Harriet. In addition, it also approaches the issue of women's creativity because Emma's portrait of Harriet embodies her matchmaking zeal and active imagination. It is true that her poor judgement of Mr Elton's character and Harriet's origins, together with her false assumptions about other characters in the novel, indicates the wayward tendency of her creativity, and it is also true that Mr Knightley, her mentor and future husband, has always scolded her for her unrestrained imagination, but it would be simplistic to suppose that her marriage will curtail her creative power. Mr Knightley, for all his disapproval of Emma's role as a creator—whether of matches or stories—can do nothing to entirely counteract her free creativity. As I have argued, he has no power over Emma when it comes to her unconventional forms of address. In addition, the narrator also refrains from ascertaining whether or not Emma will give up her matchmaking business in future. When Emma knows that Mrs Weston has given birth to a baby girl, the narrator states that Emma 'had been decided in wishing for a

Miss Weston. She would not acknowledge that it was with any view of making a match for her, hereafter, with either of Isabella's sons' (p. 362). It is remarkable that after her failure to pair Harriet with Mr Elton and the reprimand she has received from Mr Knightley, she still entertains the thought of matchmaking. The phrase 'she would not acknowledge' suggests that Emma may continue with her old trick—just without openly admitting to her doings. With a strong artistic inclination and a husband who, though striving to check her irregularities, is enthralled by her lively imagination, it is likely that Emma's creative power will still flourish after she marries. Perhaps the portrait in *Emma*, despite all the imperfections associated with it, is nevertheless an important symbol of women's creativity.

Taking into account the hierarchy of genres in figurative art, the material and social significance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century portraits and miniatures, and the practice of painting in Austen's time, Austen's references to pictures emerge as her nuanced method of investigating female agency in a male-dominated world. It is true that, as many critics have argued, Austen's painting scenes provide the stage for the representation of her heroines' growing self and social understanding. Indeed, Elizabeth, Elinor, and Emma, like true *Bildungsroman* heroines, have all revised their opinions of others and assumed better command of their social behaviour by the end of the novel. However, what Austen expresses through her fictional portraits and miniatures also shows a strain of resilient female power that is hidden but, with an understanding of painting traditions, retrievable. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen first draws on the prestige and style of her time's most prominent portrait painter in her creation of the character Mrs Reynolds. By setting Elizabeth's picture-viewing experience against the

background of Mrs Reynolds's guidance, Austen crystallises women's struggle for personal views when dictated by an authoritative voice. In the gallery scene where Elizabeth finally sees the portrait of Darcy, Austen describes their complicated power relations in the vein of the eye miniature's social tradition. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Austen illustrates Lucy's inversion of patriarchal control by showing her manipulation of Edward's miniature, letter, and ring, things that were traditionally signifiers of male power and female conformity. Placing this unconventional character side by side with the gentle and long-suffering heroine Elinor, Austen implicitly casts doubts on female virtues such as altruism and total submission to patriarchal values. Elinor's burst of indignation against Edward at the end of the episode is a significant moment that demonstrates her consideration of her own rights. In *Emma*, Austen taps into the gendered power imbalance in common portrait painting to question conventional gender roles. In making Emma's submissive subject Harriet turn against her and illustrating Emma's egalitarian relationship with Mr Knightley, Austen satirises blind obedience in women and puts forward a desirable pattern of interaction in heterosexual unions. Alison Conway has pointed out that fiction and portraiture shared similar receptions in the eighteenth century, and she thinks that 'the memory of each genre's ability to signify an illicit, rather than a moral, reading of sentiment' persisted into the nineteenth century.¹²⁴ Perhaps it is no coincidence that in each of the novels I have discussed, Austen channels her concerns about female agency into scenes involving pictures.

¹²⁴ Conway, p. 212.

Chapter Two:

Women in the House: Interior Design and Gender Roles in *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion*

Rarely do the domestic spaces in Jane Austen's world receive description. The reader is given next to no clues as to the inside of, say, Elizabeth Bennet's Longbourn, the Dashwood sisters' Norland Park, or Emma Woodhouse's Hartfield. The bareness of Austen's, and indeed other Georgian, literary worlds, has its roots in the eighteenth-century aesthetics of interior design, which favoured visually spacious rooms with furniture arranged against the wall. In addition, as readers of fiction were assumed to be from similar social backgrounds and had built a consensus on the matter of taste, novelists needed not elaborate on an interior as long as it conformed to the established standards.¹²⁵ In light of this tendency to provide sparing detail, then, Austen's minute description of certain domestic spaces in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Persuasion* (1818) invites careful scrutiny. In *Northanger Abbey*, objects that fill Catherine's and Mrs Tilney's rooms are specified. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny's East Room is depicted in such great detail that the passage looks at odds with Austen's usual reticence about interiors. In *Persuasion*, Captain Harville's house at Lyme also receives a degree of descriptive attention that is unusual in Austen.

It is likely that Austen depicts an interior for a reason, considering that fiction and architecture are interrelated. As Philippa Tristram has pointed out, terms such as 'structure', 'aspect', 'outlook' and 'character' are used in the analytical discourses of both novels and buildings, and the domestic nature of fiction makes it an ideal genre to

¹²⁵ See Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, p. 5.

convey messages about the actual living spaces.¹²⁶ However, Austen's description of interiors bears significance beyond the function of being 'indicative of social change' or informing readers of unfamiliar settings as Tristram has suggested.¹²⁷ It is remarkable that in the Austen novels where interiors are carefully described, the protagonists are all subjected to manipulation and oppression. Catherine Morland first falls victim to the Thorpes' coercion, then suffers from the humiliating plight of being ruthlessly ejected from Northanger Abbey by General Tilney. Fanny Price's position in the Bertram household is ambiguous. Though a relative, she is treated more like a servant. Anne Elliot, despite her privileged background, is overlooked within her own family circle. She is valued in the two Musgrove households that receive her as a guest, but only for the emotional support she provides. As these mistreated heroines all come into contact with domestic spaces that are minutely described and, despite their forced submission to external power over their own affairs, all demonstrate an ability to disrupt or differ from the world view they are urged to adopt, I suggest that Austen uses the attitudes towards interior design commonly held in her time to articulate her investigation of women's position.

The image of the domestic goddess made iconic by Victorian ideology has contributed to the generally assumed view that women were in charge of the management of domestic space. In reality, however, the furnishing of the home was a male-dominated field until the late nineteenth century.¹²⁸ Even if in practice men collaborated with their wives in interior design, in a patriarchal culture the husband's interests reigned supreme.¹²⁹ Therefore, it is questionable how much of a woman's character was reflected in the arrangements she managed to make at home.¹³⁰ Given the

¹²⁶ Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction*, p. 2.

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 13; Philippa Tristram, 'Jane Austen's Aversion to Villas', in *The Georgian Villa*, ed. by Dana Arnold (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996), pp. 25-31 (p. 25).

¹²⁸ There were, however, a few upper-class women who oversaw the running of their husbands' houses and even designed them. See Dana Arnold, *The Georgian Country House: Architecture, Landscape and Society* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003), especially Chapter 5.

¹²⁹ See Deborah Cohen, pp. 89-93.

¹³⁰ It has to be noted, however, that although it seems an indisputable fact that an interior speaks volumes

fact that interior design revolved largely around men's, rather than women's, needs, it might not be a coincidence that Austen represents her more pliable heroines' quest for agency and an ideal partner through references to domestic interiors. Examined in the contexts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century furnishing conventions and gendered use of space, the carefully described rooms in *Northanger Abbey*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Persuasion* are the stage for Austen to criticise the established stereotypes of women and explore new possibilities for them.

CATHERINE MORLAND'S QUEST FOR THE GOTHIC STYLE

Like Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* also gets the chance to tour a country house accompanied by an authoritative figure. However, the incarnations of patriarchal authority faced by the heroines are different. While Elizabeth's chaperon Mrs Reynolds, as a housekeeper, can be seen as an instrument for dictating and implementing male control, Catherine's guide General Tilney, the very master of Northanger Abbey, is himself the epicentre of power. It seems reasonable, therefore, to assume that the tension between the heroine and patriarchy is higher in *Northanger Abbey*, especially given the fact that Catherine is determined to find Gothic objects in General Tilney's classically-furnished house. Indeed, critics have read Catherine's visit to Northanger Abbey in terms of the ingénue's challenge to male

about its owner's personal character, it was not until the late eighteenth century that people came to regard domestic space as a medium for the projection of individuality. Throughout the eighteenth century, only a small group among the upper echelons of society paid attention to the symbolic messages adhering to the things they acquired. Such awareness, nevertheless, stayed on the level of individual items such as china and imported furniture and did not extend to the overall arrangement of a room. Most people who could afford furnishings of some kind bought items based on what was available from their local providers rather than on personal taste. These attitudes had begun to change by the end of the eighteenth century. People were conscious of the fact that they were revealing their personality through the arrangement of different elements within a given space. They no longer followed a specific style and aimed at creating an interior that suited their whim. See Charles Saumarez Smith, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993), p. 306.

authority. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have argued that Austen ‘shows her heroine penetrating to the secret of the Abbey, the hidden truth of the ancestral mansion, to learn the complete and arbitrary power of the owner of the house, the father, the General’.¹³¹ Paul Morrison concurs with Gilbert and Gubar, applying Foucault’s theory of panoptic surveillance and seeing Catherine’s solitary tour of Mrs Tilney’s room as happening ‘at a time when she is effectively outside parental or paternal control, when she is in essence nobody’s daughter, and when she is not yet effectively under Henry’s control, when she is in fact nobody’s wife’.¹³²

While I share these critics’ assumption that *Northanger Abbey* is a male-dominated place, I would like to add that discussions about Catherine’s defiance of patriarchy will benefit from a consideration of her disagreement with General Tilney over stylistic matters. The Gothic style about which Catherine is so enthusiastic is diametrically opposite to the classical design favoured by General Tilney. Significantly, Catherine’s and General Tilney’s respective personalities correspond to characteristics of the two styles. The Gothic style, which places high value on freedom and creativity, coincides with Catherine’s active imagination. In contrast, the classical style, which stresses harmonic proportions and tends to overlook the human need for comfort, echoes General Tilney’s predilection for rigid discipline, a personal trait embodied in the strict time regime he imposes on his household.¹³³ Given these connections, then, Catherine’s rebellion is closely linked to her undampened curiosity about discovering unexpected objects in General Tilney’s seemingly immaculate house.

Catherine’s tour of *Northanger Abbey* begins with the parts of the house that General Tilney chooses to show her, and it is through descriptions of the décor in these rooms that the General’s character and authority are established. The narrator’s account

¹³¹ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 135.

¹³² Paul Morrison, ‘Enclosed in Openness: *Northanger Abbey* and the Domestic Carceral’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 33 (1991), 1-23 (p. 3).

¹³³ Tristram in *Living Space* summarises the distinction between the Gothic and the classical styles as follows: ‘One style directs itself to individualism; the other seeks harmony with a social whole’ (p. 7).

of the common drawing-room, the first space in the abbey that Catherine enters, offers a concise but clear picture of General Tilney's pursuit of contemporary fashion and love of show:

The furniture was in all the profusion and elegance of modern taste. The fire-place, where she had expected the ample width and ponderous carving of former times, was contracted to a Rumford, with slabs of plain though handsome marble, and ornaments over it of the prettiest English china. The windows, to which she looked with peculiar dependence, from having heard the General talk of his preserving them in their Gothic form with reverential care, were yet less what her fancy had portrayed. To be sure, the pointed arch was preserved—the form of them was Gothic—they might be even casements—but every pane was so large, so clear, so light!¹³⁴

The 'modern taste' that the furniture exhibits must have been Georgian, or classical, style, as classicism dominated the architectural scene throughout the eighteenth century and remained popular into the Regency period. What the style of the furniture conveys, however, is more than General Tilney's elegant taste. As it was likely that he ordered his tables and chairs, together with the state-of-the-art Rumford fireplace from London,¹³⁵ the fashionable capital at the time, his furniture is clear evidence of his wealth. Situated thirty miles away from Bath, Northanger is by no means near the capital. Such a location was remote before the arrival of rail transport. However, General Tilney still managed to keep abreast of the latest trends and to furnish a house as London fashion dictated. This shows not only his consciousness of contemporary taste but also financial

¹³⁴ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 118. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

¹³⁵ The Rumford fireplace, invented in the 1790s and coinciding with the time when *Northanger Abbey* was first penned, was popular among London households. See James Ayres, *Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition, 1500-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 37.

power to support such a pursuit. Apart from the stylish furniture and cutting-edge fireplace, the ‘large’, ‘clear’, ‘light’ windows also speak to General Tilney’s affluence. As a window tax based on the number and size of windows was levied in England between 1696 and 1851,¹³⁶ a house with several windows was symbolic of the owner’s wealth. The link between a person’s riches and the number of windows installed in his or her house can also be found in *Pride and Prejudice*, where Mr Collins boasts about how many windows Rosings has and how much the glazing has cost Sir Lewis De Bourgh, the husband of his patroness Lady Catherine.

The décor of the common drawing-room, however, also indicates something more disturbing than General Tilney’s obsession with fashion and love of display. It is significant that this space, where ladies withdrew after dinner and thus a room commonly bearing marks of femininity in this period,¹³⁷ speaks volumes only about General Tilney’s personal taste. Although Mrs Tilney has died, the Tilney family is not entirely without female members. In Austen’s other motherless households, daughters assume considerable power in managing the drawing-room. Emma introduces a ‘large modern circular table’ at Hartfield to replace the old ‘small-sized Pembroke’, which Mr Woodhouse much prefers but is obliged to forgo (p. 272). In *Persuasion*, Elizabeth Elliot is given a free rein to furnish the drawing-rooms of both Kellynch Hall and her father’s rented house in Bath. Given General Tilney’s love of ceremony, it is natural that he should expect his daughter to use the drawing-room after the fashion of the day, that is, to entertain female guests after dinner while gentlemen linger over port in the dining room. The domination of his preference in the décor of this otherwise feminine space highlights how far his power stretches. Even a socially sanctioned female domain is under his control.

The influence of General Tilney’s ideas about interior design extends beyond the

¹³⁶ See Ayres, pp. 79-80.

¹³⁷ Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 149.

walls of the common drawing-room. When Catherine and Eleanor return to their rooms to dress for dinner, they ‘ascended a broad stair case of shining oak, which, after many flights and many landing-places, brought them upon a long wide gallery’ (p. 118). The fact that polished oak is used for the flooring of the stairs indicates that General Tilney accords importance to this space. While the plan for rebuilding a parsonage in 1787 restricted the use of oak to the parlour and adopted cheaper woods such as deal and elm for the bedrooms and garrets,¹³⁸ General Tilney apparently thinks stairs are important enough to be made of oak.

In addition to the common drawing-room, General Tilney shows Catherine a number of other rooms, including the dining-parlour and the grander drawing-room. Compared with the common drawing-room, the terms that are used to describe these rooms are generalised and atmospheric rather than particular. The dining-parlour is simply depicted as ‘fitted up in a style of luxury and expense’, and nothing in the larger drawing-room is specified although it was perceived by Catherine to be ‘very noble—very grand—very charming’ (pp. 121, 133). It is likely that after delineating General Tilney’s character through the interior of the common drawing-room, Austen does not feel the need to repeat the same process, as every space that bears his personal mark conveys the same message. Moreover, the heroine, Catherine, is not at all interested in these interiors. The common drawing-room falls short of Catherine’s expectations, and the dazzling furnishings of both the dining-parlour and the large drawing-room are lost upon Catherine’s ‘unpractised’ and ‘indiscriminating’ eye (pp. 121, 133). Catherine’s inability or unwillingness to discern the symbols of wealth General Tilney wishes her to recognise in the rooms he shows her indicates that she is able to keep her passion for the Gothic even in the face of her male oppressor’s forceful campaign.

Unsatisfied with what she is allowed to see, Catherine sets out on her own to find

¹³⁸ See Ayres, p. 93.

things that interest her, and her adventure begins in her own room. Because it was men who presided over matters of domestic interiors in this period, Catherine's apartment is furnished in roughly the same style as other spaces in the abbey:

The walls were papered, the floor was carpeted; the windows were neither less perfect, nor more dim than those of the drawing-room below; the furniture, though not of the latest fashion, was handsome and comfortable, and the air of the room altogether far from uncheerful. (p. 119)

The presence of wallpaper and carpet, like the existence of the Rumford fireplace and windows in the common drawing-room, confirms General Tilney's social distinction. Textile production, being unmechanised, remained expensive throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Even in Bath, a fashionable spa town that could rival London in the world of fashion, the use of wallpaper was limited to the most privileged households.¹³⁹ Because Northanger Abbey is located in the country, General Tilney's acquisition of fabrics in his house, like his purchase of other fashionable items referred to in the novel, reinforces his image as an affluent follower of fashion.

As in the other rooms bearing signs of General Tilney's wealth and taste, Catherine is blind to the trappings of affluence he deliberately thrusts upon her. Instead, she is keen to search for objects that are tucked away, things that do not feature in General Tilney's pride in his home. In the apartment that serves as Catherine's room during her stay in Northanger Abbey, she discovers two suspicious pieces of furniture: a chest and a black cabinet. The chest is

of cedar, curiously inlaid with some darker wood, and raised, about a foot from the ground, on a carved stand of the same. The lock was silver, though tarnished from

¹³⁹ See Ayres, pp. 125, 162.

age; at each end were the imperfect remains of handles also of silver, broken perhaps prematurely by some strange violence; and, on the centre of the lid, was a mysterious cypher, in the same metal. (p. 119)

The description of the chest indicates its outmodedness. In the first place, the chest is an old form of furniture with certain disadvantages: nothing could be placed on its lid without hindering access, and having opened it one usually had to reach deep to find a small object. By the time the novel was written in the 1790s, the chest had been widely replaced by the chest of drawers. In addition, the cedar, which was popular among upper-class households in the late seventeenth century, and the tarnished silver lock also point to the age of the chest.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, even Eleanor does not know ‘how many generations it has been here’ (p. 120). The other piece of furniture that catches Catherine’s eye is a black cabinet decorated with ‘Japan, black and yellow Japan of the handsomest kind’ (p. 123). Like the chest, the style of the black cabinet also indicates its antiquity because japanned furniture formed part of the *chinoiserie* interior that was prevalent in the bedchambers of mid-eighteenth century country houses.¹⁴¹ Catherine’s interest in these items, things that bear marks of human touch and history, is the complete opposite of General Tilney’s love of neat but emotionally empty symbols, and the discoveries she makes in her own room set the stage for the most important part of her attempt to look behind his smooth façade: finding proof of Mrs Tilney’s mistreatment.

Catherine’s quest for unusual items in Northanger Abbey culminates in her visit to Mrs Tilney’s bedchamber. Prior to this visit, Catherine has seen ‘a very elegant monument to the memory of Mrs. Tilney’ with ‘highly-strained epitaph, in which every virtue was ascribed to her by the inconsolable husband’ (p. 139). As with everything

¹⁴⁰ See Ayres, pp. 168, 54.

¹⁴¹ Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 175.

General Tilney values, the monument serves to illustrate his predilection for the ostentatious rather than his genuine care for the family. Catherine is not to be fooled by his standard demonstration of remembrance, and ventures into Mrs Tilney's bedchamber. The interior that meets Catherine's eye, disappointingly, is one that is furnished according to General Tilney's taste:

She saw a large, well-proportioned apartment, an handsome dimity bed, arranged as unoccupied with an housemaid's care, a bright Bath stove, mahogany wardrobes and neatly-painted chairs, on which the warm beams of a western sun gaily poured through two sash windows! (p. 142)

This 'handsome', 'bright', 'neat' and 'gaily'-lit space bears no traces of mistreatment. With 'the warm beams of a western sun gaily [pouring] through two sash windows', the room even hints at the well-being of its inhabitant. However, its 'unoccupied' condition, which signals no sign of life, may suggest that General Tilney has smoothed away any irregularities with the clean-cut classical style. According to George Hepplewhite's *The Cabinet Maker and Upholsterer's Guide* (1788), a book documenting a distinctive style of elegant furniture that was fashionable in the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the 'dimity bed', 'mahogany wardrobe', and 'painted chairs' were common in fashionable houses at the time of *Northanger Abbey's* composition.¹⁴² In turning his late wife's bedchamber into a depersonalised showroom, General Tilney erases her personality, if he has not eradicated her person. The narrator remains vague about General Tilney's guilt, but she tellingly comments that if he did commit a crime, he 'had certainly too much wit to let them sue for detection' (p. 142). Just as the availability of sunlight did not ensure Mrs Tilney's physical health—because she eventually died in the

¹⁴² See David Nickerson, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), pp. 79-103.

room—the sparkling clean bedchamber leaves one wondering whether subtle nuances may be hidden beneath its smooth surface.

Catherine's quest is not entirely to no avail. After all, she finds in the cedar chest 'a white cotton counterpane' and in the japanned cabinet 'an inventory of linen' (pp. 120, 126). These mundane objects have traditionally been interpreted as a parody of the predictable plot of Gothic fiction and indicators of Catherine's wild imagination. Although there are critics who recognise the importance of Catherine's seemingly banal findings, they do not discuss their significance in relation to their materiality. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Austen could be 'pointing at the real threat to women's happiness when she describes her heroine finding *a laundry list*' (italics in original),¹⁴³ but they do not further develop this argument. What Gilbert and Gubar leave unexplained is taken up by Paul Morrison. Accepting that panoptic power is 'a power that regulates by laying open, controls by making visible, a power that by virtue of the very banality of its operations seeks to disguise its identity as power', Morrison interprets 'the specific content of the inventory' as 'the recuperation of the gothic carceral in terms of the workaday world of a domestic female lot'.¹⁴⁴

The power relations embodied in objects that Morrison identifies are key to a deeper understanding of Catherine's findings. Apart from the discourse of Foucault that Morrison uses in his reading, a consideration of the cotton counterpane's and the linen's cultural backgrounds will also reveal these everyday items' hidden meanings. The cotton counterpane was 'common in even cheap furnished lodgings by the 1790s',¹⁴⁵ and linen was processed at home to make items for personal and household uses such as sheets, handkerchiefs, neckcloths, and shirts. Such an essential part of genteel housekeeping, as can be imagined, was the sole responsibility of women, even in the

¹⁴³ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 135.

¹⁴⁴ Morrison, pp. 11, 12.

¹⁴⁵ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 214.

case of well-to-do ladies.¹⁴⁶ What women's efforts produced, however, was to help foster the image of a well-functioning patriarchal system, as good housekeeping was a credit to the household. On the national level, cotton also took on additional symbolic significance during the Napoleonic Wars. Britain's war with France made the choice of muslin over silk an act of patriotism that honoured Britain's imperial expansion and the domestic cotton industry.¹⁴⁷ Viewed in this light, the white counterpane and the washing bill hidden in obscure quarters signify women's unacknowledged labour in the patriarchal system. In *Northanger Abbey*, while General Tilney makes an explicit statement of power through fashionable movables and appliances on show, the actual female work and value are encased in forgotten furniture and not allowed to be seen. Catherine's uncovering of mundane but practical objects can thus be read as an act that disturbs General Tilney's world of patriarchal symbols and mocks his obsession with empty signifiers.

Like the objects that bear women's work but remain hidden, Mrs Tilney's existence is elusive. In fact, the Gothic tale Henry tells Catherine in their ride from Bath to Northanger, though meant as a joke to tease Catherine, can be read as an account of Mrs Tilney's suffering. He says to her:

'[Y]ou must be aware that when a young lady is (by whatever means) introduced into a dwelling of this kind, she is always lodged apart from the rest of the family. While they snugly repair to their own end of the house, she is formally conducted by Dorothy the ancient housekeeper up a different staircase, and along many gloomy passages, into an apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before. Can you stand such a ceremony as this? Will not your mind misgive you, when you find yourself in this gloomy chamber—too

¹⁴⁶ Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 122.

¹⁴⁷ For the imperial history of muslin, see Antje Blank, 'Dress', in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 234-51 (pp. 235-36).

lofty and extensive for you, with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size—its walls hung with tapestry exhibiting figures as large as life, and the bed, of dark green stuff or purple velvet, presenting even a funereal appearance.’ (pp. 114-15)

In retrospect, the ‘apartment never used since some cousin or kin died in it about twenty years before’ evokes Mrs Tilney’s room, in which she died nine years before Catherine’s visit. The velvet bed, a style that was popular in the late seventeenth century and would have seemed passé by the end of the eighteenth,¹⁴⁸ indicates a sense of loss, and Henry’s comment that the bed presents ‘a funereal appearance’ serves as yet another link to Mrs Tilney’s death. The ‘gloomy chamber—too lofty and extensive for [Catherine], with only the feeble rays of a single lamp to take in its size’, though a far cry from the ‘large, well-proportioned apartment’ with ‘a bright Bath stove’ into which Catherine sneaks (p. 142), connotes Mrs Tilney’s symbolic, if not physical, isolation in the house. General Tilney has never been apparently closely attached to her, and during the period of her illness, her children do not show particular signs of affection. As Henry informs Catherine, he and his brother ‘saw her repeatedly’ (p. 145), but he does not refer to any more loving forms of care on his part. Eleanor was away from home when Mrs Tilney died, and she frankly tells Catherine that she ‘could not then know what a loss it was’ and that the grief increased only as she grew older (p. 132).

In the story that Henry tells Catherine, he also talks of a ‘portrait of some handsome warrior, whose features will so incomprehensibly strike [her], that [she] will not be able to withdraw [her] eyes from it’ (p. 115). Notably, the portrait in Northanger Abbey that both engages Catherine’s interest and puzzles her is that of Mrs Tilney. Contrary to Catherine’s past experience, Mrs Tilney’s portrait does not bear ‘an equal resemblance of mother and child’, so she ‘was obliged to look and consider and study

¹⁴⁸ Nickerson, p. 10.

for a likeness' (p. 140). The lack of resemblance between Mrs Tilney and her children could be interpreted as an outward sign of her detachment from them. Catherine's reaction may bias readers' interpretation, but the fact that both Henry and Eleanor were not particularly attached to her while she was alive provides a possible clue. It is noteworthy that Mrs Tilney, a near-mythical figure who does not seem to have bonded with any close relations and whose story is only implicitly contained in her son's Gothic tale, becomes implicitly associated with a warrior through Catherine. This ingénue is as fascinated by the portrait of a warrior as by Mrs Tilney's life stories. To Henry, Catherine's unusual interest in his mother is incomprehensible, as he makes known to her: 'The domestic, unpretending merits of a person never known, do not often create that kind of fervent, venerating tenderness which would prompt a visit like yours' (p. 144). However, Catherine's curiosity about Mrs Tilney, just like her enthusiasm for objects that are overshadowed by General Tilney's classical interiors, demonstrates her ability to see through the ostentatious and the prominent. In providing an analogy between a warrior and Mrs Tilney, Catherine—whether or not she realises it—recognises the worth of the overlooked woman and steps into the role of her ally and successor.

Entering Northanger Abbey as an outsider, Catherine is to become a new member of the Tilney family by the end of the novel. In marrying Henry, Catherine will become, to some extent, a child of Mrs Tilney and accomplish what she has failed: standing on a more equal footing in marriage. The more balanced relationship between Catherine and Henry is revealed through the interior design of Woodston, the parsonage that is to be their new home. Catherine takes an instant liking to the house the moment she has the presence of mind to observe 'the room in which she was sitting' (p. 157). At this moment she is still too reserved to openly express her opinion, but when she is shown into the would-be drawing-room, her excitement makes her lose her inhibitions. 'It is the prettiest room I ever saw;—it is the prettiest room in the world!' she exclaims (p.

157). The term 'pretty', when referring to a thing, denotes 'pleasing to the senses, aesthetically pleasing; attractive or charming' (*OED Online*). As Myra Stokes has noted, the word nearly always carries 'invisible but audible inverted commas round it' for more sophisticated Austen speakers,¹⁴⁹ but for a naïve character like Catherine, the word 'pretty' delivers nothing but straightforward admiration and indicates her simplicity. Viewed in this light, Catherine's repetition of it becomes her means of personalising the space. Her desire for ownership grows more apparent when she imagines herself as the mistress of the house, as indicated by her response to General Tilney's allusion to Woodston's lack of 'a lady's taste': 'Well, if it was my house, I should never sit any where else' (p. 157).

In the end Catherine does become the mistress of Woodston. Unlike General Tilney, who exercises power in interior design, Henry regards this sphere as a shared responsibility. After Henry secures Catherine's and her parents' consent, he returns to 'what was now his only home, to watch over his young plantations, and extend his improvements for her sake, to whose share in them he looked anxiously forward' (p. 185). Unlike Mrs Tilney, who is forced to live in a home that is fitted up according to her husband's taste, Catherine will marry a husband who is willing to provide her with a tabula rasa. In fact, with 'windows reaching to the ground' that offer a view over 'green meadows' (p. 157), the unfurnished drawing-room in Woodston has already been stamped with Catherine's personality. The 'green meadows' calls to mind the confinement-hating Catherine as a child, who 'loved nothing so well in the world as rolling down the green slope at the back of the house' (p. 6). Here in Woodston, Catherine is able not only to participate in the design of the interior but also to retain some of her early yearning for unrestraint.

As my discussions have shown, Austen's description of interiors in *Northanger Abbey* is more elaborate and significant than traditional readings have allowed. In

¹⁴⁹ Myra Stokes, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 92.

detailing the domestic space of General Tilney's Northanger Abbey, Austen registers the contemporary idea that men led the way in interior design. Hidden in such a concept is a wider inequality between husband and wife, as exemplified by the dictatorial General Tilney and the disembodied Mrs Tilney. Austen questions such a phenomenon by introducing into the male dominated interior of Northanger Abbey an ingénue who does not recognise the status symbols set up by its owner. It is in this setting that Catherine discovers objects that are passé and ordinary and unearths stories about an equally insignificant figure, Mrs Tilney. Catherine's findings, though serving to mock her unrestrained imagination, point towards General Tilney's neglect of women's roles and possible mistreatment of his wife. In Woodston, Austen constructs a new space where the husband and wife will share the task of domestic design, which suggests a more balanced married life.

During the process of her attempt to find unusual objects in Northanger Abbey, Catherine demonstrates extraordinary determination. She carries out her adventure regardless of Henry's alarming story and the sense of foreboding she detects in General Tilney's behaviour, opening the lid of the chest with 'resolute effort', vowing to be the 'mistress' of the black cabinet's content, and not allowing an elegant monument dedicated to Mrs Tilney 'in the smallest degree [to] affect her doubts of' the former mistress's actual death (pp. 120, 125, 140). Susan Zlotnick has noted Catherine's strength in this regard and argued that 'by examining the chest and questioning its placement in the room, [Catherine] refuses to accept domestic arrangements as a given'.¹⁵⁰ While Zlotnick's argument is directed towards the effectivity of Catherine's novel reading, I wish to emphasise that set against General Tilney's preference for classical décor, Catherine's persistence in discovering irregular items also exhibits her courage in challenging established ideologies.

¹⁵⁰ Susan Zlotnick, 'From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency, Novels, and the Marketplace in *Northanger Abbey*', *Studies in the Novel*, 41 (2009), 277-92 (p. 289).

FANNY PRICE AND HER EAST ROOM

While none of the spaces in which Catherine moves belongs to her, and her arrangement of the Woodston interior is anticipated rather than described, Fanny Price can claim a degree of private ownership of certain spaces in her uncle's house Mansfield Park. In fact, the East Room, a space closely associated with Fanny, is so minutely depicted that it has received passing remarks even from critics who do not particularly dwell on Austen's domestic spaces. Although a number of critics have commented on the intertwining relationship between Fanny and her surroundings, they adopt theoretical rather than materialistic approaches.¹⁵¹ Of these critics, P. K. Kagawa brings in a more material-based approach because she emphasises 'how a body moves, uses and feels its spaces'.¹⁵² Building on her interpretation of the East Room as a library and a sitting room, I wish to incorporate more historical and materialistic backgrounds of eighteenth-century interiors into my examination of the East Room, a space that is so central to the debate about Fanny's position in the novel.

Critics have held a wide spectrum of views about Fanny. Some regard her as the personification of rectitude and traditional values, while others consider her to be a victim of patriarchal exploitation. Alistair Duckworth hails Fanny as 'a character who holds to a permanent sense of place and a stable idea of personal identity'.¹⁵³ Anna Despotopoulou also views Fanny's arrangement of her space as the embodiment of stability, but instead of linking her with conventional morality, she argues that Fanny builds 'a unique feminine space for herself which remains uncontaminated and

¹⁵¹ See, for example, Francis R. Hart, 'The Spaces of Privacy: Jane Austen', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), 305-33; John Skinner, 'Exploring Space: The Constellations of *Mansfield Park*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 4 (1992), 126-48.

¹⁵² P. K. Kagawa, 'Jane Austen, the Architect: (Re)Building Spaces at *Mansfield Park*', *Women's Studies*, 35 (2006), 125-43 (p. 135).

¹⁵³ Duckworth, p. 64.

uninterrupted by male involvement'.¹⁵⁴ Claudia Johnson is less sanguine about Fanny's position. She thinks that Fanny is 'ideologically and emotionally identified with the benighted figures who coerce and mislead her' and posits that *Mansfield Park* is Austen's most 'bitter parody of conservative fiction'.¹⁵⁵ By contrast, I want to argue that, if examined within the framework of contemporary interior design, Fanny's use of the East Room demonstrates her ability to carve out a niche for herself in the patriarchal structure to which she is subservient.

When Fanny first arrives at Mansfield Park as a ten-year-old girl, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, having considered with Mrs Norris 'the best place' for Fanny, assign her 'the little white attic, near the old nurseries'.¹⁵⁶ Apart from bearing the name 'the little white attic', this space is left completely undescribed. White is a colour that does not have any distinctive hue. Its application to the name of Fanny's room suggests the Bertram family's neglect—both material and emotional—of their poor relation. A degree of austerity in the white attic is to be expected, as it is remotely located, near where the housemaids and governess sleep. In addition, Sir Thomas is anxious to draw a clear distinction between Fanny and his daughters, so Fanny is unlikely to enjoy the same advantages as her cousins. The paucity of comforts may not have struck Fanny, a girl who is fully aware of her position in the Bertram family, but as a little girl she often weeps for the emotional deprivation she has to endure. As the narrator puts it, 'Fanny, whether near or from her cousins, whether in the school-room, the drawing-room, or the shrubbery, was equally forlorn, finding something to fear in every person and place' (p. 12).

Although she enters the Bertram family with only the little white attic to call her own, Fanny manages to secure the East Room as her sitting or dressing room as she

¹⁵⁴ Anna Despotopoulou, 'Fanny's Gaze and the Construction of Feminine Space in *Mansfield Park*', *Modern Language Review*, 99 (2004), 569-83 (p. 570).

¹⁵⁵ Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women Politics and the Novel*, p. 96.

¹⁵⁶ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

grows older:

The East room as it had been called, ever since Maria Bertram was sixteen, was now considered Fanny's, almost as decidedly as the white attic;—the smallness of the one making the use of the other so evidently reasonable, that the Miss Bertrams, with every superiority in their own apartments, which their own sense of superiority could demand, were entirely approving it;—and Mrs. Norris having stipulated for there never being a fire in it on Fanny's account, was tolerably resigned to her having the use of what nobody else wanted, though the terms in which she sometimes spoke of the indulgence, seemed to imply that it was the best room in the house. (p. 119)

The fact that the Miss Bertrams give up the East Room to Fanny on account of their possession of their own 'apartments' suggests that Fanny's newly acquired space serves a similar function. An apartment refers to 'a portion of a house or building, consisting of a suite or set of rooms, allotted to the use of a particular person or party' (*OED Online*). Popular in the Baroque period but still present up until 1770, this country house configuration comprised a bedroom with an attached dressing room or closet.¹⁵⁷ Even if the apartment system waned in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, ladies' bedrooms still had attendant dressing rooms, and these rooms took on the new importance of serving as 'a setting for private activities' such as reading, writing, needlework, and receiving intimate guests.¹⁵⁸ Mrs Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* has a dressing-closet attached to her bedchamber, and Catherine speculates that she may have walked or read in it. Indeed, the objects and activities described in the East Room match the description of what commonly happened in a lady's sitting room: Fanny has her

¹⁵⁷ Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 230.

¹⁵⁸ Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 193.

‘writing desk’, ‘books’, ‘work-boxes’ and ‘netting-boxes’ (pp. 119-20); she also receives Edmund, Mary Crawford and Sir Thomas as her guests. In having a sitting room like her cousins, Fanny’s position is raised to that of Maria and Julia Bertram, which is an ironic situation as Sir Thomas has stated that measures must be taken to make Fanny remember that ‘she is not a *Miss Bertram*’ (p. 9). In fact, Fanny’s pursuits in the East Room show that she fulfils the role of a lady better than the other female members of the Bertram family. The novel does not specify what Maria and Julia do in their sitting rooms, but their childhood activities of ‘making artificial flowers’ and ‘wasting gold paper’ suggest that as adults they may continue to engage in the same sort of meaningless leisure work (p. 12). Their mother, Lady Bertram, is more indolent. She is portrayed as a woman who ‘spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa’ and making ‘some long piece of needle work’ that was useless and without aesthetic value (p. 16). It is true that the East Room is ‘what nobody else wanted’ (p. 119), but Fanny’s appropriation of it as a lady’s dressing room indicates her ability not only to acquire the status that has been deliberately kept out of her reach but also to live up to that image in a manner superior to her social betters.

Not only does Fanny use the East Room as a lady’s space, but she also employs it for intellectual pursuits that were unusual for ordinary women. As indicated by Edmund’s remarks, books feature prominently in the East Room:

‘How does Lord Macartney go on?—(opening a volume on the table and then taking up some others.) And here are Crabbe’s *Tales*, and the *Idler*, at hand to relieve you, if you tire of your great book.’ (p. 123)

Fanny’s reading list consists of Lord Macartney’s *Journal of the Embassy to China*, first published in Sir John Barrow’s *Some Account of the Public Life, and a Selection of the Unpublished Writings of the Earl of Macartney* in 1807, and George Crabbe’s *Tales in*

Verse, published in September 1812. These works show Fanny's up-to-date reading and wide-ranging interests, and the fact that Edmund seems to understand the content of these books suggests he is accustomed to discussing literary works with her. In this respect, the East Room functions as a 'boudoir', a word first introduced to England in 1781, with its original French connotation of 'intellectual *causeries*'.¹⁵⁹

The décor of the East Room also smacks of a contemporary 'sitting-library'. Two of the major stylistic trends of country-house libraries designed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were to bring in the more relaxing ambience of the sitting room and to incorporate nature into the interior. Humphry Repton in his *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1816) explains that 'the most recent modern custom is to use the library as the general living-room'.¹⁶⁰ Such a 'sitting-library' allowed groups of people to pursue different activities 'in an atmosphere that was cultivated but at the same time informal'.¹⁶¹ Maria Edgeworth, after her 1818 visit to the library at Bowood House in Wiltshire, described a similar scene:

It was very agreeable in the delightful library after breakfast this day—groups round various tables—books and prints. Lady Lansdowne found the battle of Roundway for me in different histories, and Lord Lansdowne shewed me a letter of Waller's to Lord Hopton on their quarrel after this battle and Lord Grenville shaking his leg and reading was silent and I suppose happy.¹⁶²

The East Room, with its close association with reading and other leisure activities, imparts a similar flavour. There Fanny keeps her writing desk and collection of books, receives guests, and even acts with Mary Crawford and serves as a prompter when

¹⁵⁹ Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 193.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 204.

¹⁶¹ Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 209.

¹⁶² Maria Edgeworth, *Letters from England, 1813-44*, ed. by Christina Colvin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), p. 91.

Edmund rehearses with Mary.

In addition to assuming the more relaxed character of a sitting-room, modern libraries in this period also featured access to nature with locations at ground level and low-silled or French windows opening into the garden. Correspondingly, plants were introduced to the house by means of vases, pots of flowers and conservatories.¹⁶³

Caroline Powys, an eighteenth-century diarist moving among upper-class circles, remarked in the 1770s that in Middleton Park, Oxfordshire, she found

a most excellent library out of the drawing-room, seventy feet long – in this room, besides a good collection of books there is every other kind of amusement, as billiard and other tables, and a few good pictures. As her Ladyship is, according to the fashion, a botanist, she has a pretty flower garden going out of the library.¹⁶⁴

It is unlikely that the East Room, previously a school room, is situated on the ground floor, but it is well-situated in terms of the availability of sunlight:

The aspect was so favourable, that even without a fire it was habitable in many an early spring, and late autumn morning, to such a willing mind as Fanny's, and while there was a gleam of sunshine, she hoped not to be driven from it entirely, even when winter came. (p. 119)

The abundance of sunshine may explain why Fanny is able to keep her plants indoors. In fact, in the East Room plants seem to assume as much importance as books, because the narrator never refers to one without mentioning the other: Fanny goes to the East Room 'when she visited her plants, or wanted one of the books', collecting 'her plants'

¹⁶³ Girouard, p. 214.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 204.

and ‘her books’ ‘from the first hour of her commanding a shilling’ (pp. 118, 119). In actually growing plants in the East Room, Fanny creates a ‘library’ with a built-in garden and assumes the role of a landscape designer. In the eighteenth century, landscape design remained an exclusively male domain. Even if women were recorded to have participated in designing the layout of a garden or enjoyed the activity of gardening,¹⁶⁵ they never had the high profile ascribed to male garden designers such as Repton. *Mansfield Park* is a novel where landscape design is vigorously discussed among several property owners, so Fanny’s conscious cultivation of plants places her in a position to provide an alternative to, if not to challenge, the male practice. Instead of facilitating views into nature like other contemporary ‘sitting-libraries’, the East Room incorporates plants into its environment and offers direct access to rustic charm.

To argue that the East Room closely resembles the library of the period would be to stretch the facts. For all their newly-acquired relaxed character and sitting-room functions as mixed gender spaces, libraries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries still featured a considerable number of bookshelves and were deemed a male preserve. Evolving out of the gentleman’s cabinet or closet, which housed objects, paintings and books collected from the Grand Tour, the library was a masculine space.¹⁶⁶ In *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr Bennet habitually retires to his library and regards the space as his sanctuary: he even drives his wife from it when her presence annoys him. Mr Bingley has a library at Netherfield to provide Elizabeth with books when she needs them, and Mr Darcy is reputed to have a large library at Pemberley. Fanny’s collection would look meagre in comparison to real gentlemen’s libraries, and it has to be said that the East Room’s prevailing atmosphere is feminine. However, the remote likeness the space bears to a contemporary ‘sitting-library’ is still significant because it suggests Fanny’s ability to move beyond the strict confines of femininity.

¹⁶⁵ See, for example, Susan G. Bell, ‘Women Create Gardens in Male Landscapes: A Revisionist Approach to Eighteenth-Century English Garden History’, *Feminist Studies*, 16 (1990), 471-91.

¹⁶⁶ Girouard, p. 178; Jackson-Stops and Pipkin, p. 206.

Indeed, Fanny's East Room can be viewed as an alternative to the former gentleman's cabinet. While well-born men filled their cabinets and closets with Old Masters and Greek or Roman statues gleaned from their trips to the Continent, Fanny graces the East Room with

three transparencies, made in a rage for transparencies, for the three lower panes of one window, where Tintern Abbey held its station between a cave in Italy, and a moonlight lake in Cumberland; a collection of family profiles thought unworthy of being anywhere else, over the mantle piece, and by their side and pinned against the wall, a small sketch of a ship sent four years ago from the Mediterranean by William, with H. M. S. Antwerp at the bottom, in letters as tall as the main-mast. (p. 120)

Instead of displaying things that showcase purchasing power and symbolise wealth, like General Tilney with his Rumford fireplace and Staffordshire china, Fanny exhibits objects that commemorate personal ties, as indicated by the family profiles and the sketch sent by her brother. More significantly, Fanny expresses her creative energy while maintaining a proper image of femininity through the three transparencies featuring romantic and picturesque scenes. Transparencies were 'scenes painted on paper, Irish linen, fine calico or cambric muslin that were back-lit to create an illuminated effect'.¹⁶⁷ Because of their reliance on the contrasting effects of light and dark, transparencies commonly featured Gothic and picturesque scenes, like the moonlit lake and Tintern Abbey in Fanny's windows. Popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they were considered properly feminine in many respects. Not only were the skills required for making transparencies similar to other becoming

¹⁶⁷ John Plunkett, 'Light Work: Feminine Leisure and the Making of Transparencies', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 43-67 (p. 44).

ladylike pursuits, such as embroidery, water-colour painting, and paper-work, but the aesthetic properties of these handiworks, ‘radiant, ethereal, passive’, also evoked the image of an ideal woman.¹⁶⁸ Despite their amateurish status, which made them inferior to Old Masters in contemporary perception, transparencies were an important outlet for female creativity. Mary Howitt and Jane Carlyle both conducted the activity of transparency-making as a way of exercising their creativity,¹⁶⁹ and Fanny’s involvement in this pursuit also indicates her ability to push boundaries without going beyond the confines of socially-constructed femininity. The subjects that Fanny chooses for her transparencies are standard and may seem to suggest nothing more than her romantic taste: Tintern Abbey and Cumberland evoke William Wordsworth’s poetry, and Italy often features in Gothic novels such as Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and *The Italians* (1797). However, these locations hint at a more subtle significance. Tintern Abbey, Italy and Cumberland are places for which Fanny has a yearning but is unlikely to have visited. By decorating her window with transparencies that feature these scenes, Fanny incorporates a wider world, albeit still an imaginary one, into her narrow confines. Although she is unable to travel to faraway places and bring back valuable artworks, she can at least create a feminised version of a gentleman’s cabinet with things she can lay her hands on.

Placed within the framework of interior design, the East Room becomes a space that serves multiple functions. It is a lady’s dressing room, but it also conveys the character of a sitting-library and a gentleman’s cabinet. In arranging the East Room to have both feminine and masculine qualities, Fanny shows an ability not only to acquire a status that has previously been refused her but also to cultivate intellectual pursuits that were normally denied ordinary women. Focusing on Fanny’s construction of a space that shows masculine characteristics, Kagawa argues that ‘Fanny builds her own

¹⁶⁸ Plunkett, p. 56.

¹⁶⁹ For these female writers’ transparency-making stories, see Plunkett, pp. 53-54; 60-61.

space of knowledge-making in the East Room' and 'reverses the traditional power relations between male and female spaces of knowledge'.¹⁷⁰ I agree with Kagawa that Fanny acquires agency through furnishing the East Room, but her achievement of power is not so straightforward if her relationship with the room and its content is closely examined.

Fanny's possession of the East Room, and indeed her possession of other objects referred to in the novel, is incomplete. Of the East Room she is described as 'almost equally mistress' (p. 118); the new mare for which Edmund exchanged his road-horse to replace Fanny's 'old grey poney' nominally belongs to him, and she was only 'put in almost full possession of her' (pp. 28-29). As the word 'almost' indicates, Fanny's ownership is always undermined. This is understandable as she is dependent on the Bertram family. She might be able to purchase books, plants, and pictures, but her purchasing power must have relied on Sir Thomas; she might demonstrate a high level of intellectual capability through her arrangement of the East Room as a miniature sitting-library, but her reading habits are indebted to Edmund.

It also has to be noted that the East Room, which seems to be Fanny's secure haven, has never been free from intrusion. Fanny cannot stop her visitors from entering the space even when she would rather avoid their presence than welcome them. For example, the moment of peace in which Fanny indulges after suffering from the pressure of being urged to act is interrupted 'when a gentle tap at the door was followed by the entrance of Miss Crawford' (p. 132). The description suggests that Mary enters the East Room without having obtained Fanny's consent. She does knock on the door, but she seems to have left no time for Fanny to react by slipping in quickly. The coexistence of Mary's gentle tap and unauthorised entrance also encapsulates her complex relationship with Fanny. When Fanny is under enormous pressure to act, Mary intervenes to prevent 'any farther entreaty from the theatrical board' (p. 116). On the

¹⁷⁰ Kagawa, pp. 137-38.

other hand, however, Mary's recognition that Fanny is 'as good a little creature as ever lived' does not keep her from cheating Fanny to help Henry's advances (p. 180). Once in the East Room, Mary even takes the initiative to talk, as she soon says: 'Am I right?—Yes; this is the east room. My dear Miss Price, I beg your pardon, but I have made my way to you on purpose to entreat your help' (p. 132). She raises a question but provides the answer herself, and seeks Fanny's assistance almost without further ceremony. No details about Fanny's mind at this moment are given except the description that she is 'quite surprised' (p. 132), but these words are enough to indicate that Mary's visit is unexpected. Given Fanny's disapproval of Mary's character and her feelings of jealousy regarding her, Mary's unannounced visit must have an unsettling effect on Fanny.

Another unwelcome visitor is Sir Thomas. After rejecting Henry Crawford's proposal, Fanny again retreats to the East Room to calm her nerves. Just when she is starting to regain her composure, her tranquillity is broken by the approaching footsteps of her uncle:

Nearly half an hour had passed, and she was growing very comfortable, when suddenly the sound of a step in regular approach was heard—a heavy step, an unusual step in that part of the house; it was her uncle's; she knew it as well as his voice; she had trembled at it as often, and began to tremble again, at the idea of his coming up to speak to her, whatever might be the subject.—It was indeed Sir Thomas, who opened the door, and asked if she were there, and if he might come in. The terror of his former occasional visits to that room seemed all renewed, and she felt as if he were going to examine her again in French and English. (pp. 243-44)

As with Mary's visit, Sir Thomas's entrance is also heralded by a sound, but instead of

‘a gentle tap at the door’ (p. 132), what Fanny hears this time is ‘a heavy step’. The word ‘heavy’ implies that Sir Thomas’s approach is putting pressure on Fanny, and she indeed shudders with fear. Sir Thomas may not intend to intimidate his niece, and the fact that he asks for her permission before entering the East Room indicates his respect for her privacy. To Fanny, however, her uncle’s authority has been so deeply ingrained in her that memories of her days as a pupil come flooding back to overwhelm her. Her terror may be justified, as Sir Thomas’s former visits were ‘occasional’ and seemed to fulfil no other purpose than to test her accomplishments. Because the East Room was previously a school room, where patriarchal ideologies were inculcated into young women, it symbolises an extension of Sir Thomas’s control. Fanny’s continual dread of her uncle’s presence in the room thus marks her inability to completely loosen the shackles of patriarchy.

Fanny’s incomplete ownership of the East Room and her failure to prevent unwanted guests from intruding into her sanctuary may show her weakness in a patriarchal context, but her real power lies in her adaptability. The East Room was once a deserted place. It is the fact that Fanny furnishes it with objects available to her that makes it stand out. Apart from plants and books, which Fanny may have bought with her pocket money, the East Room is filled with things that are given and not necessarily in a good condition. There are ‘a faded foot-stool of Julia’s work, too ill done for the drawing-room’, ‘a collection of family profiles thought unworthy of being anywhere else’, ‘work-boxes and netting-boxes’ given by Tom, and probably other memorabilia given by other members of the Bertram family (p. 120). With these bits and pieces, Fanny constructs a space that even her privileged female cousins are unable to build. Maria and Julia may have sitting-rooms exclusively furnished for them, but they still feel stifled by the authority of their father. For Maria, although she escapes from Mansfield Park by marrying Mr Rushworth, what she enters is another patriarchal structure, because Sotherton, as indicated by Mrs Rushworth’s representation of its

‘shining floors, solid mahogany, rich damask, marble, gilding and carving’ as evidence of the family’s glory (p. 67), is also an embodiment of patriarchal power.¹⁷¹ Fanny may be deprived of the life of ease and luxury granted to women by male authorities, but in her makeshift East Room she is relatively free to experience moments of independence and spiritual renewal.

Fanny’s alteration of the East Room embodies her power to reform an established system using its own rules. Unlike Tom, who not only disrupts the social structure of Mansfield Park but also poses a direct challenge to his father’s authority when he turns the billiard room into a theatre,¹⁷² Fanny takes what is allotted to her and uses readily available objects in her makeover. In the East Room Fanny is able to articulate more forcefully a privilege to decide on the way that room should be arranged. Her influence is, of course, undermined by the fact that she is supported by the Bertrams both financially and intellectually; but equally it can be seen as an assertion of her ability to develop an independent sphere within the patriarchal system of Mansfield Park.

Equipped with a remarkable ability to adapt unwanted or valueless materials for new uses, Fanny finally arrives at Thornton Lacey and becomes a mistress in reality. Her influence there is imaginable because Edmund has previously shown his admiration for her arrangement of the East Room. He calls it her ‘little establishment’ (p. 123). This term is intriguing because it often connoted settlements ‘in the sense of marriage’ and could also refer to ‘a household’ or a ‘family residence’ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (*OED Online*). Because it was usually men that were expected to provide an ‘establishment’ for women, Edmund’s admiration for Fanny’s East Room is an inversion of gender relations. Fanny may depend on the Bertram family for financial support and educational opportunities, but she gradually acquires agency, of which even the second

¹⁷¹ It has to be noted that although Fanny is interested in Mrs Rushworth’s stories, she is attracted by Sotherton’s historical and romantic associations rather than its patriarchal symbols.

¹⁷² Roger Sales, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 100-01.

son of the Bertram family is envious.

Edmund also shows his inclination to seek Fanny's advice on the design of Thornton Lacey in one of his letters to her when she stays in Portsmouth. 'I want you at home, that I may have your opinion about Thornton Lacey. I have little heart for extensive improvements till I know that it will ever have a mistress,' he writes (p. 332). At this point Edmund is unaware that he is addressing the future mistress of Thornton Lacey, but his eagerness to consider her taste is evident. Like Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, Fanny finally ends up in a home where her preference in matters of interior design will be valued. Moreover, the novel hints at her influence in a second home when it refers to Fanny and Edmund's move to the parsonage. The reader has seen the parsonage's previous two mistresses, Mrs Norris and Mrs Grant, and neither of them does her job well. Mrs Norris is mean with her money, lamenting 'how much was consumed in [her] kitchen by odd comers and goers' (p. 24), while Mrs Grant squanders the family's income on an 'enormous great wide' dining table that is even bigger than the one used in Mansfield Park (p. 172). As the new mistress of the parsonage, Fanny is finally ensconced in the right place. Because she can exercise a power to reform without defying the conventions of the time, she may provide the golden mean of which the parsonage was long devoid.

ANNE ELLIOT AS A VISITOR TO DIFFERENT PARLOURS

As the décor of Pemberley, Northanger Abbey, and Sotherton indicates, Austen's larger houses, when described, are representations of a patrilineal and patriarchal system. The portraits and miniatures at Pemberley point to the role of the master as a model patriarch, the modish furnishings at Northanger Abbey showcase the owner's taste and wealth, and the luxurious and historic interior at Sotherton is also meant to convey the

message that the family is well-established. The sense that a space furnished to reflect only male power can become empty of emotional attachments and human comforts is also evident in *Persuasion*. The clearest idea the reader gets of Kellynch Hall's interior is the pictures and mirrors about which Sir Walter Elliot is so obsessive. These objects signify the baronet's self-importance, and it is apparent that his daughter Anne feels detached in the house. Fortunately for Anne, she is invited to many other houses, and Austen explores possible gender relations through delineating Anne's feelings about the domestic interiors she sees.

Apart from her home Kellynch Hall, the houses with which Anne is most familiar are Uppercross Cottage, the marital home of her younger sister Mary, and Uppercross House, the family home of her brother-in-law's parents and unmarried siblings. Despite enjoying good relationships with the Musgroves, Anne does not feel closely connected with them, and neither does she show a particular interest in their houses. Anne's lack of genuine affinity with her hosts' homes may indicate her stance on gender role issues if the gendered associations of things are taken into consideration. In Uppercross Cottage, the delineation does not go beyond 'the faded sofa' on which the hypochondriac Mary is lying when she is first introduced to the reader.¹⁷³ Like Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, who is also constantly associated with the sofa, Mary and her sofa indicate married women's dependence at home. The additional note that the 'once elegant furniture' is 'gradually growing shabby' 'under the influence of four summers and two children' signifies the sad fate of women's being worn out in their domestic life (p. 35). Uppercross House presents a mixture of old and new styles, but it does not strike a chord with Anne either. Its 'square parlour' 'with a small carpet and shining floor' is described as being 'old-fashioned', but it is in the process of being transformed by the two elder Miss Musgroves with the addition of 'a grand piano forte and a harp,

¹⁷³ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 35. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

flower-stands and little tables placed in every direction' (p. 37). If old décor, like that in other of Austen's larger houses, symbolises the patrilineal tradition, Henrietta and Louisa's introduction of feminine objects may be viewed as a gesture that poses a threat to the established patriarchal system. Indeed, the narrator's subsequent description of the ancestral portraits on the walls of the parlour suggests this possibility:

Oh! could the originals of the portraits against the wainscot, could the gentlemen in brown velvet and the ladies in blue satin have seen what was going on, have been conscious of such an overthrow of all order and neatness! The portraits themselves seemed to be staring in astonishment. (p. 37)

However, if the changes brought about by Henrietta and Louisa represent a challenge, their effectiveness is undercut by the fact that they end up bringing 'the proper air of confusion' (p. 37). In fact, the musical instruments and small pieces of furniture installed by the Musgrove sisters serve more as symbols of the 'usual stock of accomplishments' young women leave school with, than as an act that seeks to revolutionise the male-dominated structure (p. 38). While Mary may fade away as a wife and a mother, Henrietta and Louisa are likely to continue to play a secondary, trivialised role in accepting and conforming to the ideal image expected of women. Anne's lack of interest in both Uppercross Cottage and Uppercross House indicates that she cannot identify with either of these two prospects.

Compared with all the other domestic spaces Anne has entered, Captain Harville's house is the most meticulously described and wins Anne's profound admiration following an initial moment of astonishment. Anne's love of its interior is obvious because immediately after she leaves Captain Harville's house, she 'thought she left great happiness behind her' (p. 83). When Lady Russell engages her in conversation about her father and sister in Bath, she cannot help but dwell on 'the home and the

friendship of the Harvilles and Captain Benwick' (p. 101). Anne's affinity with the Harvilles and their house has been investigated by Monica Cohen within the historical framework of the British Navy. She reads *Persuasion* 'as a *nostos* [homecoming] narrative that tells the story of how navy men are reintegrated into a home country no longer at war' and thus locates 'the origins of the premium placed on small spaces in domestic narratives as a revisit to the tight quarters characteristic of a British frigate'.¹⁷⁴ While Cohen's exploration of the connection between the navy and the home is cleverly argued, such a perspective places masculine attributes above women's link to domestic spaces. I propose that the parlour scene in Harville's home, if examined in the contexts of objects' gendered meanings and domestic gender relations, points to the new mode of husband-wife relationship Anne aspires to. The parlour, or the drawing-room, was a space primarily identified with women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Anne's older sister Elizabeth is responsible for furnishing the drawing-room at Kellynch-hall, her younger sister Mary, when first introduced to the reader, is found on her worn sofa at Uppercross Cottage, and the Musgrove sisters are in charge of the decoration of the parlour at Uppercross House. Viewed in this light, Captain Harville's parlour is an interesting oddity because it is associated with both masculine and feminine characteristics.

Anne is pleased to see 'all the ingenious contrivances and nice arrangements of Captain Harville' and his ability to 'turn the actual space to the best possible account, to supply the deficiencies of lodging-house furniture, and defend the windows and doors against the winter storms to be expected' (p. 83). The phrase 'ingenious contrivances' conveys a high level of intellectual capacity that is not normally ascribed to female housekeeping. For example, the Musgrove sisters' furnishing of Uppercross House is depicted in the form of a catalogue of fashionable objects and devoid of any further

¹⁷⁴ Monica F. Cohen, 'Persuading the Navy Home: Austen and Married Women's Professional Property', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29 (1996), 346-66 (p. 353).

elaboration. Given their mediocre education and unexceptional taste, their decoration does not suggest any intellectual depth. If the ‘ingenious contrivances’ demonstrate an intellectual ability that is typically linked with men, the reinforced windows and doors display Captain Harville’s virility. Fanny in *Mansfield Park* may show an intellect unusual in women with her arrangement of the East Room as a sitting-library, but she cannot resist the intrusion of Mary Crawford and Sir Thomas. Here Captain Harville, being a man, is more physically capable of guarding his space against harm.

However, it must also be noted that Captain Harville, like Fanny and other real-life genteel women, has to avail himself of what is available to create a bespoke space. As historical evidence shows, although men did not normally concern themselves with day-to-day household consumption, they usually held ultimate power when it came to purchasing large pieces of furniture in the house.¹⁷⁵ Fanny’s realm of creativity is limited to small items such as books, plants, and pictures. Likewise, here Captain Harville can only add a personal touch to a space that has already been furnished with ‘the common necessities provided by the owner [of the rented house]’ (p. 83). Unlike traditional gentlemen, who filled their cabinets with valuables collected from their trips to the Continent mainly to show off their status, the ‘few articles of a rare species of wood, excellently worked up’ and the ‘something curious and valuable from all the distant countries Captain Harville had visited’ are reflections of his personal interests as well as testimonies to his greater mobility (p. 83). In this regard, Captain Harville is like Fanny: both manage to transcend the restrictions on their creative power in interior design and construct a space that demonstrates their personality.

The narration of the parlour scene does not stop at the description of the interior. It goes on to give an account of the habitual activities in which Captain Harville engages in that space:

¹⁷⁵ See Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 167-68.

Captain Harville was no reader; but he had contrived excellent accommodations, and fashioned very pretty shelves, for a tolerable collection of well-bound volumes, the property of Captain Benwick. His lameness prevented him from taking much exercise; but a mind of usefulness and ingenuity seemed to furnish him with constant employment within. He drew, he varnished, he carpentered, he glued; he made toys for the children, he fashioned new netting-needles and pins with improvements; and if every thing else was done, sat down to his large fishing-net at one corner of the room. (p. 83)

What this passage brings to mind is also a mixture of masculine and feminine associations. The fact that Captain Harville does not read and is lame significantly reduces his masculinity. His concept of usefulness to others and ease of finding 'employment' at home evoke the concept of an ideal housewife, who was expected to centre herself around her family and superintend the household. Furthermore, Captain Harville's feminised image is reinforced through his use of needles and pins, which evoked embroidery, an activity that in the public mind had been fused with 'domestic femininity' by the eighteenth century.¹⁷⁶ Nevertheless, it has to be noted that netting was 'one of the few drawing-room occupations which were permitted to men',¹⁷⁷ and Captain Harville's background of a naval career makes his pursuit of needlework sufficiently masculine. The ambiguity of gender associations in Captain Harville's parlour represents a domestic life in which men and women share interests and responsibilities.

The parlour scene in Captain Harville's house presents to Anne a 'picture of repose

¹⁷⁶ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984), p. 64.

¹⁷⁷ Penelope Byrde, *Jane Austen Fashion: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen* (Ludlow: Excellent, 1999), p. 112.

and domestic happiness' that is also 'a something more, or less, than gratification' to her (p. 83). As this is the only space in the novel in which Anne expresses an interest, it may be regarded as an indicator of the sort of domestic life she loves. Anne cannot find such a space within her immediate circles. Neither of her sisters' positions in the house appeals to her. Anne does not envy Elizabeth's role as an authoritarian mistress, who 'lay[s] down the domestic law at home, and lead[s] the way to the chaise and four, and walk[s] immediately after Lady Russell out of all the drawing-rooms and dining-rooms in the country' (p. 12). Indeed, Elizabeth's pride in the drawing-room over which she reigns is inexplicable to Anne. As the narrator suggests, Anne

must sigh, and smile, and wonder too, as Elizabeth threw open the folding-doors, and walked with exultation from one drawing-room to the other, boasting of their space, at the possibility of that woman, who had been mistress of Kellynch Hall, finding extent to be proud of between two walls, perhaps thirty feet asunder. (p. 112)

Deprived of emotional investment, Elizabeth's drawing-room is reduced to a void which can only be described with the impersonal tone of measurement. As for Mary, her use of the drawing-room, viewed through her hypochondriac moaning, reveals the nothingness of her life and her self-absorption.

It may be that what Anne finds so much to admire is Captain Harville's relationship with his wife, which his parlour embodies. The novel does not provide details regarding their interactions, but there are still telltale signs of their partnership. After Louisa's fall, as the narrator notes, 'while Louisa, under Mrs. Harville's direction, was conveyed up stairs, and given possession of her own bed, assistance, cordials, restoratives were supplied by her husband to all who needed them' (p. 93). Here both husband and wife assume the role of care-taker; moreover, it is Mrs Harville who

'directs'. In addition, the decision to receive the party from Uppercross has not been made by Captain Harville alone. It is 'a look between him and his wife' that decides their subsequent action (p. 93). This way of communication indicates that Captain Harville and his wife are a couple who share similar values and habitually collaborate with each other on household matters.

Partnership between husband and wife is more explicit in Admiral Croft and his wife, and Anne is also fascinated by this naval couple. Like Captain and Mrs Harville, the Crofts also work in tandem at home. When the Admiral recounts to Anne how he and his wife transform Kellynch for the better, he makes it clear that his wife 'should have the credit of [the changes]', adding that he has 'done very little besides sending away some of the large looking-glasses' (p. 104). The Crofts' partnership, though present in the domestic environment, is best portrayed when they are out and about. Being driven back to Uppercross Cottage by the couple in their gig, Anne witnesses an instance of their collaboration. While talking about Wentworth's potential union with either of the Miss Musgroves, the Crofts nearly have an accident. It must be the Admiral who holds the reins, but as the narrator explains, it is Mrs Croft that intervenes to avert disaster: '[B]y coolly giving the reins a better direction herself, they happily passed the danger; and by once afterwards judiciously putting out her hand, they neither fell into a rut, nor ran foul of a dung-cart' (p. 78). Like Mrs Harville, who gives directions when the house unexpectedly receives a patient, Mrs Croft steers the course in times of emergency. Anne is amused by the Crofts' way of driving and considers it 'no bad representation of the general guidance of their affairs' (p. 78). The driving event indicates that the relationship between Admiral and Mrs Croft does not resemble the common pattern of a dominant husband and a powerless wife, and Anne's admiration indicates her allegiance.

The way of life exemplified by the Crofts is an itinerant one that contains domesticity. They are not particular about where they live as long as they are together.

Such a mindset is revealed in Admiral Croft's comment on their lodgings in Bath when he talks to Anne:

'It suits us very well. We are always meeting with some old friend or other; the streets full of them every morning; sure to have plenty of chat; and then we get away from them all, and shut ourselves into our lodgings, and draw in our chairs, and are as snug as if we were at Kellynch, ay, or as we used to be even at North Yarmouth and Deal. We do not like our lodgings here the worse, I can tell you, for putting us in mind of those we first had at North Yarmouth. The wind blows through one of the cupboards just in the same way.' (p. 138)

Here the concept of home is defined by where the couple is. They find happiness in each other's company, so physical surroundings are unimportant in comparison. In fact, the feeling of comfort regardless of the size of the Crofts' home provides a sharp contrast to the grand impression patriarchs like General Tilney and Sir Walter seek to convey through their large drawing-rooms. Compared to the 'snugness' featured in the Crofts' dwellings, the grandeur of Northanger Abbey and Kellynch Hall serves as an ironic symbol of an emotionally unfulfilled life.

The unsettling closure of *Persuasion* has provoked a heated debate among critics. Understood in the context of Anne's identification with the Harvilles and the Crofts, Anne's final settlement may cease to be a conundrum. Both couples enjoy an egalitarian relationship with their spouses, and such partnership is reflected in the way their domestic life is conducted. Captain Harville's parlour is a scene where masculine and feminine characteristics meet. It is reminiscent of the female activity of embroidery but simultaneously evokes a sense of mobility more typical of men through the keepsakes Captain Harville has accumulated from his travel. In the Crofts' home, the couple cooperate with each other to create a sense of 'snugness'. What the Harvilles and the

Crofts have in common is the partnership between the couple and an ability to combine domesticity and mobility, qualities that were conventionally gender-specific, in the way that suits them. Anne's prospects hinted in the text suggest a similar boundary crossing. She may have 'no Uppercross-hall before her, no landed estate, no head ship of a family', but the possibility of her becoming 'the mistress of a very pretty landaulette' is clearly indicated (p. 201). The possession of a carriage suggests that Anne can live a life that is a lot less restricted than her life before marriage. Even if she does end up living a landed life, she would probably inject mobility into her domestic life and share outdoor activities with Captain Wentworth, as the Harvilles and the Crofts have done. Gilbert and Gubar have reason to conclude that in *Persuasion* 'naval life may be an alternative to and an escape from the corruption of the land so closely associated with patrilineal descent'.¹⁷⁸ However, if both man and wife enjoy a wholesome partnership, they are as likely to achieve fulfilled lives on the land as at sea, as indicated by the relationships of the Harvilles and the Crofts.

In the three novels examined in this chapter, the heroines' interest in interior design is linked to their personal fulfilment in a patriarchal context and their acquisition of a partner who seeks to cooperate with, rather than dictate to, them on household matters. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine refuses to accept what is displayed immediately before her eyes and demonstrates perseverance in her search for irregularities under the seemingly perfect surface of General Tilney's house. Her challenge to male authority is rewarded by her marriage to Henry Tilney, who is sound on matters of female fashion as well as pleased to share the task of interior design with her. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny

¹⁷⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 180.

uses makeshift materials to construct an autonomous personal space without damaging the patriarchal system that supports her achievement. She becomes the mistress of not one, but two houses. In *Persuasion*, the reference to a collaborative couple is more explicit, as the space that Anne identifies with is one that is presided over by a man who performs both masculine and feminine tasks. In addition, as the Crofts' relationship indicates, the image of the domestic husband is balanced by the picture of an itinerant wife. Only hinted at in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, collaborative married lives are given full attention in *Persuasion*. By delineating mistreated women's affinity with domestic interiors and their ability to find ways round their restrictions, Austen subtly interrogates women's position and the inequality of the established husband-wife relationship.

Chapter Three:
Women and Luxuries: Gifts and Gendered Power Relations in
Mansfield Park and Emma

At first glance, Jane Austen's novels seem to show consumer goods and the act of consumption in the usual negative light. When her characters, whether male or female, visit shops, the motivation seems to be invariably linked to vanity, social emulation and love of fashion. Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, the Steele sisters in *Sense and Sensibility* and Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* represent the negative stereotype of rapacious female consumers; Robert Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* and Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion* correspond to the caricatured image of foppish men. This pattern of representing people and the things they notice has led Claudia Johnson to observe that 'whenever objects are made to stand out with any sort of specificity in Austen's novels, something is wrong'.¹⁷⁹ This, to some extent, is true. As I have shown in the previous chapter, an interior design that centres around male interests and showcases patriarchal power often emerges as an embodiment of control for Austen's female characters. However, the fact that things often represent trouble does not mean that the women affected are entirely at the mercy of problematic objects and the authority behind them. Catherine Morland, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot all pose a challenge to the patriarchal system by either openly disagreeing with the male superior, adapting existing spaces to suit their needs, or showing allegiance to a different alternative. With regard to gifts that concern vulnerable women, Austen also explores women's agency while representing their subjugation.

Dependent women in Austen are often compared to commodities, inanimate,

¹⁷⁹ Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures*, p. 165.

characterless objects that are subject to the manipulative power of circulation. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, a poor relation in the Bertram household, is threatened by her uncle's attempt to 'sell' her on the marriage market.¹⁸⁰ In *Emma*, there are two such characters: Harriet Smith, the natural daughter of an obscure tradesman, is regarded by Emma as 'a valuable addition to her privileges', 'exactly the something which her home required' (p. 21); Jane Fairfax, the only child of a lieutenant and a vicar's daughter, though adopted by a wealthy family after her parents died, is faced with the threat of the 'governess-trade' (p. 235). The commodity-like status of these female characters is often complicated when they are entangled in situations that involve gifts of consumer goods. Fanny is faced with a vexing dilemma posed by the dress and jewellery she receives, and Jane is exposed to malicious gossip because of Frank Churchill's secret present of a pianoforte. However, not every woman who occupies a disadvantaged social position feels oppressed by her gifts. Harriet, for example, is elated by Emma's attention and shows simple delight when the man who reciprocates her love and eventually becomes her husband, Robert Martin, '[rides] about the country to get walnuts for her' (p. 29). As Harriet is content with her status quo, this chapter focuses instead on Fanny and Jane, two characters who show courage in evading, or at least laying open, their oppression in the face of troubling gifts.

The relationship between female characters and the 'world of goods' requires a sophisticated analysis.¹⁸¹ Critics on Austen's descriptions of consumer goods either attribute symbolic meanings hastily or, in an effort to rid material objects of the negative connotations associated with consumerism, focus on social significance alone.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ Fanny's transformation from a niece to a daughter within the economic framework of Sir Thomas's calculation is discussed in Eileen Cleere, 'Reinvesting Nieces: *Mansfield Park* and the Economics of Endogamy', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 28 (1995), 113-30.

¹⁸¹ John Brewer and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

¹⁸² See, for example, Alicia L. Kerfoot, 'Replacing the Old Silver Knife: The Convergence of Antislavery Rhetoric and Legal Discourse in *Mansfield Park*', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 85 (2008), 275-91; Ross J. Wilson, "'The Mystical Character of Commodities': The Consumer Society in 18th-Century England', *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 42 (2008), 144-56.

Eighteenth-century England has been described as a ‘consumer society’,¹⁸³ but as historical evidence shows, commodities in the Georgian era bore multifarious meanings to their owners. Objects could signify personal taste, aspirations and affective ties while retaining their economic value. Drawing on the multiple meanings one could attach to objects of monetary value, I want to argue that in the novels in which Jane Austen portrays a troubled relationship between female characters and their gifts of consumer goods, she employs these objects to demonstrate women’s demeaning position in a patriarchal society and to illustrate their efforts to carve out a life without being consumed.

FANNY PRICE AS A RECIPIENT OF CLOTHING AND JEWELLERY

Gift-giving involves power relations. It requires ‘the maintenance of received differences of social and economic power’ and produces ‘*legitimate authority*’ (italics in original).¹⁸⁴ In the eighteenth century, clothing and jewellery given to young women often marked the power of patriarchy over women’s bodies. One such example is hidden in Maria Bertram’s attempt at crossing the ha-ha on Rushworth’s estate. Interpretations of Maria’s metaphorical escape from patriarchal imprisonment have focused on her physical movement,¹⁸⁵ but Fanny’s fear that Maria may tear her gown in the process of overstepping boundaries indicates that clothing, too, represents a form of patriarchal control. Jewellery also featured prominently in the exercise of patriarchal authority over young women. In 1735, Grace Boyle, a 15-year-old girl preparing to enter London society, wrote to her friend Anne Strafford about the jewels she received

¹⁸³ Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982), p. 5.

¹⁸⁴ Margot Finn, ‘Men’s Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution’, *Social History*, 25 (2000), 133-55 (p. 148).

¹⁸⁵ Kerfoot, p. 279.

from her parents. These valuable gifts, as Marcia Pointon indicates, are ‘calculated for public display in a ritual of ostentation which will mark out the girl as marriageable and her parents as powerful’.¹⁸⁶

Fanny’s gifts are in a similar vein of patriarchal manipulation. Indeed, she is in danger of becoming a commodity when a ball is organised to display her to potential suitors and material objects are provided to enhance her value. Before the ball takes place, Fanny receives from Sir Thomas a white gown, from her brother William an amber cross, from Henry Crawford via his sister Mary a gold necklace, and from her cousin Edmund a gold chain. Given on the eve of Fanny’s ‘coming out’, these gifts are redolent of symbolic meanings that indicate patriarchal attempts to commodify and invest in her. The connotation of patriarchal control hidden in Fanny’s gifts has been observed by Eileen Cleere, who notes that there is ‘a triptych of male interest to increase Fanny’s price in the social market place’.¹⁸⁷ However, although she points out the disturbing meaning of Fanny’s gifts, she centres her argument on men’s abstract feeling of concern for Fanny rather than on the actual presents. Because men in *Mansfield Park* express their interest in Fanny by means of material objects, I want to explore Fanny’s status in her male-dominated society through the clothes and jewellery she receives.

The first object that Fanny receives to adorn her body is a white gown given by Sir Thomas before Maria’s wedding. The circumstances in which this gift is made are replete with men’s economic calculations concerning women because the marriage between Maria and Mr Rushworth is mainly used to serve the combined interest of the father and the husband. Originally bought for Fanny as a bridesmaid’s dress to wear at Maria’s wedding, the gown can be read as an expression of Sir Thomas’s desire to furnish his niece for matrimony. The connection between the white gown and Sir Thomas’s attempt at controlling Fanny’s body becomes all the more apparent soon

¹⁸⁶ Marcia Pointon, *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture, 1665-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 32-33.

¹⁸⁷ Cleere, p. 125.

afterwards when Fanny wears the same gown at the ball held in her name.

It is likely that Sir Thomas's involvement in the acquisition of the white gown is more active than merely paying for it. As in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when people referred to a bought dress, they actually meant a length of material to make the said gown,¹⁸⁸ Sir Thomas might have indeed chosen the fabric himself. It was not unusual for men of his class to show a keen interest in textile goods and fashion. They purchased clothes for their female relatives as well as for themselves. Such examples could be found in Austen's novels as well as in real life. Sir Walter Elliot in *Persuasion* once considered sending his daughter Mary a new hat and pelisse. James Woodforde, a parson with a Norfolk living and an estate in Somerset, recorded in his diary the trimmings and fabrics he bought for his niece Nancy, carefully noting down the prices and circumstances of his gift-giving.¹⁸⁹ While not every man's present of a dress for women is tinged with his intention to control the female recipient's body, the novel indicates that Sir Thomas does exercise his power through attire for women.

The most notable example is Sir Thomas's indolent wife Lady Bertram, who agrees with him on every matter and, before the ball for Fanny takes place, contents herself with sitting on the sofa and having a new dress made for her by her maid. In the early nineteenth century, men were responsible for the maintenance of their wives in the form of food and shelter. Gowns and accessories were also included in the 'maintenance', and as their quality and quantity depended on the husband's station in society and income,¹⁹⁰ they could be used by men to show their power. Lord Chancellor Brougham held such a view. When expressing his opinion on pin money, a category of women's property that was not clearly defined but invariably linked to women's allowance for clothing, he said that pin money was meant to 'dress the wife so as to

¹⁸⁸ Alison Adburgham, *Shops and Shopping 1800-1914: Where, and in What Manner the Well-Dressed Englishwoman Bought her Clothes* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ Finn, pp. 139-140, 144, 147.

¹⁹⁰ Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 154.

keep up the dignity of the husband'.¹⁹¹ Sir Thomas's power over women through apparel also extends to his daughters. As I have noted, Maria's determination to flee from patriarchal control is demonstrated through her fearless tearing of her gown.

Compared with his relationships with his wife and daughters, Sir Thomas's control of female bodies is more problematic in Fanny's case, as an investigation into the properties of Fanny's white gown and its textual contexts will reveal. First, it is useful to visualise what the gown might look like. Although no details about it are given apart from the information disclosed by Edmund, a rough picture can be constructed from social and historical facts. The material Sir Thomas buys, if not personally selects, for Fanny is a piece of white muslin with 'glossy spots' (p. 174). White was a colour fashionable among respectable young ladies from the 1790s to the 1810s. Eleanor Tilney in *Northanger Abbey* is always dressed in white, and Austen in 1801 spoke of having a new white gown made to be worn at the Bath Assembly Rooms.¹⁹² Therefore, Sir Thomas's choice of white muslin indicates not only his consciousness of women's fashion but also his desire to promote Fanny's respectability.

Moreover, white muslin carries another symbolic meaning: innocence. Although white as a symbol of purity is more potent in Victorian literature, a feature I will discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, *Mansfield Park* does not preclude such a symbolic link. Assigned the 'little white attic' as her room when she first arrives at her uncle's estate as a little girl, Fanny is kept to that space well into her early adulthood (p. 8). Later on she comes to acquire the East Room for her own use, but her subjection to infantilisation is not lost because the East Room used to be a nursery. Extratextual evidence also supports the connection between white muslin and the infantilisation of women, as the material was used to make clothes for both women and babies in Austen's time.¹⁹³ Viewed in this

¹⁹¹ Quoted in Staves, p. 156.

¹⁹² Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, 4th edn, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 89.

¹⁹³ Vanda Foster, *A Visual History of Costume: The Nineteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1984), p. 26.

light, Sir Thomas's purchase of white muslin expresses his wish to display his niece as a naïve young woman who is submissive to his, and by extension her future husband's, power.

If aiming simultaneously to promote Fanny's respectability and emphasise her malleability is the objective Sir Thomas wants to achieve through a white muslin gown, the text hints at the contradictoriness of his aim. In the Regency period, prices of white cotton and muslin dropped, so servant girls could afford to buy these fabrics if they wished.¹⁹⁴ This revealed the instability of dress as a class marker, and the blurred distinction between mistress and maid is registered in *Mansfield Park* through the class-conscious Mrs Norris. She reports that the Sotherton housekeeper, Mrs Whitaker, 'turned away two housemaids for wearing white gowns' (p. 84). To Mrs Norris and Mrs Whitaker, the housemaids wearing white gowns represent a force that challenges the established social structure, as white gowns were 'a mark of gentility'.¹⁹⁵ In fact, the flimsy, easily soiled white muslin would also have been impractical for maids. Callimanco, a sturdy woollen fabric that was often striped, was more suited to housemaids' work and commonly worn by female servants in the late eighteenth century.¹⁹⁶ Although at Sotherton, another estate like Mansfield Park, power is exercised to delimit subversive forces, the incident mentioned in passing in Mrs Norris's babbling reveals that it is impossible to keep an object's symbolic meaning firmly within the ideological bounds constructed by society's authorities. Read alongside Fanny's dress, the white gowns worn by two of Sotherton's maids bring out the irony of Sir Thomas's investment of one authoritative meaning in an object.

Apart from indicating the impossibility of both keeping Fanny in a submissive state and promoting her as a desirable wife suited to a gentleman, the dress given by Sir

¹⁹⁴ For a detailed investigation into serving girls' purchase of clothing, see John Styles, 'Custom or Consumption? Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England', in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, pp. 103-15.

¹⁹⁵ Byrde, p. 66.

¹⁹⁶ Styles, 'Plebeian Fashion', pp. 110-11.

Thomas also shows a confusing sexual status. In clothing Fanny to attract potential suitors, Sir Thomas would want to emphasise her sexual purity. The white colour of the gown might serve this purpose, but its material and cut could have weakened the symbolic force. Muslin gowns in fashion at the turn of the century were in fact semi-transparent, delicate dresses. The favoured *à la grecque* style called for a low-cut neckline and short sleeves, thus revealing the arms and much of the décolleté; moreover, the bosom was accentuated with a waistline that had moved just under the bust.¹⁹⁷ Although the style of Fanny's white gown is not detailed, a hint is provided through Edmund's remark. As Edmund observes, the gown has 'glossy spots' (p. 174). The presence of eye-catching embellishment indicates that the dress is for evening wear.¹⁹⁸ While muslins for informal daytime wear were worn over a high-necked garment called a chemisette to conceal the bare front and neck,¹⁹⁹ those designed for formal occasions would be very revealing with short sleeves and a low-cut neckline.²⁰⁰ Edmund's recollection of Mary Crawford, a woman with dangerous sex appeal, upon seeing Fanny in her dress suggests the white gown's symbolic meaning of sexual purity is also unstable.

For all Sir Thomas's desire to display Fanny, he wants to ensure that she attracts the right person, and the target he has in mind is Henry Crawford. However, the confusing sexual status implied by the 'glossy spots' of the gown through its association with Mary represents a subversive current that is beyond the control of Sir Thomas. Before it captivates the eyes of Henry, Fanny's white gown catches the attention of Edmund, the last man Sir Thomas would have wished Fanny to marry. Although Edmund does not regard Fanny as a potential wife when he observes her in her new dress, his comments on her looks must have given her immense gratification, which Sir

¹⁹⁷ Blank, p. 240.

¹⁹⁸ Blank, p. 236.

¹⁹⁹ Foster, p. 31.

²⁰⁰ Byrde, p. 24.

Thomas would have attempted to discourage if he had known. With ambiguous social and sexual connotations, the white gown threatens to go against Sir Thomas's wish. The patriarchal control he hopes to enforce through the white gown is thus significantly undercut.

Though eager to showcase Fanny's marriageability, Sir Thomas does not supply her with a complete outfit, and Fanny is left to ponder over what accessories to wear with the gown. The only befitting ornament in her possession is 'a very pretty amber cross which William had brought her from Sicily' (p. 199). Amber was a fashionable material for jewellery. In 1817 the *Lady's Magazine* noted that 'amber and gold ornaments seem to claim the preeminence'.²⁰¹ As a shape in jewellery design, crosses were also widely worn by young ladies. The *Lady's Magazine*, reporting the London fashions in 1801, pointed out that 'crosses of white cornelian edged with gold are universal'.²⁰² In the same year Austen's sailor brother Charles bought her and her sister Cassandra topaz crosses, and Austen approved of the crosses' propriety by telling Cassandra that they 'shall be unbearably fine' with the ornaments.²⁰³

Given the fact that William's cross is not bought for the ball, it is not explicitly associated with male interest in displaying women. Nevertheless, the amber cross still bears signs of patriarchal power. Bought probably with William's prize money and at a location closely linked to his naval career, the amber cross represents his masculine prowess. Indeed, amber can be viewed as a fitting badge for Fanny to exhibit the distinction of her brother's naval career because the harvest of amber was also a dangerous occupation connected with the sea. As one nineteenth-century journalist noted, amber harvest was conducted on the shore in bad weather:

²⁰¹ Quoted in Diana Scarisbrick, *Jewellery in Britain 1066-1837: A Documentary, Social, Literary and Artistic Survey* (Wilby: Michael Russell, 1994), p. 314.

²⁰² Quoted in Scarisbrick, p. 353.

²⁰³ *Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 95.

The amber harvest reminds one slightly of the pilchard harvest on the coast of Cornwall. Scouts are placed along the coast to watch for broken weather. When the wind blows in from the sea, as it does so often with terrific violence, the boulders are loosened and rolled and tumbled at the bottom. [...] Then the men wade out into the water, and clutch and grasp with hooks and hands and nets the drifting seaweed, freighted with its precious burden.²⁰⁴

Despite the inevitable connotation of male power, however, for Fanny the amber cross is a piece of jewellery that befits a ball at Mansfield, and she values it as a token of brotherly love. She shows her awareness of the cross's social worth, because she knows that wearing it with ribbon would be inappropriate at a ball where young ladies appear in 'all the rich ornaments' (p. 199), but what makes her treasure the gift is her love for its sender, her brother William. Compared with Sir Thomas's gift of a white muslin gown, William's amber cross is an object less invested with the sense of patriarchal control. The narrative touches upon its link with William's occupation but only refers to its origin in Sicily. By focusing on Fanny's recognition of the amber cross's social and affective significance, the text minimises signs of patriarchal control that may accompany a gift of jewellery.

Despite William's hope of purchasing a chain to make the amber cross wearable, he fails to do so due to a lack of sufficient money. This situation indirectly subjects Fanny to the manipulation of the Crawfords. With no one to advise her on her ballroom outfit, Fanny turns to Mary Crawford for help. Acting as Henry's close ally, Mary deliberately places a necklace from Henry in front of Fanny more frequently than others so as to give her the impression that the necklace is least wanted. Mary's scheme succeeds, and Fanny is dismayed to discover the origin of the necklace. In this instance the symbolic meaning of masculine control embedded in jewellery is obvious, as

²⁰⁴ 'Amber', *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 11 (1894), 209-11 (p. 210).

indicated by one of the questions Mary poses to Fanny in order to trick her into accepting the necklace: '[A]re you imagining he would be too much flattered by seeing round your lovely throat an ornament which his money purchased three years ago, before he knew there was such a throat in the world?' (p. 203). The image Mary evokes of a woman's body adorned by an accessory that showcases a man's purchasing power is explicitly sexually charged. Worn with the low-cut evening dresses popular in the early nineteenth century, necklaces would have drawn attention to the wearer's bare throat and upper breasts. When Henry casts a glance at the necklace on Fanny's throat at the ball, he is also feasting his eyes on her uncovered flesh. In fact, the text later reveals that his sexual interest in Fanny 'made her blush and feel wretched' (p. 215).

Necklace designs were varied as they are now, so it is difficult to determine what the one Mary thrusts upon Fanny looks like. However, the fact that it is 'of gold prettily worked' (p. 202) suggests that it may have a particularly elaborate design.²⁰⁵ Worn on Fanny's throat, its intricate pattern can conjure up the image of Fanny as prey caught in the trap laid by Henry. People can indeed become enmeshed in romantic relationships, as indicated by Mary's joke that Henry 'glories in his chains' (p. 282). Here Mary deliberately casts Henry in the role of the conquered, but judging from the way he interacts with Maria and Julia, it is clear that he delights in making women around him surrender to his charm. By forcing a necklace around the throat of Fanny, Henry uses jewellery to mark his sexual conquest. For Mary, the intermediary who disguises her brother's calculation as her own act of kindness, the necklace also embodies her effort to ensnare Fanny in imposed obligations.

It seems that Fanny, pressurised into accepting and wearing the gold necklace, finally falls victim to the Crawfords' attempt at controlling her body. However, by the time she wears the ornament to the ball, she has found ways to alter its meanings and transformed it into an object she can comfortably live with. Fanny's deliberation process

²⁰⁵ For descriptions of some of the gold necklace patterns during this period, see Scarisbrick, p. 352.

begins with an effort to settle whether Henry's necklace or Edmund's chain should be worn with William's cross. When she finds out that the cross will fit only with Edmund's chain, which is the result she most wishes to see, she has no problem reconciling herself to the idea of wearing the gold necklace. In Fanny's reconstruction of the necklace's significance, Mary is the only person she associates with the item:

[Fanny] acknowledged [wearing Mary's necklace] to be right. Miss Crawford had a claim; and when it was no longer to encroach on, to interfere with the stronger claims, the truer kindness of another, she could do her justice even with pleasure to herself. (p. 212)

Here in Fanny's mental conversation with herself Henry is entirely absent. Although she knows that the necklace originally comes from Henry and half suspects that Mary presents it to her 'with [Henry's] knowledge and at his desire' (p. 203), she chooses not to recognise the role he plays in the gift-giving process. In dissociating Henry from the ornament, Fanny is able to evade the sexual interest in her the necklace may represent.

However, it is significant that Fanny, who earnestly wanted to return the necklace at the time of being forced to accept it, now places so much emphasis on Mary's 'claim'. To her the necklace was an 'unexpected acquisition', a 'doubtful good' (p. 204), so even if it solved her problem of finding appropriate jewellery to wear with her ball dress, she could not comfortably thank Mary for her kindness. Fanny's change of attitude is triggered by Edmund's plea. In persuading Fanny to wear the gold necklace, Edmund reiterates Mary's generosity and thus highlights, if not exaggerates, her 'claim' on Fanny:

'For one night, Fanny, for only one night, if it *be* a sacrifice—I am sure you will upon consideration make that sacrifice rather than give pain to one who has been

so studious of your comfort. Miss Crawford's attentions to you have been—not more than you were justly entitled to—I am the last person to think that *could be*—but they have been invariable; and to be returning them with what must have something the *air* of ingratitude, though I know it could never have the *meaning*, is not in your nature I am sure.' (p. 206, italics in original)

The text does not show Fanny's reaction to Edmund's argument, but it indicates that by the time she decides to wear the necklace, she has not only come to terms with his view but also endorsed it heartily.

It is more likely, however, that Fanny sees Edmund's claim rather than Mary's in the necklace. Before she settles the accompanying jewellery for William's cross, she has resolved to wear the gold necklace 'to oblige Edmund' (p. 212), but when she finally arrives at the decision to wear it, she dwells on Mary's claim alone. Such inconsistency may arise from the complex web of relationships linked with the necklace. Having been invested with Henry's erotic interest in Fanny, the gold necklace is already a sexually charged item. In addition, as Edmund's plea to Fanny for wearing the necklace is intertwined with his passion for Mary, openly acknowledging Edmund's influence on her decision, even only to herself, would have painfully reminded Fanny of his infatuation. By regarding Mary as the only person for whom the necklace is worn, Fanny is able to cleanse it of any sexual associations she wishes to eliminate: the sexual threat from Henry is gone, so is Edmund's passionate love for Mary. Now the only significance Fanny allows the necklace to bear is innocent feminine friendship, but since Fanny wishes to be under no obligation to Mary, she gives the symbolic meaning of the necklace yet another twist. With 'Edmund's claim' in the background, Fanny endows the necklace with her own unacknowledgable love for Edmund and thus separates herself from Mary's claim. The necklace, not originally bought for Fanny, was a characterless commodity chosen by the Crawfords to place Fanny under obligation.

Through a complicated process of meaning reconstruction, however, Fanny manages to change an item that is fraught with problems into an object that serves both her social need of being appropriately dressed and her emotional need of projecting feelings.

Edmund also contributes to Fanny's outfit for the ball, and like William's amber cross, Edmund's gold chain does not display an apparent sense of patriarchal control. Both are bought with consideration of Fanny's simple taste. The cross, which would 'bestow even to a modern belle a certain nun-like air',²⁰⁶ corresponds to Fanny's quiet character, and the 'plain gold chain perfectly simple and neat' (p. 205), which in Austen's time would reach the waist and thus would not draw as much attention to the wearer's bare skin,²⁰⁷ also suits Fanny's personality. Both William and Edmund seek to select gifts that reflect Fanny's individuality and modest taste, which marks them out from Sir Thomas and Henry. It must be more than coincidence that Edmund's chain, instead of Henry's necklace, fits with William's cross, as the two pieces of jewellery that go together are both made with genuinely good intention and a real understanding of the recipient's needs. When such presents are given by men, they are less reminiscent of patriarchal power and more agreeable to the female recipient. In fact, Edmund reduces the feel of indebtedness a gift may contain by deliberately downplaying the gold chain's economic value and its social significance. He tells Fanny that the chain is just a 'little trifle', asking her to consider it as 'a token of the love of one of [her] oldest friends' (pp. 204, 205).

Fanny's reaction to this male gift is remarkably different from previous instances. While formerly Fanny does not seem to dwell on the beauty of the gifts she receives, now she is immediately attracted by the gold chain's aesthetic appeal. She expresses her joy by noting first the chain's attractiveness and then her own desire:

²⁰⁶ *Lady's Magazine* (1832), quoted in Scarisbrick, p. 353.

²⁰⁷ Scarisbrick, p. 352.

‘Oh! this is beautiful indeed! this is the very thing, precisely what I wished for! this is the only ornament I have ever had a desire to possess. It will exactly suit my cross. They must and shall be worn together. It comes too in such an acceptable moment. Oh! cousin, you do not know how acceptable it is.’ (p. 205)

It is true that Fanny would have been delighted with whatever Edmund gave her, but her burst of excitement testifies to the suitability of the gold chain. Fanny’s language of aesthetic appreciation can also be viewed as an expression of her love for Edmund, especially when one considers the piece of paper with Edmund’s handwriting on it that accompanies the gold chain. Fanny’s reaction to that scrap of paper is detailed in the text at length and worth quoting in full:

[S]he seized the scrap of paper on which Edmund had begun writing to her, as a treasure beyond all her hopes, and reading with the tenderest emotion these words, ‘My very dear Fanny, you must do me the favour to accept’—locked it up with the chain, as the dearest part of the gift. It was the only thing approaching to a letter which she had ever received from him; she might never receive another; it was impossible that she ever should receive another so perfectly gratifying in the occasion and the style. Two lines more prized had never fallen from the pen of the most distinguished author—never more completely blessed the researches of the fondest biographer. The enthusiasm of a woman’s love is even beyond the biographer’s. To her, the hand-writing itself, independent of any thing it may convey, is a blessedness. Never were such characters cut by any other human being, as Edmund’s commonest hand-writing gave! This specimen, written in haste as it was, had not a fault; and there was a felicity in the flow of the first four words, in the arrangement of ‘My very dear Fanny,’ which she could have looked at for ever. (p. 207)

The fact that Edmund's note and chain are locked up together indicates that Fanny considers them to be a coherent whole, but she distinguishes one from the other by attaching different meanings to each. While the chain with obvious monetary value is adored for its beauty and compatibility with William's cross, the piece of paper with an incomplete message, like a literary relic, is treasured not because of its material worth but because of the collector's affection for the author. It is worth noting that Fanny's romantic sentiments about Edmund's note do not verge on the silly sentimentalism Harriet demonstrates for Mr Elton's cast-off odds and ends in *Emma*. There a piece of court plaister and an old pencil are hoarded by Harriet without Mr Elton's knowledge of it. Being discarded objects and never meant as gifts for Harriet, they do not come loaded with the original owner's emotional investment as Edmund's hand-writing does. It is true that Fanny also shows personal affection for the chain, since when she later joins the chain with William's cross, she regards the two pieces of jewellery as 'memorials of the two most beloved of the heart' (p. 212), but when the chain and the note are compared to each other, she does not dwell on the sentimental value of the chain and thinks the note is 'the dearest part of the gift'. The word 'dear' is significant because it can denote emotional attachment as well as a high price. While the chain has diminished fiscal and emotional values, the note is reminiscent of both. Such a distinction reduces any force of patriarchal control Edmund's chain may evince. Despite Edmund's claim that the gold chain he gives Fanny is not ordered specifically for the ball, he is anxious that Fanny should have a chain suited to the event, so the sense of Edmund's adorning Fanny's body for matrimony cannot be completely dispensed with. In relocating both economic and emotional values to another item and valuing the chain for its aesthetic qualities, Fanny is presented as a character who can evade the sense of gendered obligation that may accompany a man's gift.

While the degrees of implied male control in Fanny's object relations vary from

gift to gift, the same sense of incompleteness persists. The white gown in which Fanny appears at her coming out ball is not new. It has been worn twice, once at Maria's wedding and once at the Grants' dinner party. Muslin gowns, though washable, were easily dirtied and prone to wear and tear.²⁰⁸ In *Northanger Abbey*, the dress enthusiast Mrs Allen fusses about a hole in her sleeve, and Henry Tilney prides himself in knowing the different uses of frayed muslin gowns. Fanny may have the upper housemaid's help with the care of her white dress, as she does when dressing before the ball, but the fact that she wears an old gown at an event that is to mark her coming of age reflects on Sir Thomas as a negligent patriarch. The amber cross from William, though selected to match Fanny's religious character and tastes, and brought to her by William in person, is nevertheless without a chain and cannot be worn. Henry's gold necklace, originally a gift to his sister, has, according to Mary's memory, been worn six times and is given indirectly through Mary. Edmund may have Fanny's preferences in mind regarding the purchase of a gold chain, but instead of choosing one himself he commissions his brother Tom to buy one for him in London. These examples attest to Fanny's ambiguous position in her social structure. On the one hand, her male gift-givers apparently consider her important enough to deserve a material form of recognition, hence their contribution to her 'coming out' outfit. On the other hand, the 'imperfect' gifts they make indicate the offhand or thoughtless manner in which they treat Fanny, despite the fact that all these men, with perhaps the exception of Henry, do not deliberately intend to act meanly. The complexities surrounding Fanny's gift relations reveal a pervasive implicit attitude that is anxious to preserve Fanny's inferior status while giving her marks of affection or honour, and the fact that casually offered presents are sufficient to make Fanny feel a debt of gratitude towards her benefactors – benign and malicious alike – fleshes out her demeaning situation. Given such circumstances, what Fanny

²⁰⁸ Clair Hughes, 'Talk about Muslin: Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth & Culture*, 4 (2006), 184-97 (p. 189).

manages to resist and transform is indeed remarkable.

FANNY PRICE AS A GIVER AND A CONSUMER

When Fanny is in Portsmouth, her role of a gift recipient is replaced by that of a gift-giver. She resolves a family row about a silver knife between her sisters Susan and Betsey by purchasing a new one for Betsey. The silver knife in *Mansfield Park* has received scant critical attention, and critics who have commented on it focus on the importance of economic exchange: Cleere sees Fanny's visit to Portsmouth as an experience that 'teaches her important lessons about supply and demand',²⁰⁹ and Kerfoot, viewing the newly-bought silver knife as a commodity that replaces the old knife, argues that the episode indicates 'Fanny's ability to reform through economic exchange'.²¹⁰ While it is true that Fanny's participation in the practice of consumption reveals her awareness of wealth's importance and its power of restoring domestic peace, an investigation of the silver knife's cultural background demonstrates that the episode concerns a wider range of issues.

First, it is necessary to establish the nature of the silver knife. From the fact that Fanny's deceased sister Mary 'would have [the silver knife] lay by her in bed, all through her illness' (p. 304), it can be inferred that the knife is a portable tool such as a penknife, a paper knife or a fruit knife rather than a table knife. Although a lack of details about Mary's knife makes it difficult to determine what purpose it is meant to serve, the fact that it has a silver blade gives a vital clue. One possibility is that Mary's knife is a penknife, as this was an object commonly found in ladies' pockets in the long eighteenth century.²¹¹ However, the penknife, rather than incorporating a silver blade,

²⁰⁹ Cleere, p. 126.

²¹⁰ Kerfoot, p. 287.

²¹¹ Ariane Fennetaux, 'Women's Pockets and the Construction of Privacy in the Long Eighteenth

had a steel blade for trimming the nibs of quill pens,²¹² so there is little likelihood that Mary's knife is a penknife. Another option is the paper knife, which is the forerunner of the nineteenth-century letter opener and in the Georgian era featured 'a broad, blunt blade and a rounded tip and served to separate the pages of books or newspapers from each other'.²¹³ Since the blade of paper knives was made of smooth materials such as ivory, bone or hard woods in order not to damage the paper when cutting folds in book leaves, this possibility has to be excluded, too. It is most likely that Mary's knife is a fruit knife, because knives with silver blades were called 'fruit knives'.²¹⁴ In addition, as silver-bladed knives were a popular gift in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it is reasonable to assume that Mary's knife, a gift from her godmother old Mrs Admiral Maxwell, is indeed a fruit knife.

Identifying the silver knife referred to in *Mansfield Park* as a fruit knife retrieves social meanings which the text does not explicitly reveal, and such knowledge is crucial to the understanding of the episode. Small silver items in the eighteenth century embodied middle-class women's familial relationships and social connections. An examination of goods listed in wills in Birmingham and Sheffield during the eighteenth century shows a gendered difference. While men passed on few newly bought commodities and left them only to close family members, women bequeathed a wide range of novelties, small silver items among them, and listed not only direct family members but also friends and younger members of the extended family as recipients.²¹⁵ Circulated in women's networks of friends and family, small objects of economic value thus served as mediums of female bonding. Jane Austen's letters also provide evidence

Century', *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 20 (2008), 307-34 (p. 316).

²¹² Simon Moore, *Penknives and Other Folding Knives* (Princes Risborough: Shire, 2006), p. 25.

²¹³ Kurt F. Büchel, ed., *Letter Openers: Works of Art on the Desk* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2011), p. 14.

²¹⁴ Steve Shackelford, ed., *Blade's Guide to Knives & their Values* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2010), p. 214; see also Simon Moore, *Pocket Fruit Knives: A Synopsis of their History from the United Kingdom, France, Northern Europe & USA* (Farnham Common: Antique Knives, 2008).

²¹⁵ Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 239-42.

of the silver knife as a means of forming social ties. In 1808 while on a visit to Godmersham, Jane wrote to Cassandra to seek her advice on what gift to make to her sister-in-law, Mrs Frances Austen: ‘pray can you tell me of any little thing that w^d be probably acceptable to M^{rs} F.A.—I wish to bring her something;—has she a silver knife—or w^d you recommend a Broche?’²¹⁶ It is clear from these lines that the recipient’s needs were considered when a gift was about to be made. In fact, many silver fruit knives in this period bore an engraving of the recipient’s name or initials.²¹⁷ In this way a purchased commodity was stamped with personality before it amassed more affective significance through its circulation in a circle of friends and family.

The silver knife in *Mansfield Park* is exactly such an item invested with both economic and sentimental values. It is at the centre of female bonding in the text. Originally given by little Mary’s godmother, it is a memento of a close adult-child relationship that is generally missing in Fanny’s parental home. At Mary’s death, she leaves it to her sister Susan, probably her most intimate sibling in the house. If Fanny had not left Portsmouth, Mary might have given the silver knife to her, as Fanny felt a strong affinity with Mary, and the feeling might have been reciprocal. The emotional ties revealed through the silver knife are further complicated by Betsey. This spoiled little girl, who threatens to disrupt the bond between Susan and Mary by coveting and occasionally laying her hands on Mary’s knife, looks like Mary. When Fanny finally intervenes by buying a new knife for Betsey, what she restores is more than the bond between Mary and Susan. More importantly, she creates emotional attachments for herself. She was forced to break her connection with Mary when she left for Mansfield, but now as the medium that restores the silver knife to its rightful owner, Fanny acts as a contributor to the affective worth of an object that her deceased favourite sister also prized. In ensuring Susan’s ownership of the silver knife, Fanny is united with Mary

²¹⁶ *Jane Austen’s Letters*, p. 142.

²¹⁷ Shackleford, p. 214.

through their common interest in Susan and thus builds a social network of her own, which also compensates for the weak parent-child relationship in the Price household.

Fanny's use of objects to foster relationships stands in sharp contrast to her experience before her coming out ball, where men's gifts are either incomplete or indirect and inevitably tinged with an undertone of dominance and manipulation, but the way she forms sibling bonds is not without precursors in the novel. While Edmund's gift of a gold chain for Fanny before her rite of passage cannot be entirely rid of associations with male control, the writing materials he gives her when she first arrives at Mansfield are, like the silver knife Fanny purchases for Betsey, the kind of objects that facilitate the formation and stability of sibling love. On that occasion, Edmund provides the materials needed to maintain Fanny's original bond with her brother William and, in doing so, creates a new sibling tie between him and Fanny. In the Mansfield breakfast room, the adolescent Edmund

prepared [Fanny's] paper, and ruled her lines with all the good will that her brother could himself have felt, and probably with somewhat more exactness. He continued with her the whole time of her writing, to assist her with his penknife or his orthography, as either were wanted; and added to these attentions, which she felt very much, a kindness to her brother, which delighted her beyond all the rest. He wrote with his own hand his love to his cousin William, and sent him half a guinea under the seal. (p. 13)

Edmund's role as an intermediary in cementing the tie between Fanny and William helps contribute to his own sibling bond with Fanny, just like the part Fanny plays in the Susan-Mary relationship.²¹⁸ Mary Crawford's participation in Henry's gift-giving, in

²¹⁸ The significance of sibling affection and marriages in Austen is discussed in Glenda A. Hudson, *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

comparison, is a negative example of sibling bonding through objects. Henry and Mary are brother and sister. If Fanny marries Henry as they hope, she will become sister-in-law to Mary, and another sibling trio is formed. Contrary to Edmund's and Fanny's interventions, which mend relationships, Mary's involvement creates embarrassment and inflicts pain. Stepping into the role of her sister Mary by redistributing silver knives, Fanny proves to be a better gift-giver than another Mary, the calculating Mary Crawford.

Fanny's purchase of a new knife for Betsey helps her forge an emotional bond with Susan and shows her regard for her sister. While such an interest mirrors those of Sir Thomas and Henry in her, and all are represented through material objects, there is a fundamental distinction between Fanny's and those men's motives. While Sir Thomas's white gown and Henry's necklace both embody a desire to use Fanny's body to display patriarchal power, Fanny's purchase of a new knife taps into the affective functions of objects for fostering mutually supportive relationships. It is true that Fanny's gifting is not completely free from the connotations of relational obligations and pecuniary concerns, as indicated by the silver knife episode's achievement in 'opening Susan's heart to her [Fanny]' and 'giving her something more to love and be interested in' (p. 312). Here the establishment of a relationship is compared to an act of violence and echoes Henry's remark on his determination to 'mak[e] a small hole in Fanny Price's heart' earlier in the novel (p. 179). Edmund's comment on how Henry can win Fanny's heart also uses such a metaphor:

'I am aware, more aware than Crawford can be, that the man who means to make you love him (you having due notice of his intentions), must have very up-hill work, for there are all your early attachments, and habits, in battle array; and before he can get your heart for his own use, he has to unfasten it from all the holds upon things animate and inanimate, which so many years['] growth have

confirmed, and which are considerably tightened for the moment by the very idea of separation.’ (pp. 272-73)

Although relationship-forming may be inevitably violent in a metaphorical sense, Fanny’s and Henry’s attempts at bonding with another person are different. While Henry desires Fanny’s heart ‘for his own use’, Fanny’s interest in Susan consists largely of a wish to improve her well-being. The word ‘interested’ can express the display of attention on the level of personal feelings as well as in the financial sense, and what distinguishes Fanny’s gifting from Sir Thomas’s and Henry’s is the emphasis on the giver’s consideration for the recipient. Perhaps all gifts imply the giver’s aspiration for advantage and demand returns of some kind, but the silver knife episode indicates that when a gift is made with another person’s happiness in mind, gifting can be less troubling and more emotionally satisfying.

When objects are less loaded with the desire to achieve personal gain, consumption can also be explored without the usual negative connotations. In fact, the close relationship between Fanny and Susan following Fanny’s purchase of a new knife is portrayed in the language of financial benefit. Fanny understands ‘the worth of her [Susan’s] disposition’, and their growing intimacy is ‘a material advantage to each’ (p. 312). The word ‘worth’ here means ‘the character or standing of a person in respect of moral and intellectual qualities’, but it can also denote ‘pecuniary value’ (*OED Online*). ‘Material’ as an adjective is synonymous with ‘significant’, but its connection with the physical world is difficult to overlook. Here the use of finance-related vocabulary in the description of sibling affection reinforces the notion that the system of economic calculation can sit comfortably with social bonding.

Given Fanny’s previous troubled relationships with gifts, such a portrayal of her newly cultivated gift relations in the latter half of *Mansfield Park* is remarkable. Now the text does not shy away from the mention of consumption or what money can

achieve. Indeed, as Fanny's relationship with Susan indicates, economic exchange can be used as a means of establishing female solidarity. In addition to the silver knife episode, the text offers two more such instances: as Fanny and Susan's intimacy grows, they are presented as visiting the High Street together and occupying the same room reading books borrowed from the circulating library. Shopping was an activity that helped cement women's relationships with their friends and relations among women of and above Fanny's class in the eighteenth century. Companions provided advice and support, and shops were respectable places for socialising.²¹⁹ It is not known what shops Fanny and Susan visit, but it is apparent that Fanny views shopping with Susan as an exclusively female activity. When the Price sisters are obliged to include Henry in their visit to the High Street, the situation becomes 'strange, awkward, and distressing' for Fanny (p. 316).

Apart from strengthening their ties through the activity of shopping, Fanny and Susan are also portrayed to be reading together, and the text clearly indicates that a financial transaction is involved in this other form of sibling bonding, as the books they read are borrowed from a circulating library. When Fanny fails to find any books in her father's house, the narrator says that 'wealth is luxurious and daring—and some of hers found its way to a circulating library' (p. 313). Books were luxuries in Austen's time, and their cost in the first two decades of the nineteenth century was increasing. In 1815 a three-volume novel was priced at a guinea. Given the low average standard of living, few could afford to buy books and those interested in reading would subscribe to a circulating library. The annual subscription fee for John Lane's library in 1814 was two guineas, but people could also pay a one-off fee to gain access to books.²²⁰

Books for Fanny can be a form of escapism. She hopes to immerse herself in reading so as to refrain from dwelling on Edmund's potential proposal to Mary. Critics

²¹⁹ Berg, pp. 268-69.

²²⁰ Lee Erickson, 'The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library', *Studies in English Literature*, 30 (1990), 573-90 (pp. 577-79).

have also pointed out the liberating effect of reading for Fanny.²²¹ The ecstasy she feels about becoming ‘a subscriber’, ‘being any thing *in propria persona*’ and ‘a renter, a chuser of books’ (p. 313) indicates the sense of power she feels when she can directly obtain the things she wants. This moment is more fitted to be a mark of Fanny’s ‘coming out’ than the ball previously. Her exclamation shows an awareness of independent identity that is indispensable to a person’s psychological maturity. However, Fanny’s happiness in her visit to the circulating library does not consist of personal satisfaction alone. She also has Susan’s improvement in mind when making her choices. Thus books for Fanny are also a means through which to form social bonds. The practices of reading aloud and reading for social affiliation were still strong by the beginning of the nineteenth century.²²² Fanny often reads to Lady Bertram and, growing up in a family where people read well, has learned to appreciate good reading, as indicated by her absorption in Henry’s reading of Shakespeare:

She could not abstract her mind five minutes; she was forced to listen; his reading was capital, and her pleasure in good reading extreme. To *good* reading, however, she had been long used; her uncle read well—her cousins all—Edmund very well; but in Mr. Crawford’s reading, there was a variety of excellence beyond what she had ever met with. (p. 264, italics in original)

With the wish to inspire in Susan ‘a taste for the biography and poetry which she delighted in herself’ (p. 313), Fanny would have included in her improvement scheme reading aloud and discussing texts. In this regard, despite the implication of self-indulgence, reading as conducted by Fanny is still different from the act of consumption carried out by her male superiors. While Sir Thomas and Henry give her

²²¹ See, for example, Alan Richardson, ‘Reading Practices’, in *Jane Austen in Context*, pp. 397-405 (p. 402).

²²² Richardson, p. 399.

expensive consumer goods ultimately to enhance their own power, Fanny's material pursuit is beneficial both to her and her sister.

Fanny's practice of consumption stands in contrast to that of men in the novel. Her purchase of a silver knife and subscription to a circulating library show that consumer goods and economic exchange become less problematic when the cultivation of genuine affection between the giver and the recipient is the motivation. In such circumstances, economic worth and emotional significance can co-exist in the value of a material object. However, it seems impossible that gifts from men will ever conform to this ideal. William's and Edmund's presents are both made with true brotherly love, but neither of them is perfect. What is at play may be the inevitable sense of patriarchal dominance evinced by men's gifts, which in *Mansfield Park* is made clear through the timing of William's and Edmund's presents: they are given before Fanny's coming out ball. In contrast, Fanny's relationship with Susan as represented through silver knives, shopping trips, and books is not disturbed by a strong sense of manipulation. Without trappings of male control, women's relationships with and through objects are more likely to be trouble-free. Fanny may have learned the importance of money in the marketplace by the end of the novel, and in taking an interest in Susan, she seems to assume the role of those men who have wished to control her through material objects. If Fanny knows the value of wealth and the implications of gifts, she uses her knowledge in a way that contributes to forming a mutually advantageous relationship, as shown in her sisterly bond with Susan.

JANE FAIRFAX AND HER BROADWOOD PIANO

Instead of creating a pliant female protagonist as she does in *Mansfield Park*, Austen in *Emma* explores the issue of female subjection through a taciturn marginal

character, Jane Fairfax. Jane's status is analogous to Fanny's in that she also experiences displacement at a young age and is dependent on a male guardian for her upbringing. However, Jane is more unfortunate than Fanny, as she does not enjoy the stability available to Fanny in Sir Thomas's household. For all the intimate relationship she has with the Campbells 'as another daughter' (p. 129), the bleak prospect of becoming a governess awaits her when she comes of age.

Jane's demeaning situation in the novel is encapsulated in the piano episode, where the unsought-for gift triggers an array of conjectures in the Highbury community as to who the sender may be. Speculation is so wild that her very reputation is at risk of being tarnished. Like the different pieces of jewellery Fanny receives from men in *Mansfield Park*, the piano given to Jane also brings to the fore a crisscrossing of male interests in a dependent woman. All the possible senders, except Mrs Dixon, are men. Public opinion favours Colonel Campbell as the gift-giver; Emma believes Mr Dixon plays a part in the gifting; while Mrs Weston is convinced that the piano is a present from Mr Knightley. In the end, Frank Churchill, to whom Jane has been secretly engaged and is eventually married, is confirmed to be the man behind the scheme. The piano in *Emma* has been interpreted as a sexually encoded object, 'a signifier of sexual interaction among young men and women'.²²³ While this reading is apt for exploring sexual relationships in the novel, an analysis that considers Frank's involvement in the piano episode and the social significance of women's piano playing will reveal the intricate pattern of power relations embedded in the gift.

To other characters in the novel, Frank's role in the mysteries of the piano may be difficult to discern, but on second reading the intelligent reader should be able to identify him to be the real sender and notice the hidden meanings behind what he says and does. He smiles when Jane's newly arrived piano excites a lively discussion at the

²²³ Nicholas E. Preus, 'Sexuality in *Emma*: A Case History', *Studies in the Novel*, 23 (1991), 196-216 (p. 205).

Coles' dinner party. Upon Emma's request for a reason, he replies: 'I suppose I smile for pleasure at Col. Campbell's being so rich and so liberal.—It is a handsome present' (p. 169). Pianos, though starting to be widely found in middle-class homes by Austen's time, remained an expensive luxury. In the nineteenth century the price of a square piano, like the one given to Jane, was between 18 guineas (£19) and £30,²²⁴ and Austen in 1808 talked of buying a pianoforte, 'as good a one as can be got for 30 Guineas'.²²⁵ Thus to those who know Frank to be the benefactor, his comments on Colonel Campbell's financial power and generosity emerge as self-congratulatory remarks.

In addition to showing pride in his own purchasing power, Frank also secretly delights in his class superiority and musical knowledge when he praises the taste of Colonel Campbell, his surrogate sender:

'Whoever Col. Campbell might employ,' said Frank Churchill, with a smile at Emma, 'the person has not chosen ill. I heard a good deal of Col. Campbell's taste at Weymouth; and the softness of the upper notes I am sure is exactly what he and *all that party* would particularly prize. I dare say, Miss Fairfax, that he either gave his friend very minute directions, or wrote to Broadwood himself. Do not you think so?' (p. 189, italics in original)

Broadwood, a London based piano firm, was the most prolific and prestigious piano maker in England in the early nineteenth century. They produced nearly five hundred pianos a year, while their rivals both at home and abroad only made forty or fifty pianos at their peak.²²⁶ Broadwood's clientele, as indicated in their account books, was composed of 'the regular customers', the aristocracy and the gentry who regularly dealt

²²⁴ James Parakilas and others, *Piano Roles: A New History of the Piano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 35.

²²⁵ *Jane Austen's Letters*, p. 168.

²²⁶ Cyril Ehrlich, *The Piano: A History* (London: J. M. Dent, 1976), p. 18.

with the firm, and ‘the Chance Trade’, probably the aspiring middle classes who approached the firm to acquire a piano as a status symbol.²²⁷ Frank’s visit to the Broadwood showroom in Great Pulteney Street in Westminster, a fashionable shopping district, certainly proves him to ‘belong to the place’ (p. 157), to borrow his words about purchasing gloves at the Highbury village shop, Ford’s. However, the fact that Frank can distinguish ‘the softness of [the piano’s] upper notes’ also indicates his superior knowledge of the musical instrument. As the design of pianos was widely varied in the early nineteenth century, and particular builders produced pianos with particular qualities suitable for particular styles of music,²²⁸ the selection of the right piano would require musical knowledge. The nouveau-riche Mrs Cole, though admitting that she does not ‘know one note from another’, is eager to emphasise that her husband ‘is so particularly fond of music’ that their purchase of a grand pianoforte becomes justifiable (p. 169). By singling out qualities of the piano and naming the brand, Frank demonstrates that he is more concerned about the piano’s reflection of his own importance than its contribution to Jane’s welfare.

With wealth and status, Frank has reason to feel pleased with himself. However, Frank’s choice of Colonel Campbell as his surrogate sender suggests a troubling aspect of his relationship with Jane. Before Frank discloses his secret engagement to Jane in his letter to Mrs Weston, he always sides with popular opinion about the identity of Jane’s benefactor. It is true that he does so to conceal his special relationship with her, but the fact that the position of his stand-in mirrors his own in relation to Jane suggests her continuing subjection to male power. As a man of means, Colonel Campbell is in a position to ‘g[i]ve a change to her destiny’ (p. 128), in other words, to control Jane’s life. Although Jane is described as having ‘fallen into good hands’ and as having ‘received every advantage of discipline and culture’ (pp. 128-29), her dependent status remains

²²⁷ Parakilas and others, p. 34.

²²⁸ Preus, p. 89; Ehrlich, pp. 15-17.

unsettling in the novel. Because the word 'fall' when applied to a woman implies a moral judgement of her chastity, Jane's 'falling' into good hands becomes questionable or even ironic. Emma's observation about Frank's postponement of visiting his father at Randalls provides indirect evidence of Jane's ambiguous position:

'A young *woman*, if she fall into bad hands, may be teased, and kept at a distance from those she wants to be with; but one cannot comprehend a young *man*'s being under such restraint, as not to be able to spend a week with his father, if he likes it.'
(p. 97, italics in original)

The contrast Emma draws between women's and men's circumstances hints at her society's double standard. While women can 'fall', men are entirely free from such danger. In the example Emma gives of a woman 'falling' into the 'hands' of others, one piece of evidence is her restricted freedom of movement, and Jane's story mimics this aspect of female subjection. Although the text makes clear that Jane knows 'nothing but kindness from the Campbells', it also points out that since Jane 'belonged to Colonel Campbell's family' and 'lived with them entirely', she 'only visit[ed] her grandmother from time to time' (p. 128). The Campbells live in London, and Highbury is only sixteen miles away. The distance between the two places is short enough for Frank to dash back and forth in one day, so it makes one wonder why Jane did not visit her close relations more frequently. One likely explanation based on Emma's comment is that Jane's movement is carefully controlled. Moreover, as the word 'fall' has sexual associations, the control of her movements is analogous to the restriction of her sexuality. Viewed in this light, Colonel Campbell emerges as a patriarchal authority to whom Jane is subjected. In using Colonel Campbell as a stand-in for himself as the piano giver, Frank places himself in the powerful position of the colonel to control Jane's body.

These examinations show that the piano of disputable provenance embodies not only Frank's self-love but also his desire to rule her. Frank may wish to help Jane develop her musical talent in making the gift, but it is likely that Jane, together with the piano, will end up becoming nothing more than his extended self. His eagerness to show off his own voice and Jane's singing is evident at the Coles' dinner party. Having sung a duet with Jane twice, he would have made her sing a third song if Mr Knightley had not alerted Miss Bates to Jane's hoarse voice and thus stopped him. The day after the dinner party when an audience is gathered in the Bates' sitting room to hear Jane play, Frank is again keen to display Jane's musical skills by begging her 'to play something more' (p. 190). In complying with Frank's requests for showing her off, Jane risks becoming objectified. Her existence, like that of the piano, seems to serve the single purpose of signifying his power. Indeed, as both Jane and the piano are described as being 'elegant', the repetition of the adjective suggests a blurred boundary between Jane and her present.

The types of music played by Jane also serve as telltale signs of her role as a mere embellishment for Frank. She plays waltzes and Irish airs: these are dance tunes and vocal music with piano accompaniment that do not demand too much of the player.²²⁹ It is true that genteel girls, though expected to be musical, were not trained to execute complicated pieces of music, and society as a whole did not take proficiency in piano playing seriously.²³⁰ Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* is satisfied with her mediocre piano skills, and Emma, after the Coles' party, where she hears Jane's superior playing and singing, experiences only a short period of regret by practising her instrument for 'an hour and a half' (p. 181). Austen herself, who regularly practised the piano before breakfast as her solitary pursuit, played the type of music that her niece considered

²²⁹ Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (London: Constable, 1990), pp. 254, 256.

²³⁰ Elizabeth Morgan, 'Pertinacious Industry: The Keyboard Etude and the Female Amateur in England, 1804-20', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 69-87 (pp. 69-70)

‘disgracefully easy’.²³¹ In contrast, the more accomplished piano players in Austen, those who are able to play more challenging musical pieces like concertos, are either ridiculed for showing off in the wrong way or condoned on account of excessive sentimentality: Mary Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice* is skilled enough to be able to play ‘a long concerto’, a composition written for musical instruments alone, but unwisely follows it up with ‘Scotch and Irish airs’ (pp. 17, 18), which require singing and expose her weak voice; Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility* can play a ‘a very magnificent concerto’, but when indulging her grief of ‘a disappointment in love’, she plays only the vocal music that is reminiscent of Willoughby (pp. 111, 144). It seems odd that Jane, whose superior musicianship is frequently referred to in the text, is not even remotely associated with concerto playing. In fact, the only types of music Jane is described to have played are light-hearted pieces that would have satisfied her culture’s low expectations of lady pianists. Frank asks her to play waltzes at the Coles’ dinner party and selects sheet music containing Irish songs to be sent with the piano he orders for her. While the main purpose of the Irish songs, as I will discuss, is to aid Frank in conveying the impression that Mr Dixon is the piano sender, the fact that Irish airs were popular drawing-room performances suggests that Frank is also guilty of determining the way Jane’s musical talent appears and of presenting an image of her as a socially-approved amateur pianist. Viewed in this light, the piano and the sheet music given by Frank are not only embodiments of his own financial power and artistic taste but also a means of restricting Jane’s musical accomplishment.

Frank’s disregard for Jane’s personal comfort and wishes in bidding her to do what he likes augurs badly for their married life. Jane’s personality is likely to remain subsumed under Frank’s love of display, and it seems that Jane will continue to be an object-like figure that attests to Frank’s own achievement, whether financial or artistic. After their secret engagement is made public in Highbury, Frank expresses to Emma

²³¹ Caroline Austen, *My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir* (London: Jane Austen Society, 1952), p. 2.

another wish to furnish Jane with presents:

‘Look at her. Is not she an angel in every gesture? Observe the turn of her throat. Observe her eyes, as she is looking up at my father.—You will be glad to hear (inclining his head, and whispering seriously) that my uncle means to give her all my aunt’s jewels. They are to be new set. I am resolved to have some in an ornament for the head. Will not it be beautiful in her dark hair?’ (pp. 376-77)

Here Frank is inviting Emma to join him in his assessment of Jane, which is reminiscent of his words to Miss Bates about his trust in Emma’s judgement of the piano: ‘Miss Woodhouse’s opinion of the instrument will be worth having’ (p. 185). It is apparent that with eyes riveted on Jane’s throat, eyes and hair, Frank views her as a sexual object. Henry Crawford in *Mansfield Park* may experience the same delight when he sees his necklace around Fanny’s throat. The ‘ornament for the head’ Frank considers purchasing for Jane may be a tiara, as, in the early nineteenth century, this particular piece of head jewellery was worn only by married women and was an appropriate wedding gift from husband to wife. In 1830 Lord Seymour ordered a tiara composed of diamonds and emeralds for his would-be wife, Jane Georgiana, to be worn at their wedding.²³² Frank may or may not make Jane a wedding present as luxuriously furnished as the tiara ordered by Lord Seymour, but his tendency to view his spouse as an instrument for displaying his own wealth is disturbingly implicit in the background.

Jane is taciturn in the novel. In the face of Frank’s attempt to display her and downplay her virtuosity, she is either silent or complies without a word. At the Coles’ dinner party, Frank’s petition for a third song is heard, Mr Knightley’s anger is made known, and Miss Bates’s anxiety is shown, but Jane’s reaction remains unreported. Back in her aunt’s sitting room the next day, Jane simply ‘play[s]’ when Frank asks her

²³² Scarisbrick, p. 346.

to repeat one of the waltzes they danced the previous night (p. 190). Jane's silence and acquiescence make one wonder if she is aware of what the piano represents, and of what she stands for in Frank's eyes. In fact, it may be that Austen particularly wishes her readers to speculate on Jane's real situation in her relationship with Frank, as she assigns to this quiet marginal character lines that deliver a strong protest against women's demeaning position. Jane vehemently talks about the 'governess-trade' and knows there are 'places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something—Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect' (p. 235). These are perhaps hints dropped that encourage the reader to make a connection between the evils of the genteel women's job market and those of their marriage market.

Whether or not Jane knows her situation in relation to marriage can only remain a mystery, but the text presents her life as one that is caught in different forms of male control. Her sentimental leave-taking of the piano as reported by Miss Bates sums up her difficult situation:

'Poor dear Jane was talking of [the piano] just now.—"You must go," said she. "You and I must part. You will have no business here.—Let it stay, however," said she; "give it house-room till Colonel Campbell comes back. I shall talk about it to him; he will settle for me; he will help me out of all my difficulties."—And to this day, I do believe, she knows not whether it was his present or his daughter's.' (p. 302)

It is likely that by this time Jane has guessed or discovered the real gift-giver. Frank's letter to Mrs Weston explaining his engagement to Jane hints at this possibility. He writes: 'Of the pianoforté so much talked of, I feel it only necessary to say, that its being ordered was absolutely unknown to Miss F—, who would never have allowed me to send it, had any choice been given her' (p. 345). Frank's denial of Jane's knowledge

regarding the piano is confined to 'its being ordered'. He chooses not to say whether or not she knows him to be the sender afterwards. The piano episode, however, gives a clue. He misleads Emma about the sender by emphasising the link between Irish melodies and Mr Dixon, and he also takes pains to point out that *Robin Adair*, one of the songs Jane plays, is Mr Dixon's favourite.²³³ As everything Frank does up until that moment is to conceal his engagement to Jane, it makes sense to assume that the song is Frank's furtive way of flirting with Jane,²³⁴ and Frank deliberately sustains Emma's misconception. If Jane knows Frank to be the giver of the piano soon after she receives the instrument, her farewell to it is also a metaphorical leave-taking of her lover. It is significant that on the eve of becoming a governess, an occupation she deems to be restrictive, Jane appeals to Colonel Campbell, a paternal figure, to assist her. Believing Frank to be in love with another woman, Jane is aware that support from a husband figure has been lost. Her remarks convey a deep sense of helplessness in a woman's life. She can choose only between relying on her future partner for maintenance, binding herself slave-like to a profession, or remaining a dependant on her guardian. With Frank's tendency to exploit Jane's 'exhibitible' qualities, there is a sad overtone to their marriage. Jane escapes from the governess-trade only to fall into the 'wife-trade'.

In comparison, the relationship of the principal would-be couple in the novel, Emma and Mr Knightley, is not bound up with gifts. In fact, outside their relationship, both Emma and Mr Knightley are gift-givers rather than gift recipients. Emma takes the place of her father in distributing food to the less advantaged of the Highbury community, and Mr Knightley also assumes the role of a benevolent landlord when he

²³³ It has to be noted, however, that there is a touch of irony in Frank's transfer of Jane's love for him to Mr Dixon. It is true that Frank's allusion is a cruel act that tarnishes Jane's reputation, because Mr Dixon is a married man and the husband of Jane's best friend. However, in hinting at Jane's adultery, Frank also liberates Jane from his control and thus disrupts his attempt to subordinate Jane and present her as a testament to his power.

²³⁴ Peter F. Alexander in '“Robin Adair” as a Musical Clue in Jane Austen's *Emma*', *The Review of English Studies*, 39 (1988), 84-86, also argues that Fanny uses *Robin Adair* 'as a covert means of replying to Frank's covert affirmation of his continued love' (p. 85). While his argument is based on *Robin Adair*'s appearance after another song of significance to the couple, I arrive at the conclusion owing to details from Frank's letter.

sends apples to the Bates. In confining her exploration of troubling gift relations to vulnerable characters like Jane, Austen exhibits women's objectification in a material world controlled by men.

Fanny and Jane are the only two characters in Austen's novels to be entangled in their relationships with presents. They are both dependent, and the troublesome presents given them are all related to men. If Fanny's ball gown and jewellery and Jane's square piano represent different forms of male control, their reactions indicate different female strengths. While Fanny is able to resist patriarchal force by transforming the meanings of her gifts and assuming the role of a gift-giver in the latter half of *Mansfield Park*, Jane's strongest opposition to her fate of being a vulnerable woman in marriage can be channelled only through her comments on the social position of governesses. Despite such a difference, both characters demonstrate a female power that cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, using Fanny's gift relations with her sisters as an example, Austen shows that gifting, though difficult to rid of its connotations of relational obligation, can be emotionally fulfilling to both the giver and the recipient if the relationship is established on an equal footing. Austen's portrayal of women's relationships with presents may also shed light on her reticence about the proposal scenes of her heroes and heroines. If the offering of any kind of gift necessarily entails a situation of unequal power, the scenes where a man offers his hand to a woman will deliver the message of women's submission to male power. This is perhaps why Austen avoids the use of such an image in her proposal scenes. The process of two people's decision to marry is therefore either cursorily summed up by the narrator or presented through their exchange of mutual understanding.

Chapter Four:
**Women beside and beyond the Hearth: The Home and Women's
Prospects in *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters***

There is no doubt that compared with Jane Austen's fictional object world Elizabeth Gaskell's novels are richer in detail. However, although Gaskell published her novels at least three decades after Austen's death and covered a wider array of subjects, she and Austen both showed an interest in middle-class women and their domestic environments. It is significant to note that in the works where domestic settings are dwelt upon, their middle-class heroines are subjected to similar trials of transplantation. In Austen, Catherine Morland, Fanny Price, and Anne Elliot are all removed from their original homes and forced to embark on different journeys of acclimatisation. Gaskell's middle-class heroines are similarly situated. In *North and South* (1854-5), Margaret Hale, a rector's daughter with an upper-middle-class education, lives in different houses and visits various domestic spaces throughout the novel. In *Wives and Daughters* (1864-6), Molly Gibson, a doctor's daughter with genteel and aristocratic connections, not only enters a wide range of households but also sees her own home transformed following her father's second marriage. However, there is a marked difference between Gaskell's and Austen's representations of women at home. While Austen's heroines, with the exception of Anne, are ensconced in the domestic sphere at the end of the novel, Margaret and Molly show a strong interest in pursuits outside the home even if they are also domestically adept. This chapter will explore how Gaskell differs from Austen on the subject of women's relationships with the home and the broader meaning underlining her representations.

Scholars commenting on Victorian fiction, decorative styles in general, and

Gaskell's domestic spaces in particular tend to formulate their arguments along the lines of bourgeois class consciousness. Thad Logan, who has offered an extensive discussion of the Victorian drawing-room, both fictional and real, sees domestic details as reflections of the rising middle classes' anxiety to create a home that is 'just right', neither too exuberant nor too bare.²³⁵ Christopher Lindner views Thornton's house as one that 'belongs to a capitalist and a consumer' and what the space contains as mere 'commodities'.²³⁶ Such a proposition, while concurring with Gaskell's portrayal of the Thorntons' drawing-room as a sparkling yet emotionally void space, promotes the idea that Gaskell's fictional objects are confined to the representation of nineteenth-century class struggles. Morality, a value that is closely associated with the Victorian middle classes, is also an idea that critics frequently employ to investigate the connection between interiors and their inhabitants. Jim Cheshire and Michael Crick-Smith apply this approach in their investigation of Gaskell's own decorative projects at Plymouth Grove.²³⁷ Taste is still another focus of interest for critics on Gaskell's objects, and a line of argument that, too, primarily concerns social status. John Kanwit situates his discussion of class conflicts in *North and South* within the wider context of mid-Victorian discourses on taste. He argues that Thornton's improved household taste will equip him with the right attributes to become a better master.²³⁸

Although these comments offer valid ways of analysing Gaskell's fictional object world, their focus on class distinction risks subsuming the issue of gender and reducing the relationship between characters and objects to an unproblematic connection. As Kerri Hunt has noted in her discussion of Indian shawls and Mrs Thornton's lace in *North and South*, Gaskell depicts objects that present multilayered meanings and

²³⁵ Logan, p. 217.

²³⁶ Christopher Lindner, 'Outside Looking in: Material Culture in Gaskell's Industrial Novels', *Orbis Litterarum*, 55 (2000), 379-96 (p. 385).

²³⁷ Jim Cheshire and Michael Crick-Smith, 'Taste and Morality at Plymouth Grove: Elizabeth Gaskell's Home and its Decoration', *The Gaskell Journal*, 27 (2013), 1-21.

²³⁸ John P. Kanwit, '“Mere Outward Appearances”? Household Taste and Social Perception in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Review*, 35 (2009), 190-210 (pp. 204-08).

challenge standard ways of interpretation. She proposes that to retrieve the complexity that inheres in Gaskell's objects, one must deal with 'the particularity which is a condition of their ability to connote'.²³⁹ In response to Hunt's call to avoid treating Gaskell's objects as unproblematic signs, this chapter is grounded on an exploration of materiality and examines Margaret's and Molly's status in the domestic sphere through the lens of nineteenth-century furnishing styles. I want to show that in describing domestic details, Gaskell goes further than simply registering the contemporary taste or presenting the bourgeoisie's class anxiety. She evinces an attempt to lay bare women's object-like status in the socially sanctioned feminine sphere of the home. Moreover, as suggested by the futures she envisions for Margaret and Molly, Gaskell also explores the expansion of women's opportunities.

MARGARET HALE IN THE DRAWING-ROOM

Nineteenth-century middle-class women's lives were closely connected with the home, and among all spaces, the drawing-room, widely deemed to be a feminine space, occupied a central position.²⁴⁰ However, the home in the nineteenth century was not an exclusive female domain. In terms of room use and decoration, the home was a locus where gender power struggles, frequently those between husband and wife, were played out.²⁴¹ Gaskell, like Austen, registers such tension in her novels and explores putative conjugal ties by representing drawing-rooms through the eyes of the visitors who are

²³⁹ Kerri E. Hunt, '“Nouns that were Signs of Things”: Object Lessons in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *The Gaskell Journal*, 26 (2012), 3-17 (p. 9).

²⁴⁰ I use the term 'drawing-room' to designate the reception room of a house, but Gaskell also employs 'sitting-room' and 'parlour' when she refers to the same space. While these terms do carry different shades of meaning, I do not differentiate one from another in this chapter. Distinctions between the terms can be found in Logan, pp. 12-13.

²⁴¹ Although women were closely associated with domestic arrangements, critics disagree as to when their authority in home décor was established. Even in areas where female authority was clearly identified, there was no denying that the arrangement of domestic spaces was centred around male interests. See Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors*, pp. 300-02.

possible partners to the host/hostess. The Helstone drawing-room is reported from the perspective of Henry Lennox, who comes to Helstone specifically to seek Margaret's hand in marriage. Descriptions of the Hales' Milton drawing-room are filtered through Thornton, who has fallen in love with Margaret before his first visit. Similarly, Thornton's house is depicted through the eyes of Margaret, who at the time of her first few visits is not aware of her love but is instinctively drawn to her host. In addition, *North and South* also opens and ends with a drawing-room scene. The opening chapter, in detailing some of the Shaws' preparations for Edith's wedding, illustrates the negotiation of power between man and wife on the eve of marriage. The closing chapter, taking place in the back drawing-room of Harley Street, concerns Margaret and Thornton's reconciliation and gestures at their prospective marriage. As *North and South* primarily concerns Margaret's relationship with Thornton, my examination concentrates on the drawing-room scenes that are related to their pattern of interaction, beginning with Thornton's first visit to the Hales in the Milton suburb of Crampton, and culminating in the final proposal scene in Harley Street.

The Hales' drawing-room reported from Thornton's perspective is a cosy, lived-in, and respectable space, but given the fact that the male gaze was conventionally endowed with strong agency, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, the items singled out by Thornton signal a more disturbing connotation:

Here were no mirrors, not even a scrap of glass to reflect the light, and answer the same purpose as water in a landscape; no gilding; a warm, sober breadth of colouring, well relieved by the dear old Helstone chintz-curtains and chair covers. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall white china vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-coloured beech-leaves. Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places: and books, not cared for on account of their binding

solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white table-cloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves.²⁴²

Viewed from Thornton's standpoint, these details reflect his interests and his silent appreciation of the Hales' lifestyle. Moreover, as Thornton is left with the impression that 'all these graceful cares were habitual to the family; and especially of a piece with Margaret', the look of the drawing-room is associated with Margaret in particular (p. 79). Indeed, the lack of mirrors and the restrained colour scheme can suggest her preference for simplicity and her focus on the comfort of her family rather than on showmanship. They can also indicate her lack of vanity, as she has no need of constantly viewing her reflected images in mirrors. In addition, the davenport, a compact, practical drawing-room writing-table used by ladies,²⁴³ and books can indicate her learning; the work baskets can demonstrate her feminine virtue; the plants and fruit, in harking back to the Hales' country dwelling in Helstone, can reveal her affinity with nature and effort to preserve her roots; and the 'white' china vase and tablecloth can show her meticulous attention to domestic tasks. Whether or not the contents of the Hales' drawing-room faithfully reflect Margaret's character, however, is not important. As they are reported from Thornton's perspective, they indicate his idealised view of her, and it is clear that he attaches to objects related to her positive connotations of female virtue.

The details Thornton chooses to describe carry other hidden meanings as well. Thornton notes a myriad of items in his host family's drawing-room, but he specifies only a few colours, with particular emphasis on white. He first observes the 'white'

²⁴² Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (1855), ed. by Angus Easson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 79. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

²⁴³ Beatrice Howe, *Antiques from the Victorian Home* (London: Batsford, 1973), p. 81; Logan, p. 43.

china vase and the 'pale-green' birch and 'copper-coloured' beech-leaves it contains, but he soon moves his attention away and finally fixes his eyes on the tea table with its 'white' tablecloth displaying coconut cakes, apparently also white in colour, and 'ruddy' American apples. The emphasis on 'white' brings to mind a string of gendered connotations traditionally associated with the colour, among which are naïveté and purity. These qualities could be sexually charged, and indeed the 'ruddy' apples on the snowy tablecloth may reveal Thornton's sexual interest in Margaret. The word 'ruddy' is used more specifically to depict a person who has 'a healthy rosy complexion' or a reddish face that indicates 'blushing, strong emotion, exertion, heat, etc.' (*OED Online*). Its juxtaposition with 'white' suggests that Thornton is projecting a femininity that is both sexually attractive and sexually innocent.

When Thornton's attention to what is on the tea table immediately shifts to the person presiding over it and what she wears, the colour scheme of white and red persists, as Margaret is wearing 'a light-coloured muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink about it' (p. 79). In addition to revealing Thornton's sexual interest in Margaret, the muslin gown also hints at her potential objectification, as it links her to Edith, who is portrayed in the first chapter as lying asleep on the sofa in her 'white muslin and blue ribbons' (p. 5). 'Roll[ing] herself up into a soft ball of muslin and ribbon, and silken curls' (p. 5), Edith seems more like a domestic animal than an adult human being. The presence of a 'minute lap-dog in Mrs Shaw's arms' next door suggests Edith's similarity to her pet (p. 8), and the long tradition of using the same textiles for home furnishings and women's clothing implies Edith's reduction to an item of domestic décor.²⁴⁴

²⁴⁴ See Stefan Muthesius, *The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009), p. 82; Alice Barnaby in 'Dresses and Drapery: Female Self-Fashioning in Muslin, 1800-1850', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 89-104, argues that the shared attire for the female body and the semi-public space of the drawing-room and women's handling of both their dresses and home furnishings allowed them to extend their power to the world beyond the home. While women's exercise of creativity is significant in considering their relationship with the object world, my focus on the present text has led me to highlight women's materialised state instead.

Dressed in white muslin on ‘a crimson damask sofa’ (p. 5), Edith is reminiscent of curtains arranged in the Rococo style, which favoured the pairing of a primary bright layer of silk with another layer of muslin or lace underneath (*Fig. 2*).²⁴⁵ The ornate Rococo style, despite drawing criticism from design reformists, was still widely accepted in the mid-nineteenth century by both the more established social elite and the parvenu,²⁴⁶ and the Shaws’ back drawing-room could very probably have been furnished in that style. Represented as a repetition of the house’s drapery, Edith becomes an embodiment of a decorative woman. Although Margaret’s association with fabrics is nowhere near the decadent, artificial picture that Edith’s objectified status presents, the fact that Thornton evaluates Margaret’s person in juxtaposition with her surroundings and what she wears, suggests that even a woman whose energies are not devoted particularly to material pursuits could not completely escape objectification.

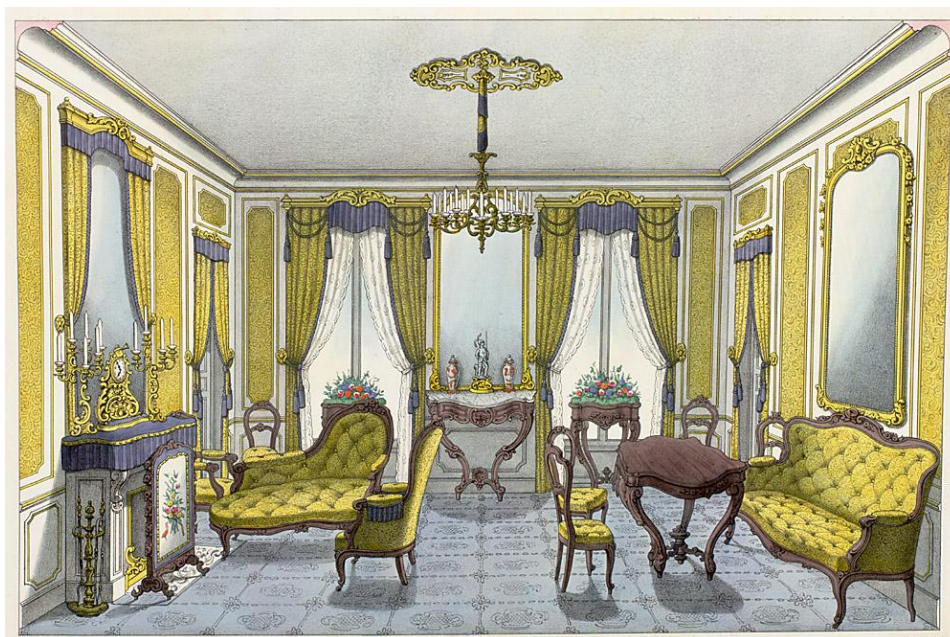


Fig. 2: A parlour in the Rococo Revival style. From *Le Garde-meuble, ancien et moderne*, livraison 74, No. 212. c. 1850. Smithsonian Institution Libraries, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum Branch, New York.

²⁴⁵ Peter Thornton, *Authentic Decor: The Domestic Interior 1620-1920* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984), pp. 154, 224.

²⁴⁶ Thornton, p. 216.

In fact, Margaret is also associated with home furnishings in the opening chapter when she acts as a model for displaying Indian shawls. Her materialised state does not simply stem from the fact that she is likened to a tailor's dummy. Indeed, the entire description of this scene shows blurred boundaries between Margaret and Mrs Shaw's drawing-room furnishings and is thus worth quoting in full.

So Margaret went down laden with shawls, and snuffing up their spicy Eastern smell. Her aunt asked her to stand as a sort of lay figure on which to display them, as Edith was still asleep. No one thought about it; but Margaret's tall, finely made figure, in the black silk dress which she was wearing as mourning for some distant relative of her father's, set off the long beautiful folds of the gorgeous shawls that would have half-smothered Edith. Margaret stood right under the chandelier, quite silent and passive, while her aunt adjusted the draperies. Occasionally, as she was turned round, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece, and smiled at her own appearance there—the familiar features in the usual garb of a princess. She touched the shawls gently as they hung around her, and took a pleasure in their soft feel and their brilliant colours, and rather liked to be dressed in such splendour—enjoying it much as a child would do, with a quiet pleased smile on her lips. (p. 9)

The 'spicy Eastern smell' at which Margaret sniffs on her way to the drawing-room immediately conjures up the Oriental décor employed in nineteenth-century domestic interiors.²⁴⁷ Margaret's affinity to objects extends beyond the stylistic level when her

²⁴⁷ The Oriental style was an umbrella term formed in the 1830s. Under this term, no clear distinction was made between *chinoiserie*, whose popularity peaked in the eighteenth century, and the 'Moorish' or 'Indian' styles, which came into fashion in the early nineteenth century. See Muthesius, p. 207. Although Orientalism was restricted to gender-specific rooms such as the boudoir and the smoking-room and Mrs Shaw's exhibition of Margaret takes place in the drawing-room, the most public space of the house, the

position in the room is specified: she stands under the chandelier and can see herself in the mirror over the chimney-piece. The large mirror installed above the fireplace was ‘a classic mid-Victorian indicator of status’, as it would have reflected the contents of the room and thus articulated the owner’s material wealth.²⁴⁸ Viewed in this light, Margaret’s image in the mirror would have appeared alongside a plethora of things her aunt places in the drawing-room. Juxtaposed with items that speak of Mrs Shaw’s affluence, Margaret becomes one of the furnishing elements that her aunt choreographs to create a desired space to show off her status. Margaret’s transformation into a piece of furniture is more manifest when she is further described as being ‘quite silent and passive, while her aunt adjusted the draperies’. The way in which Mrs Shaw skilfully creates the folds of Indian shawls resembles that of a draper in arranging curtains²⁴⁹ and that of women in creating the window drapery in their drawing-rooms, so Margaret’s ‘tall, finely made figure’ functions as curtain rails. In addition, Margaret’s passivity also reinforces her image as an object.

Although men are absent while Margaret and the Indian shawls are displayed, her potential reduction to a thing-like status cannot be divorced from the issue of gender. As Suzanne Daly has noted, Indian shawls in the Victorian imagination were identified with ‘spoils of the East’ that ‘men returning from colonial service in India bestow upon their mothers and sisters’ and functioned as a marker of respectable English womanhood.²⁵⁰ Even if shawl vendors were by no means rare in London by mid-century, ‘shawls in novels are invariably gifts or commissions from travellers to the East’.²⁵¹ Such a perception of Indian shawls indicates that these female garments, like the amber cross Fanny receives from her sailor brother William in *Mansfield Park*, bore

congregation of ladies in a room to which the hostess dedicates most of her decorative skills makes the Oriental style suitable to be examined alongside this passage.

²⁴⁸ Thornton, p. 114.

²⁴⁹ Muthesius, p. 91.

²⁵⁰ Suzanne Daly, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), p. 13.

²⁵¹ Daly, p. 28.

with them hidden histories of imperialism and patriarchal control. While the imperial significance of Mrs Shaw's Indian shawls is unclear,²⁵² as the text does not state whether her husband, General Shaw, purchases them in India or London, the patriarchal power embodied in those shawls is evident. It requires a tall Margaret to bear the patriarchal weight of Indian shawls – the delicate Edith would have been 'half-smothered' by them. Edith's uneasy relationship with her father's legacy is discernible in one of her letters sent from Italy. To Margaret she writes:

But you have no idea of the heat here! I tried to wear my great beauty Indian shawl at a pic-nic. I kept myself up with proverbs as long as I could; "Pride must abide,"—and such wholesome pieces of pith; but it was of no use. I was like mamma's little dog Tiny with an elephant's trappings on; smothered, hidden, killed with my finery; so I made it into a capital carpet for us all to sit down upon. (p. 235)

While in the opening chapter Edith's affinity to animals and objects is conveyed through the narrator's description, here her own words present a potent image of how she suffers under the ideology that keeps women in an objectified form. By finding a new practical purpose for the patriarchal gift, Edith is able to lift the symbolic weight of Indian shawls that men have imposed on women.

Margaret is not troubled by her exhibition, at least not until a man comes on the scene. This suggests that in an all-female environment, she can remain oblivious to the gendered power relations implicitly expressed by objects. Gazing at herself being gazed at by a group of women, Margaret does not seem much disturbed. She forms an intimate sensual relationship with the shawls by indulging herself in their sensory stimulation

²⁵² The historical background of Indian shawls' production and the absence of their imperial resonances in Victorian fiction are discussed in Daly, pp. 36-60. She has commented on *North and South* but does not focus on the gender issue.

and aesthetic appeal; she also dwells on the noble connotations of drapery and delights in being dressed like a 'princess'. Owing to its deep roots in Classicism, drapery in the nineteenth century was still perceived as a 'relatively unchanging signifier of wealth, nobility, taste and religiosity'.²⁵³ By focusing on the materiality of the shawls and the qualities that sidestep the issue of gender, Margaret, like Fanny when she dwells on the beauty of Edmund's chain, is able to evade the male power that was often implied in luxuries bought by men.

Margaret's exposure to Thornton's gaze later in a similar outfit shows that in Gaskell's time women's subjection to men through material objects was not easy to escape. In their first encounter in the sitting-room of a hotel, Margaret's outfit consists of

a close straw bonnet of the best material and shape, trimmed with white ribbon; a dark silk gown, without any trimming or flounce; a large Indian shawl, which hung about her in long heavy folds, and which she wore as an empress wears her drapery. (p. 62)

Here the expressions used to describe Margaret's shawl are nearly identical to those employed in the Harley Street scene. The repetition of the word 'folds' and the similar regal qualities the shawl imparts present an invariable image of Margaret as a person who is at once powerful and powerless. Thornton's sexualised gaze makes Margaret's objectification even more potent. After noting what she is wearing, Thornton wonders why 'his being there was of no concern to the beautiful countenance, and called up no flush of surprise to the pale ivory of the complexion' (p. 62). The synecdochal use of Margaret's 'beautiful countenance' to refer to her person, like Thornton's habit of using 'hands' to mean 'workers', indicates his objectification of her, and the use of a luxury

²⁵³ Gen Doy, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), p. 20.

material from the East, ivory, to describe her face reinforces Margaret's affinity with the Oriental décor, which I have noted earlier.

After some futile attempts at conversation by both parties, Thornton feasts his eyes on Margaret's appearance, drawing heavily on the sensory experience of colours, textures, and shapes in his description of her:

She sat facing him and facing the light; her full beauty met his eye; her round white flexile throat rising out of the full, yet lithe figure; her lips, moving so slightly as she spoke, not breaking the cold serene look of her face with any variation from the one lovely haughty curve; her eyes, with their soft gloom, meeting his with quiet maiden freedom. (p. 63)

The idioms he employs, the 'round white flexile throat', the 'full, yet lithe figure', the 'lovely haughty curve', conjure up images of Rococo furniture, which featured 'curving lines and rounded shapes' (See *Fig. 2*).²⁵⁴ As I have noted earlier, the Rococo style was popular in Victorian drawing-room decoration. If the Harley Street back drawing-room could be furnished in that style, the hotel sitting-room in which Thornton and Margaret's first encounter takes place might well be similarly decorated. Alternatively, Thornton could be linking Margaret to a carved statue when he evaluates her physical beauty, because 'the cold serene look of her face' brings to mind the hard materials, such as marble, used to make statues. The text does not provide any clues as to the exact nature of Thornton's reference, but his description of Margaret suggests at least that a woman's body could take on the qualities of her surrounding furniture and that the woman thus juxtaposed could easily become objectified.

In the Hales' drawing-room, which is certainly not decorated in the ornate Rococo style, Thornton applies the same expressions to Margaret's exposed body parts:

²⁵⁴ Logan, p. 38.

She stood by the tea-table in a light-coloured muslin gown, which had a good deal of pink about it. She looked as if she was not attending to the conversation, but solely busy with the tea-cups, among which her round ivory hands moved with pretty, noiseless daintiness. She had a bracelet on one taper arm, which would fall down over her round wrist. Mr Thornton watched the re-placing of this troublesome ornament with far more attention than he listened to her father. It seemed as if it fascinated him to see her push it up impatiently, until it tightened her soft flesh; and then to mark the loosening—the fall. He could almost have exclaimed—‘There it goes, again!’ (p. 79)

The expressions Thornton uses in this instance, the ‘round ivory hands’, the ‘taper arm’, and the ‘round wrist’, do not vary from those he employed when he first met her. Here the tinge of objectification is clearer because Thornton’s subsequent close attention to Margaret’s bracelet, an actual ornament, reinforces the idea of identifying her with a decorative object. In fact, Thornton’s singling out of Margaret’s ivory hands can be read alongside a popular item in the Victorian drawing-room, the feminine hand ‘modeled in china, ivory, marble, or alabaster’ (*Fig. 3*).²⁵⁵ Ironically, Margaret’s regal attributes feed into her objectification, as Queen Victoria’s hand ‘came to be reproduced by leading china firms all over England and sold, by the hundred, to her devoted subjects in every walk of life’.²⁵⁶

²⁵⁵ Logan, p. 128

²⁵⁶ Howe, pp. 55-56.



Fig. 3: James Hadley, *Antique Royal Worcester Parian Mrs Hadley's Hand Vase*, porcelain, 1850. Xupes.

Thornton's objectification of Margaret is also reinforced when the following lines are read against the background of mid-Victorian home décor:

She handed [Thornton] his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; but her eye caught the moment when he was ready for another cup; and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs. Mr Thornton saw her beautiful eyes lifted to her father, full of light, half-laughter and half-love, as this bit of pantomime went on between the two, unobserved, as they fancied, by any. (p. 79)

Margaret's ivory skin, when considered alongside her resemblance to a slave, could

have brought to mind the best-known nude body in Victorian homes, *The Greek Slave*, which was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851 and widely reproduced in the era. This statue depicts a naked woman with her hands tied to a draped pillar (*Fig. 4*). Its colour is white because it was made of a new material invented in the mid-nineteenth century, ‘parian’, the name referring to the ivory marble from the Greek island of Paros.²⁵⁷ If Margaret only assumes the ‘air’ of being forced to perform an act against her will in her dealings with Thornton, her slavery is a concrete reality in her interaction with her father. Although her eyes are depicted as being ‘full of light, half-laughter and half-love’, the narrator notes that she is ‘compelled’ to serve as her father’s sugar-tongs. Thornton’s wish to be in the position of Mr Hale thus exposes the continuing subjection of Victorian women to male authorities before and after marriage.

²⁵⁷ Logan, pp. 128-30.



Fig. 4: Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, parian porcelain, 1862 [CIRC.90-1968].

Thornton's attention to Margaret's materiality is equally strong, if not stronger, when his observation takes place in his own house. The same vocabulary with a tinge of objectification reappears when Thornton gazes at Margaret while she talks to his sister Fanny in the drawing-room:

the curving lines of the red lips, just parted in the interest of listening to what her companion said—the head a little bent forwards, so as to make a long sweeping line from the summit, where the light caught on the glossy raven hair, to the smooth ivory tip of the shoulder; the round white arms, and taper hands, laid lightly across each other, but perfectly motionless in their pretty attitude. (pp. 161-62)

The sense that Thornton perceives Margaret as an objectified woman is reinforced against the backdrop of his elaborately-furnished house. The 'curving lines' of her lips echo the circular table placed in the middle of the drawing-room; her 'glossy' hair can be linked to the polished look of the room; and her 'ivory' skin tone is reminiscent of the 'great alabaster groups' under glass shades (p. 112). When Thornton takes tea with the Hales, he compares his own house with their cosy interior and expresses his preference for their restrained, lived-in drawing-room. However, he always associates Margaret with the lavishly ornamented style whenever he gets to observe her in a domestic setting. This seems to indicate that middle-class women's objectification was unavoidable in the home.

To be sure, Margaret's observation of Thornton is also grounded in the terms of aesthetic assessment, but she soon looks beneath the surface and focuses on his character. In the episode where Thornton is enthralled by Margaret's body at the tea table, Margaret also takes notice of his appearance, but instead of dwelling on the sensory stimulation his face excites, she is interested in the personal qualities revealed through his physical traits. Having observed her father, Margaret shifts her attention to Thornton:

Now, in Mr Thornton's face the straight brows fell low over the clear, deep-set earnest eyes, which, without being unpleasantly sharp, seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in the face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, and lay principally about the lips, which were slightly compressed over a set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything, to the

keen honest enjoyment of the moment, which is seldom shown so fearlessly and instantaneously except by children. (p. 80)

It is notable that Margaret's observation of Thornton is limited to his face. She notes his 'straight brows' and 'deep-set earnest eyes', but what attracts her attention is Thornton's power of observation indicated by the brows and eyes. She compares Thornton's chiselled features to the contours found in marble statues, but she picks up subtle nuances in order to understand his personality. Her observation ends in a conclusion of 'the opposition of character' between her father and Thornton to explain their mutual attraction. She is able to make such a statement because she has been noticing the 'details of appearance' of both (p. 80).

Margaret's discomfort under the male gaze suggests that she may be conscious of women's embarrassing exhibition in a domestic setting, and the text stresses her love of the outdoors. In Helstone, she enjoys 'the free walks and rambles of her forest life', running or stopping as the fancy takes her (p. 71). In Milton, she revels in the freedom of going 'up and down to butchers and grocers' without being followed by a footman, a rule laid down by her aunt that she thinks is a 'serious annoyance' (p. 71). Margaret's interest in pursuits outside the home and her superior intellect reveal the limitations of keeping women indoors. In *North and South*, those middle-class women who are firmly based in the domestic sphere all look silly in their own ways. Edith and Fanny are good examples of women who were educated to remain delicate creatures. The infantilised Edith is incapable of managing her own children, and Fanny cannot participate in conversations that concern public issues. Mrs Shaw and Mrs Hale, two ladies of the older generation, are equally ill-equipped for an active life. Mrs Shaw is insensitive to her sister's economic plight, and Mrs Hale cannot communicate with her husband on the intellectual level. The only female character that resembles Margaret in any way is Mrs Thornton. She, too, does not abide by the convention that limits women's place to the

home. When Margaret is hurt and no one in the Thornton household dares to venture out for a doctor, it is Mrs Thornton who goes for medical aid. Her energy prevents her from appearing like other middle-class women who are prone to becoming objectified, but her masculine qualities produce emotional detachment between her and her son. It is true that Mrs Thornton is a controversial example of an active woman, but the fact that she is begged by the dying Mrs Hale to act as a mother figure to Margaret and eventually becomes Margaret's mother-in-law is significant. This suggests that Margaret's original lineage of indolent, housebound ladies will be replaced by a new line of active women, herself included.

With the seemingly inevitable situation of objectification at home, connecting the home with the world outside may provide a solution. In Milton, Margaret enters the parlours of the working classes and opens up her own drawing-room to the newly-bereaved Higgins. Back in Harley Street, after her own double bereavement, she turns the private back drawing-room into a space for business. There she reverses the conventional proposal scene by acting as the one who offers, but instead of marriage, the offer she puts forward is a business arrangement. Although she is in turn proposed to by Thornton in the matrimonial sense, the verbal exchange between them that follows suggests a dynamic power struggle that is likely to continue, much like that between Emma and Mr Knightley in *Emma*. They first argue, though playfully, about the ownership of some dry roses from Helstone and go on to poke fun at each other's background:

‘You must give them to me,’ she said, trying to take them out of his hand with gentle violence.

‘Very well. Only you must pay me for them!’

‘How shall I ever tell Aunt Shaw?’ she whispered, after some time of delicious silence.

‘Let me speak to her.’

‘Oh, no! I owe it to her,—but what will she say?’

‘I can guess. Her first exclamation will be, “That man!” ’

‘Hush!’ said Margaret, ‘or I shall try and show you your mother’s indignant tones as she says, “That woman!” ’ (p. 436)

Margaret’s frequent oscillation between passive and active roles in this excerpt is significant. She first asks Thornton to yield the flowers to her in an authoritative voice, accompanying her words with ‘gentle violence’. When Thornton asks her for payment, she switches to a passive role by first remaining silent and then timidly proposing a new topic for discussion. However, she immediately takes an active part in the conversation when Thornton disagrees with her. The imperative mood of her final sentence is a clear indicator of her power. Margaret’s skilful switching between roles, like her sound knowledge of both women’s traditional place in the drawing-room and acceptable pursuits outside the home, may be Gaskell’s suggested way out of female objectification.

MOLLY GIBSON’S TOUR OF HOUSES

While the domestic spaces described in *North and South* are closely connected with the heroine’s familial life, *Wives and Daughters* presents a female protagonist who not only is seen in her own home but also enters a wide range of domestic settings as a guest. In addition to living in a house that undergoes dramatic transformations after her father’s second marriage, Molly Gibson also visits Cumnor Towers and Ashcombe Manor-house, which belong to an earl, and Hamley Hall, a country squire’s property. Unlike *North and South*, which presents Margaret as a figure with a strong presence in

domestic spaces, the narrative of *Wives and Daughters* places Molly at a remove from her surroundings, making her more of an onlooker than a focal point. This section, before examining Molly's situation in her own home, considers the different person-object relationships, especially those pertaining to women, that Molly observes in the houses she visits. Recognising the distinction between Molly and the women with whom she comes into contact, I attempt to discuss her prospects as a middle-class woman in these mixed circles.

Wives and Daughters opens with Molly's first experience of being a guest, one that takes her to the Cumnors' aristocratic house. As the narrator notes, the annual opening of Cumnor Towers to a select group of Hollingford ladies is based on a strict observance of hierarchy: it calls for exhibition on the part of the Cumnors and admiration on the part of the invited guests. The origin of such an event is also grounded on the demonstration of and obedience to power: having established a girls' school, Lady Cumnor hands over her responsibility to the 'unoccupied gentlewomen' of Hollingford and opens her house to them every year as a way of acknowledging their help.²⁵⁸ In such a power structure, social inferiors are in danger of being regarded by their betters as a group and therefore lose their personal individuality. Indeed, in Lady Cumnor's school, pupils are required to 'dress neatly in a kind of charity uniform devised by the ladies of Cumnor Towers' (p. 7). These girls are described as 'neat' (p. 8). With their needlework described as 'neater', they are indistinguishable in their betters' eyes from the handicrafts they produce.

Molly's first visit to the Towers reveals that the upper echelons of society can themselves be degraded to the status of objects in their pursuit of material pomposity. In the scene where aristocratic children go through a ritual of dressing to be presented to their elders in the dining-room, their individuality is replaced by clothing materials:

²⁵⁸ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), ed. by Pam Morris (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 8. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

every child is dressed in ‘lace and muslin, and velvet, and brilliant broad ribbons’ (p. 22). In the drawing-room, people are consumed by their grand surroundings. As Molly observes, ‘Large mirrors, velvet curtains, pictures in their gilded frames, a multitude of dazzling lights decorated the vast saloon, and the floor was studded with groups of ladies and gentlemen, all dressed in gorgeous attire’ (p. 24). Here the ‘large mirrors’ and ‘dazzling lights’, despite their positive function of signifying the owner’s wealth, give an unpleasant sense of harshness and shininess, which echoes the ‘painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look’ of the Thorntons’ drawing-room in *North and South* (*North and South*, p. 112).²⁵⁹ The discomfort such rooms cause the heroines demonstrates that when empty symbolism, rather than practical comfort, governs the decorative scheme of an interior, the space becomes hostile to human habitation. Indeed, the enumeration of material objects and the word ‘studded’ in the description of the Cumnors’ saloon indicate that people and things are prone to becoming conflated in such a place. Even Lady Cumnor is not exempt from the person-object confusion, as the ‘purple velvet’ used to make her dress is of the same material as the curtains in her saloon (p. 26).

By contrast, the interior of Hamley Hall gives a general impression of bareness. Sounds echo through the ‘undraped hollow square of the hall and staircase’ (p. 84); the dining room contains ‘so few articles of furniture in it’ (p. 67); Mrs Hamley’s room, though ‘large and pleasant’ (p. 44), is noted more for the view from its windows than for its décor. One reason for this is of course the family’s straitened circumstances, but a close examination of some of the details provided in the description of Hamley Hall will suggest that the Hamley estate’s shabby look symbolically reflects the nature of Mrs Hamley’s married life.

²⁵⁹ Saloons and drawing-rooms are different in character, but in my comparison I focus on their shared function of entertaining groups of people. Jackson-Stops and Pipkin have offered an explanation of the differences between saloons and drawing-rooms: ‘The former [Saloons], with their great coved ceilings, massive doorcases and vast pictures, were always arranged formally as befitted their position on axis with the hall, as part of the ‘state centre’ of the house; the latter [drawing-rooms], with their more intimate scale, lower ceilings and double-hung pictures of much more human proportions, could be used quite informally on occasion’ (pp. 142-45).

A cursory look at Hamley Hall reveals a conspicuous lack of feminine touches, even in Mrs Hamley's bedroom and sitting-room, spaces that are dedicated to her own use in a house where she is the only female inhabitant. This is unusual compared with other female characters in the novel. Lady Cumnor's room is unmistakably feminine, where '[e]very chair was an easy-chair of some kind or other; and all covered with French chintz that mimicked the real flowers in the garden below' (p. 97). Women with less abundant resources also manage to add their personal stamps to their homes. Mrs Kirkpatrick, an unsuccessful schoolmistress, decorates her mirror with muslin and pink ribbons after the fashion she observes in the Towers, and the Miss Brownings, two unmarried old ladies whose father was a vicar, fill their house with 'quaint adornments' that have a great appeal for Molly (p. 150).

As several scholars have pointed out, middle-class women in the nineteenth century were actively engaged in decorating their homes with both their handicrafts and purchased goods,²⁶⁰ so the shortage of feminine touches in Hamley Hall may be attributed to Mrs Hamley's lack of interest in crafting. Indeed, she confesses to Molly that she has 'almost forgotten how to sew' (p. 64). Nevertheless, the items specified in the description of her room, when considered within their historical and cultural contexts, tell a story of her subjection to patriarchy. Among those objects named in Mrs Hamley's apartment, portraits seem to be of the most interest to Molly, and one which represents Osborne and Roger Hamley even sparks a detailed discussion between the two women. Consideration of the social significance of family portraits in the nineteenth century will shed light on the life of the mistress of Hamley Hall.

Molly's observation of Mrs Hamley's private sitting-room includes 'some crayon sketches – portraits' on the walls (p. 64). Apart from the portrait of Osborne and Roger, Molly specifies only one picture, 'a likeness of Mrs Hamley, in her beautiful youth' (p.

²⁶⁰ For example, Logan suggests that the drawing-room 'was the locus of the display of feminine accomplishments', so decorating it 'whether with the work of one's own hands or with consumer goods' was 'one of the primary duties of woman' (p. 35).

64). Although the other portraits are not further discussed, their sheer number and existence in the space are significant. By the nineteenth century, members of the gentry and aristocracy had established a long tradition of displaying a collection of portraits in their country houses. These portraits consisting of magnificent ancestors and grand personages were strategically grouped, arranged and displayed to forge an imposing image of the present generation.²⁶¹ As these family portrait collections were used to make statements of pride, they were exhibited in the ‘public’ rooms of the house, such as the drawing- and dining-rooms. Such a practice of displaying family pictures is recorded in Jane Austen’s works. In *Mansfield Park*, the Rushworths’ family portraits, shown to the Mansfield Park group by Mrs Rushworth, are apparently located in rooms that the mistress deems fit to be seen. In *Persuasion*, portraits of the Musgroves’ ancestors are clearly described as being placed in the parlour. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the juxtaposed miniatures of Wickham, Mr Darcy, and Georgiana Darcy that Elizabeth sees are situated in a room – though described by the housekeeper as ‘my late master’s favourite room’ and hence supposed to be a private space (p. 187) – which is considered by the family to be appropriate for public display.

If the unspecified portraits on the walls of Mrs Hamley’s private sitting-room include those of deceased Hamleys, as indeed they may well do, Squire Hamley is guilty of overwriting his wife’s personality with records of his familial lineage. Squire Hamley is undoubtedly proud of his ancestry. He repeatedly emphasises that his family ‘dates from the Heptarchy’ (p. 74), but is reticent about his wife’s background. In his words, Mrs Hamley ‘could not tell her great-grandfather from Adam’ (pp. 73-74). By generalising his wife’s descent, Squire Hamley rids her of her original identity, thus readying her for the title of ‘Mrs Hamley’. In taking care to convey and maintain their familial glory through material objects, Squire Hamley resembles Austen’s Sir Walter Elliot, and one of the objects to which he attaches dynastic significance is the

²⁶¹ Retford, p. 14.

‘beautifully-joined oaken flooring’ used for the Hamley Hall staircase (p. 84). Oak in the nineteenth century was associated with the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in Britain’s architectural history,²⁶² so for Squire Hamley it is an eloquent reminder of the family’s prosperous past: he intends such a symbol to remain visible and is unwilling to cover his oaken flooring with carpets. Given Squire Hamley’s investment of patriarchal significance in objects, the installation of his family portraits in Mrs Hamley’s room emerges as an indicator of his authority over his wife’s personal space.

Apart from the unspecified portraits, Molly notes that there is one picture representing Mrs Hamley ‘in her beautiful youth’ (p. 64). These are the only words applied to the portrait, and no other aspects are commented on. Such a generalised description corresponds to the traditional depiction of women in family portraiture, most of which ‘appealed to general virtues associated with the duties of wife and/ or mother, suggested feminine qualities of tenderness and empathy for the natural world or depicted suitable accomplishments that implied status and appropriate use of leisure time’.²⁶³ Mrs Hamley’s ‘beautiful youth’ highlights her procreative function in the Hamley household, and the ‘beautiful’ heir she produces, whose image is represented in another portrait in the same room, bears witness to this *raison d’être* of women that patriarchal authority prescribes. In addition, the picture that represents Mrs Hamley as a blossoming woman glowing with health stands in contrast to the languid invalid who meets Molly. It serves as a painful reminder of Mrs Hamley’s dwindling energy, which is probably the result of her social and cultural isolation in her married life.

The portrait that engages Molly and Mrs Hamley in a long discussion is one that represents Mrs Hamley’s two sons, ‘in the most youthful kind of jackets and trousers, and falling collars’ (p. 65). As Molly notes, some articles of furniture in Mrs Hamley’s sitting-room are ‘faintly indicated in the picture’ (p. 65). This suggests that the portrait

²⁶² Methesius, p. 87.

²⁶³ Retford, p. 22.

bears some affinities with the interior conversation piece, which commonly features a family group in a domestic setting, where ‘the details of domestic furnishing and clothing provide precise indicators of time, place and identity’.²⁶⁴ The text does not detail what Mrs Hamley’s sitting-room contains, but as the narrator indicates that ‘the character of the furniture was much the same as in [Molly’s] own [room]’ (p. 64), a rough idea of Mrs Hamley’s sitting-room can be gained by examining Molly’s room at Hamley Hall, which is in fact an extension of Mrs Hamley’s apartment:

All the furniture in the room was as old-fashioned and as well-preserved as it could be. The chintz curtains were Indian calico of the last century – the colours almost washed out, but the stuff itself exquisitely clean. There was a little strip of bedside carpeting, but the wooden flooring, thus liberally displayed, was of finely-grained oak, so firmly joined, plank to plank, that no grain of dust could make its way into the interstices. There were none of the luxuries of modern days; no writing-table, or sofa, or pier-glass. In one corner of the walls was a bracket, holding an Indian jar filled with pot-pourri; and that and the climbing honeysuckle outside the open window scented the room more exquisitely than any *toilette* perfumes. (pp. 63-64, italics in original)

In this passage, Gaskell vividly depicts some of the house-contents, but it must be noted that her description, like the views of interiors represented in conversation pieces, is not a direct catalogue of things. As Marcia Pointon has noted, the details of furnishing in conversation pieces are often ‘a mixture of authenticity and invention’, because what conversation pieces are meant to convey is a legible picture of the commissioner’s material wealth and social standing (p. 162). The description quoted above, like the rest of Hamley Hall, also speaks of family pride and history. The ‘old-fashioned’ but

²⁶⁴ Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, p. 161.

‘well-preserved’ furniture sums up the Hamleys’ past affluence and taste; the oaken flooring and the curtains made of ‘Indian calico of the last century’ are two fine examples. The dynastic significance of oaken flooring, as I have discussed above, is demonstrated through Squire Hamley’s pride, and the calico curtains are an equally potent symbol of the Hamleys’ glory. Before Britain began to produce cotton textiles and brought down the price of cotton in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, calico, ‘a general name for cotton cloth of all kinds imported from the East’ (*OED Online*), was a luxury import from India. By the 1820s and 30s, the period in which the novel is set, cheap imitations of the exotic fabric had been produced in large quantities by English manufacturers, and even the labouring class could afford cotton textiles.²⁶⁵ The specification of the origin of the Hamleys’ curtain material thus indicates their forefathers’ ability to participate in the high-end market.

It is important to note that there are ‘none of the luxuries of modern days; no writing-table, or sofas, or pier-glass’ in this space. Mrs Hamley may prefer to live without mirrors like Margaret in *North and South*, but the absence of writing-tables and sofas is unusual. Writing-tables would have been helpful to the poetry-writing Mrs Hamley. In fact, they were standard items of early-nineteenth-century interiors. J. C. Loudon’s *Encyclopaedia of Cottage, Farm, and Villa Architecture* (1833) included the writing-table on its list of drawing-room furniture,²⁶⁶ and in *North and South* the Hales, despite their reduced circumstances after moving to Milton, still manage to keep a davenport. As for sofas, they had been improved by new upholstery techniques by the early nineteenth century and would have contributed substantially to Mrs Hamley’s comfort.²⁶⁷ It is true that the description above refers to the extension of her apartment that is adapted for Molly’s use, and that Mrs Hamley is shown to be reclining on a sofa

²⁶⁵ Freedgood charts the production history of cotton and discusses its imperial significance alongside *Mary Barton* in *The Ideas in Things*, pp. 55-80.

²⁶⁶ Logan, p. 43.

²⁶⁷ Logan, p. 38.

at various points in the novel, but the absence of writing-tables and sofas in a space that is clearly hers is still telling. The only object in the room that can be safely assumed to express Mrs Hamley's presence is the potpourri, as dried flowers commonly appeared in Victorian women's crafting activities.²⁶⁸ However, its association with Mrs Hamley's feminine touches is still overshadowed by Squire Hamley's patriarchal authority. It occupies only a tiny corner of the room, which is dominated by oaken flooring and Indian calico, and is contained in 'an Indian jar', another item that speaks of the family's power to afford exotic commodities. In short, the enumeration of the objects that attest to Squire Hamley's patriarchal power indicates there is little room for Mrs Hamley's individuality.

The imbalanced husband-wife relationship is also tellingly revealed in Mrs Hamley's account of the story behind her sons' portrait:

'I remember the painter, Mr Green, once saw Osborne reading some poetry, while Roger was trying to persuade him to come out and have a ride in the hay-cart – that was the "motive" of the picture, to speak artistically. Roger is not much of a reader; at least, he doesn't care for poetry, and books of romance, or sentiment. He is so fond of natural history; and that takes him, like the squire, a great deal out of doors; and when he is in, he is always reading scientific books that bear upon his pursuits. He is a good, steady fellow, though, and gives us great satisfaction, but he is not likely to have such a brilliant career as Osborne.' (pp. 65-66)

Here, as in various other places in the novel, the two brothers' significantly different characters are mapped onto those of their parents. Osborne, like his mother, prefers a sedentary life, while Roger resembles his father in taking pleasure in outdoor pursuits. The result of contrasting temperaments in the siblings' relationship, however, is not a

²⁶⁸ Logan, p. 176.

copy of their parents'. Whereas the brothers are not estranged from each other, their parents suffer from incompatibility. Although the text emphasises the happiness of Squire and Mrs Hamley's marriage, it does explicitly state their alienation early on in the narrative. One discord is manifest in their different attitudes to London. Mrs Hamley delights in the cultural and social life provided by the capital, but Squire Hamley resolutely dislikes it. When he was still 'kind and willing in giving his consent, and in furnishing her amply with money' (p. 42) and she still felt inclined to socialise in London without the company of her husband, Squire Hamley supported his wife's visits to the capital, not because he recognised her individual tastes, but because he viewed her as a representative of Hamley Hall. Such an attitude is summed up in what he told her before her departure for London:

'There, there, my little woman, take that! Dress yourself up as fine as any on 'em, and buy what you like, for the credit of Hamley of Hamley; and go to the park and the play, and show off with the best on 'em. I shall be glad to see thee back again, I know; but have thy fling while thou art about it.' (p. 42)

Squire Hamley's preoccupation with the symbols of patriarchal power prevents him from truly understanding his wife. Mrs Hamley's apartment, though a space which she could call her own, is nevertheless regulated by her husband's authority. Confined to a space that does not reflect her personality, Mrs Hamley falls victim to the rigid patriarchal structure. Her chronic illness is a tangible form of the emotional void in her marriage.

The fact that domestic objects can become representations of patriarchal control can also be seen in the Manor-house at Ashcombe, Lord Cumnor's second property that is under the management of his land-agent Mr Preston. Molly visits this house with her father on the eve of his second marriage and has a chance to explore some of its interior.

Like Hamley Hall, the Manor-house also contains objects that are indicators of the host's wealth and status, except that in the Manor-house the host's authority is to an extent borrowed, because Mr Preston is not the real owner of the house. The 'wainscoted parlour', where 'a wood fire crackled and burnt, and the crimson curtains shut out the waning day and the outer chill', may look cosy and welcoming, and the 'snowy table-linen, bright silver, clear sparkling glass, wine and an autumnal dessert on the sideboard' may indicate Mr Preston's hospitality (p. 154), but these objects are also symbols that express his reflected, self-congratulatory social importance. Wainscot is 'a superior quality of foreign oak imported from Russia, Germany, and Holland, chiefly used for fine panel-work' (*OED Online*). As Squire Hamley's pride in Hamley Hall's oaken floor reveals, oak evoked a sense of history and attested to the dweller's social prestige as the descendant of a well-established family. Compared with the Hamleys, the Cumnors are latecomers to the upper echelons of society, but the use of oak panelling reveals a similar intention to stress familial glory, as do the 'yellow-satin upholstery', 'great Indian cabinets', and 'china jars' in the small drawing-room. Indeed, the same decorative principle seems to be operated in both houses, because the interior of the Manor-house at Ashcombe reminds Molly 'a little of Hamley' (p. 154).

Occupying a house replete with objects symbolic of patriarchy, Mr Preston does not hesitate to express his male power through them even if he does not own them. Although he tells Molly that the small drawing-room is for Lady Harriet's use whenever she stays at the Manor-house, he is eager to emphasise his authority over it. When Molly comments that the Manor-house must be 'a very pleasant house to stay at', she is dismayed to see that 'Mr Preston seemed to take it as a compliment to himself' (p. 155). Moreover, he goes on to explain his appropriation of other parts of the house: 'In general I live pretty much in the room in which we shall dine; and I have a sort of agent's office in which I keep books and papers, and receive callers on business' (p. 155). When Molly stops to admire some ornaments in the house, Mr Preston cannot

wait to ‘thr[o]w himself into her interests with an air of ready gallantry’ (p. 156).

Talking as if he were the owner of the Manor-house’s collection of objets d’art, he disrupts Molly’s quiet viewing with stories of the curios.

Mr Preston’s attempt to demonstrate power over women through objects may not be immediately obvious to the novel’s first-time readers but should be identifiable on second reading. At the time of Molly’s visit to the Manor-house, Mr Preston has shown an interest in Lady Harriet and is secretly engaged to Cynthia Kirkpatrick, Molly’s future step-sister. Considering Mr Preston’s matrimonial aspirations for these two ladies, his deliberate references to Lady Harriet’s occasional occupancy of the small drawing-room and Cynthia’s resemblance to the sitter of a miniature in the house become indicative of his tendency to establish the power hierarchy between his future wife and himself. Lady Harriet’s social position is far above that of Mr Preston, so his acknowledgement of her use of the small drawing-room may express his sense of inferiority. However, he makes sure that his influence is secure in the dining-room and his workspace, at least in his self-presentation to Molly.

Mr Preston’s control over women is more vividly shown through the way he links Cynthia to Mademoiselle de St Quentin, a mistress of Louis XV. It is noteworthy that the miniature of this French *comtesse* is contained in ‘a Louis Quinze cabinet with lovely miniatures in enamel let into the fine woodwork’ (p. 155). Here the king’s symbolic ownership of a woman is translated into a material form, and this trope is verbally adapted by Mr Preston to articulate his possession of Cynthia. Like the speaker in Robert Browning’s ‘My Last Duchess’ (1842),²⁶⁹ Mr Preston shows a painting to his visitor and attempts to provide an authoritative account of both the artefact and the person it evokes. This can be illustrated by the conversation he has with Molly:

‘That is said to be Mademoiselle de St Quentin, a great beauty at the French

²⁶⁹ For an ekphrastic reading of ‘My Last Duchess’, see Heffernan, pp. 141-42.

Court. This is Madame du Barri. Do you see any likeness in Mademoiselle de St Quentin to any one you know?' He had lowered his voice a little as he asked this question.

'No!' said Molly, looking at it again. 'I never saw any one half so beautiful.'

'But don't you see a likeness – in the eyes particularly?' he asked again, with some impatience.

Molly tried hard to find out a resemblance, and was again unsuccessful.

'It constantly reminds me of – of Miss Kirkpatrick.'

'Does it?' said Molly, eagerly. 'Oh! I am so glad – I've never seen her, so of course I couldn't find out the likeness. You know her, then, do you? Please tell me all about her.'

He hesitated a moment before speaking. He smiled a little before replying.

'She's very beautiful; that of course is understood when I say that this miniature does not come up to her for beauty.'

'And besides? – Go on, please.'

'What do you mean by "besides"?'

'Oh! I suppose she's very clever and accomplished?'

That was not in the least what Molly wanted to ask; but it was difficult to word the vague vastness of her unspoken inquiry.

'She is clever naturally; she has picked up accomplishments. But she has such a charm about her, one forgets what she herself is in the halo that surrounds her. You ask me all this, Miss Gibson, and I answer truthfully; or else I should not entertain one young lady with my enthusiastic praises of another.' (p. 156)

Because Molly has never met Cynthia, she cannot verify Mr Preston's words, and he fully exploits this opportunity to project a carefully devised, but by no means unproblematic, image of her. Like the portrait of Mrs Hamley, Cynthia is first and

foremost described as being ‘beautiful’. However, this positive feminine attribute is already sullied by its connection to Louis XV’s mistress Madame du Barri, a woman in an illegitimate relationship. When he encourages Molly to draw an analogy between Cynthia and the French King’s mistress, he may intend to hint at his secret engagement to Cynthia, but his identification of a schoolgirl with a courtesan is pointedly malicious. Although the sexual connotation Mr Preston implicitly but deliberately injects into his description of Cynthia’s beauty is lost on Molly, his influence leads her to consider Cynthia a woman lacking in individuality. When she asks him if Cynthia is ‘very clever and accomplished’, she is fully aware that ‘[t]hat was not in the least what [she] wanted to ask’. At the end of the conversation, Cynthia still remains a generalised woman, beautiful, clever, and accomplished. Mr Preston refers to her power only with a vague hint, wrapping it in a word that represents another clichéd feminine trait: ‘charm’.

Cynthia’s individuality is again diffused through connections to pictures when her uncle Mr Kirkpatrick thinks of her on a visit to the Academy Exhibition with his wife. Female images displayed in private houses, like the portrait of Mrs Hamley, have been noted to serve as embodiments of general feminine attributes in addition to pictorial records of individuals. This phenomenon of generalisation was more apparent in exhibition contexts because portraits exhibited at the Royal Academy were often under anonymous titles.²⁷⁰ The lack of particularity in female images allows men to invest in them whatever qualities they would like the sitter, or in the case of Mr Kirkpatrick, the person invoked by a picture of the sitter, to assume.

Before Mr Kirkpatrick visits the Gibsons, Cynthia has stayed with her uncle a few times but never made a clear impression on him. It is not until Mr Kirkpatrick offers to pay his sister-in-law a visit in Hollingford that Cynthia’s image really sticks in his mind. Notably, his observation of Cynthia at the table consists of shorthand expressions that

²⁷⁰ One example is given by Retford on p. 95. Sir Joshua Reynolds’s 1773 portrait of Lady Cockburn and her three sons was simply entitled ‘A Lady and her three Children’ in the exhibition catalogue.

indicate a general impression rather than a close study. While he looks at Molly carefully, noting some 'beautiful points about her face – long soft grey eyes, black curling eyelashes, rarely-showing dimples, perfect teeth' and her 'languor over all', her 'slow depression of manner', he describes his 'brightly-coloured' niece in just a few adjectives: 'sparkling, quick, graceful, and witty' (p. 420).

Cynthia's association with a generic image in men's eyes makes her appear like an object. After his visit to the Gibsons, Mr Kirkpatrick is resolved to have Cynthia 'up to stay with [his family] in London' and 'show her something of the world' (p. 420). The implication of introducing her into the marriage market is significant because Cynthia is later furnished by his wife with 'ball-dresses and wreaths, and pretty bonnets and mantles' and ends up marrying his former pupil Mr Henderson (p. 445). Although Cynthia is always aware of how people, especially men, look at her, and is able to use her perceived image to her advantage, the novel explores her vulnerability through her association with pictures.

MOLLY GIBSON AT HOME

Molly's home, at least before her father's second marriage, is bare, but its scant furnishings are no less important in indicating patriarchal control. The opening chapter lists a few pieces of furniture in Molly's room, including a 'little white dimity bed', drawers, and 'a primitive kind of bonnet-stand', and follows the cataloguing with a detailed description of Molly's bonnet, which is 'carefully covered over from any chance of dust with a large cotton handkerchief' and has 'a plain white ribbon put over the crown' (p. 5). In this description, the colour white dominates both Molly's bed and her garments. One important white object – Molly's white frock – is missing in the opening paragraphs, but it must be present in her room because the second chapter

reveals that she wears ‘thick white dimity’ as well as the bonnet with white ribbons on her visit to the Towers (p. 22).

The depiction of Molly’s room shows the same conflation of home furnishings and women’s attire that can also be observed in *North and South*’s drawing-room scenes. Molly in her dimity frock would have looked indistinguishable from her dimity bed. Dimity is a cotton fabric ‘usually employed undyed for beds and bedroom hangings’ (*OED Online*). Jane Austen’s brother James bought 115 yards of dimity for bed hangings when he prepared a home for his bride in 1792.²⁷¹ Although the *OED Online* also records the use of dimity in clothing, which indicates that a dress made of dimity was not unusual, Gaskell’s specification of the same material employed for both Molly’s bed and frock provides a potent symbol of her objectification. A clearer image of the effect of shared materials between female dresses and domestic furnishings is soon presented in the episode where Molly visits Cumnor Towers. When she lies asleep on Mrs Kirkpatrick’s ‘little white bed’, with the ‘muslin curtains’ flapping in the air, her ‘thick white dimity’ frock can easily blend with the surroundings and result in an image of Molly that is identical to a domestic object (pp. 18, 22).

The white colour of Molly’s room and dress can be read as an indicator of Mr Gibson’s propensity to infantilise her. The practice of exercising patriarchal control over an unmarried girl through a white gown brings to mind Sir Thomas’s infantilisation of Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, which I have discussed in Chapter 2. While there the dress’s implications of patriarchal authority are left for the reader to unpack, here Mr Gibson’s attempt to maintain Molly’s childish state is overtly expressed in the text. He instructs her governess Miss Eyre not to ‘teach Molly too much’, explaining that ‘she must sew, and read, and write, and do her sums; but I want to keep her a child.’ (p. 34). Molly, though ever obedient to her father’s wishes, does not grow up in the way that Mr

²⁷¹ Edward Copeland, ‘The Austens and the Elliots: A Consumer’s Guide to *Persuasion*’, in *Jane Austen’s Business: Her World and Her Profession*, ed. by Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 144.

Gibson prescribes. However, his effort to keep his daughter innocent may have contributed to another woman's unhappiness: that of his first wife Mary Gibson. Although Mrs Gibson remains an obscure figure throughout the novel, Molly's recollection of her mother lying on her deathbed presents another image that suggests blurred boundaries between a woman and her surrounding materials:

[Molly] could see the white linen, the white muslin, surrounding the pale, wan wistful face, with the large, longing eyes, yearning for one more touch of the little soft warm child, whom she was too feeble to clasp in her arms, already growing numb in death. (p. 151)

Here Mrs Gibson's human form is almost invisible under the soft furnishings. She can still express her emotional power through her eyes, but apart from this she is exactly like the fabrics that enclose her, white and inanimate. Her indistinct identity is like the erased personality of Mrs Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*. They are both ghostly wives who have merged into the material backgrounds created by their husbands.

If the bare and white interior of Mr Gibson's house before his second marriage tells the story of its female inmates' subjection to patriarchal control, the renovated look introduced by his second wife lays bare the emptiness of seeking to express symbolic meanings through objects. For all the visitors' praise of the Gibsons' drawing-room under the new Mrs Gibson's arrangements, descriptions of the space remain non-specific. Osborne observes that it is 'a sitting-room full of flowers and tokens of women's presence, where all the chairs were easy, and all the tables well covered with pretty things' (p. 309); Lady Harriet briefly comments that '[i]t is as full of comforts, and of pretty things too, as any room of its size can be' (p. 357). The text does not make clear what exactly the 'pretty things' both Osborne and Lady Harriet refer to are, but historical evidence shows that the items occupying the hard surfaces of a Victorian

drawing-room typically consisted of figurines, vases, plates, glassware, and textiles.²⁷² In fact, many of these objects can be found in the descriptions of the Hales' and the Thorntons' drawing-rooms in *North and South*. In comparison, the generalised depiction of Mrs Gibson's sitting-room indicates that she is more interested in the overall impression her domestic arrangements leave on others than in any particular meaning attached to a single item. What she seeks to convey through material objects is the family's elevated social position, which is also a good reflection of her own achievement. When she fills her sitting-room with easy chairs, she seems to be mimicking the refinement she aspires to in Lady Cumnor's room, where "[e]very chair was an easy-chair of some kind or other' (p. 97).

In valuing things solely for their signifying purposes, Mrs Gibson strips the interior of its emotional meaning. The most miserable victim of Mrs Gibson's house management principle is perhaps Molly, who fails in her negotiation with her stepmother over the refurbishment of her room. Soon after Mrs Gibson installs herself in the Gibson household as its mistress, she sets about giving the house a makeover in order to welcome her own daughter Cynthia. She proposes to redecorate Molly's room exactly like the one intended for Cynthia, wishing to substitute '[a] little French bed, and a new paper, and a pretty carpet, and a dressed-up *toilet-table* and glass' for Molly's 'little white dimity bed, her old-fashioned chest of drawers, and her other cherished relics of her mother's maiden-days' (pp. 182, 183, italics in original). Like Eleanor Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, who incorporates into her own room an object belonging to her deceased mother that her living father does not seem to cherish any longer – a portrait in that case – Molly takes her mother's personal items into her care and connects with the absent parent through them. The refurbishment scheme Mrs Gibson wants to introduce thus severs the visible ties between mother and daughter.

Mr Gibson's stance in this matter is problematic. If he does not positively approve

²⁷² Logan, pp. 127-33.

of his second wife's domestic arrangements, he is at least complicit in her refurbishment project. As he tells Molly on the eve of Cynthia's arrival, 'he had paid a pretty round sum' for the two girls' bedroom furniture (p. 214). When Molly frankly informs her father of her dislike of the new room, he defends the decision using the same argument Mrs Gibson has employed to stop Molly from making any further retorts. Formerly Mrs Gibson has told Molly her fear of being considered by the Hollingford community to be a partial stepmother. The reason behind her insistence on the identical look of both girls' rooms is thus not so much her love for her husband's daughter as her consciousness of her own reputation. Although Mr Gibson focuses on Cynthia's feelings when he comments on the redecoration scheme, he implicitly sides with his wife on the subject of appearing morally correct in public opinion. He tells Molly, 'Perhaps; at any rate, she'll see we've tried to make it pretty. Yours is like hers. That's right. It might have hurt her, if hers had been smarter than yours' (p. 214).

Ironically, Mr Gibson's complicity in his wife's love of hollow symbols of things turns him into another victim. Even he finds his own house suffocating, as his attitude towards Mr Kirkpatrick's upcoming visit reveals: 'it was always a pleasure to him to get out of the somewhat confined mental atmosphere which he had breathed over and over again, and have a whiff of fresh air' (p. 419). Unlike other domestic spaces in *Wives and Daughters*, where it is always women who are controlled and restricted by patriarchy via the emblematic functions of objects, Mr Gibson's renovated house presents an example of a man's suffering. His unhappy marriage to Hyacinth Kirkpatrick – who in her dealings with objects values symbols over affection – indicates that men, too, can suffer when things become empty signifiers, even if the ideology that governs such a signifying process is one that is centred around them.

Moving between houses where inmates are victims of things that represent patriarchal control, Molly is the character who is the least affected. Her interest in the outdoors and intellectual pursuits may be a way of explaining her relative independence.

In her childhood visit to Cumnor Towers, her dislike of the dazzling interior is apparent, but nor is she drawn to the 'long glittering range of greenhouses and hothouses' (p. 15). The cultivation of plants in these man-made constructions must have been expensive, so greenhouses are representative of the Cumnors' wealth, just as the pinery is of General Tilney's pride in *Northanger Abbey*. Molly's real interest is shown in the open air, the part of Cumnor Towers where she can ramble freely 'without more thought as to her whereabouts than a butterfly has, as it skims from flower to flower' (p. 15). At this stage, the interior of Cumnor Towers is still disorientating for her, as she ends up being an unwilling inmate of it. However, when she visits the Towers as a young woman, she has developed a good command of her surroundings, reading and enjoying what her environment has to offer: 'books near her, wood crackling and blazing, wafts of wind bringing the beating rain against the window, and so enhancing the sense of indoor comfort by the outdoor contrast.' (p. 613).

The distinguishing feature of Molly's stay at Hamley Hall is also her interest in the open field and books. The first thing she does when she enters the room that has been prepared for her is to go to the window 'to see what was to be seen' (p. 63), and she soon '[finds] her way into the library' (p. 82). Her habit of seeing things as they are is demonstrated in her discussion with Mrs Hamley about a portrait of Osborne and Roger. She explains to Mrs Hamley how she is going to comment on the picture: 'Oh! but I did not mean to guess at their characters. I could not do it; and it would be impertinent, if I could. I can only speak about their faces as I see them in the picture' (p. 65). Her direct encounter with Roger's painted face is akin to Elizabeth's viewing of Darcy's portrait in *Pride and Prejudice*. Elizabeth's visit to Pemberley marks a turning point in her relationship to Darcy: she is forced to see him in context and without her previous prejudices. Molly's encounter with Roger's portrait is less dramatic but is similarly characterised by a process of direct examination. Her opinion of Roger is based on what she sees:

‘No; he is not handsome. And yet I like his face. I can see his eyes. They are grave and solemn-looking; but all the rest of his face is rather merry than otherwise. It looks too steady and sober, too good a face, to go tempting his brother to leave his lesson.’ (p. 65)

This portrait-viewing episode foretells Molly’s compatibility with Roger: his fondness for natural history corresponds closely to her penchant for the outdoors. More importantly, Molly’s honest evaluation of Roger suggests that she cares about what people really are rather than what they represent. As with her discussion of a miniature’s resemblance to Cynthia with Mr Preston at Ashcombe, Molly refrains from judging a person by mere pictorial representations. Although she does make a guess as to what characteristics Roger may have based on the image she sees, she approaches a picture with minimum preconceived assumptions.

At home, Molly manages to defy the education her father has devised for her by ‘fighting and struggling hard’ (p. 34). She ‘persuaded her father to let her have French and drawing lessons’ and ‘read every book that came in her way, almost with as much delight as if it had been forbidden’ (p. 34). Molly’s voracious appetite for knowledge prevents her from becoming another silent and innocent woman like her mother. Later it also provides her with an escape from the symbolically overcharged interior her stepmother creates.

One may expect Margaret, who of the two heroines is the more mature – as indicated by the more complex issues she deals with, such as her father’s religious

doubt and the conflicts between manufacturers and workers – to better withstand men’s objectifying force. Intriguingly, however, my analysis so far has shown that it is the more docile and less worldly-wise Molly who is less often objectified. While Margaret is explicitly and implicitly likened to inanimate things, Molly, with the exception of her childhood experiences, remains an observer of rather than a participant in the objectification practices going on around her. Such a contrast may be explained by Molly’s less privileged but more inclusive education, which results in her early exposure to, and deeper involvement in, the branches of pursuits that were normally reserved for men. As Lord Hollingford’s words to Mr Gibson about his conversation with Molly at the charity-ball show, her intelligence impresses him as much as, if not more than, her beauty:

‘What a charming little lady that daughter of yours is! Most girls of her age are so difficult to talk to; but she is intelligent and full of interest in all sorts of sensible things; well read, too – she was up in *Le Règne Animal* – and very pretty!’ (p. 297)

In this comment Molly’s prettiness, thrown in at the end, is like a postscript to her scientific knowledge. It is true that the amazement Lord Hollingford expresses at a young woman’s intellectual capacity demonstrates his sexist and patronizing attitudes, but Molly’s ability to engage in a conversation with a scientific man allows her to be seen in a different light. The narrator goes on to stress the equal importance of Molly’s learning and looks in her explanation for Molly’s appeal to Lord Hollingford:

It is very likely that if Molly had been a stupid listener, Lord Hollingford would not have discovered her beauty, or the converse might be asserted – if she had not been young and pretty he would not have exerted himself to talk on scientific subjects in a manner which she could understand. (p. 297)

Although physical appearance still counts in a man's impression of a woman, Molly's relative freedom from objectification shows that a more liberal education for women could help them become less enmeshed in negative associations with things. The role Molly's knowledge of male-dominated fields performs in preventing her from being conceived of as an object is also demonstrated in Roger's analysis of his growing love for her. While he views his crush on Cynthia as the sentiment of an immature boy who 'rush[es] at the coveted object', he considers himself 'a man capable of judging and abiding' in his attachment to Molly (p. 636).

In comparison, Margaret's more frequent associations with domestic objects may be due to her more stunning type of beauty, which can be an embodiment of her more privileged upbringing. In Thornton's eyes, Margaret's looks overshadow her intellect and her ability to discuss the topics of strikes and trade. Even after they have just had a heated debate about the right relationship between manufacturers and workers, Thornton, in his immediate reflection, notes Margaret's beauty more than the gist of their discussion. At his first teatime visit to the Hales, she challenges his idea of self-made success by asking him if he 'consider[s] all who are unsuccessful in raising themselves in the world [...] as [his] enemies' (p. 84). On this occasion his departing thought concerns her manners and look, as revealed by his murmur: 'A more proud, disagreeable girl I never saw. Even her great beauty is blotted out of one's memory by her scornful ways' (p. 86). At another post-debate leave-taking, he delights in looking at 'her sweet sunny countenance', which he thinks indicates that 'all the north-wind effect of their discussion had entirely vanished' (p. 124). While in these two instances Margaret participates in conversations between men only after initially remaining a passive listener, in the proposal scene at the end of the novel she takes the initiative to discuss business with Thornton. If her beauty has led him to reify her before their marriage, the final scene suggests that her understanding of his profession will initiate a

more balanced relationship between them.

Both *North and South* and *Wives and Daughters* explore the male propensity to demonstrate power over women in the domestic setting, either indirectly by linking them with material objects, or directly by signifying their subordinate status with things that are symbolic of patriarchal authority. In *North and South*, Margaret is objectified – mainly in Thornton’s eyes but also, as indicated by Mr Hale’s use of her fingers as sugar tongs, in her father’s – through her affinities with soft furnishings, articles of furniture, and decorative ornaments. In *Wives and Daughters*, Lady Cumnor, Mrs Hamley, and Cynthia are all subjected to different forms of objectification through items that convey a conventional male-centred ideology. Although the grown-up Molly is not treated as an object by men around her, she as a little girl is infantilised by her father. These instances seem to expose the impossibility of women’s redeeming their materialised state in the context of domesticity. As illustrated in both novels, in an environment that revolves around male interests, the meaning of things tends to be fixed within a rigid patriarchal framework even if the male inhabitants do not actively or consciously seek to eliminate their womenfolk’s individual identity. Such a situation results in a strong association of women with domestic objects that delimits women’s role in society.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the heroines of both novels, despite their differences in temperament and knowledge of life, show an interest in pursuits outside the home, and that the endings of both novels point towards a more promising prospect for them as opposed to the previous generation. Both Margaret and Molly will lead a married life that is far less housebound than their mothers’. Margaret is likely to collaborate with Thornton in the operation of his factory, and Molly will join the conversations between Roger and his scientific friends with a genuine interest in the subject, as her discussion with Lord Hollingford about scientific literature has indicated. This seems to suggest that participating in activities traditionally deemed to be the exclusive domain of men might offer women a way out of their object-like status. To

break free from the clamp of patriarchy, women needed to explore the territory beyond the home.

Chapter Five:
**Women and Gifts of All Sorts: Gift Exchange and Patriarchal
Symbolism in *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers***

As I have shown in Chapter 3, dependent women are more likely to be entangled in a troubled relationship with consumer goods, especially gifts that come from men. In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny Price, a poor relation growing up in the aristocratic Bertram household, is vexed by the dress and jewellery she receives; in *Emma*, Jane Fairfax, a genteel but impoverished young woman, is in danger of having her reputation tarnished by a pianoforté sent by her secret lover Frank Churchill. Like Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell also explores the relationship vulnerable female characters have with their gifts, and more often than not, the relationship is also fraught with difficulties. In *Ruth* (1853), the eponymous heroine first experiences objectification through the luxuries her rich lover showers on her and is then forced to acknowledge the authority of Mr Bradshaw, a local patriarch, when he sends her expensive fabrics. In *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), Sylvia Robson is perpetually troubled by the gifts made by her cousin Philip, who later becomes her husband.

However, Gaskell's portraits of women's uneasy relationships with gifts are more complicated than Austen's. One significant difference is that Ruth and Sylvia are several rungs down the social ladder from Fanny and Jane. Ruth's father is a farmer, and her claim to gentility is through her mother, who is the daughter of a curate. Although she later moves up the social hierarchy when she assumes the role of a respectable widow and becomes a governess to the daughters of the most influential family in her adopted town of Eccleston, she is more disadvantaged than Austen's governess figure Jane, who is brought up as a daughter by an affluent colonel. Sylvia's background also falls at the

humbler end of the middling spectrum. Her parents live on a farm rented from Lord Malton, with a hint of high status passing down through the maternal line. According to Sylvia's mother, her original family, the Prestons of Slaideburn, are brought low after her great-grandfather lost his property. Sylvia enters the petite bourgeoisie, to borrow the Marxist term, only when she marries Philip, who becomes a joint proprietor of Foster's shop just before his marriage.

In addition to placing her female characters who struggle to negotiate the issues of gift receiving in the lower ranks of the middle class, Gaskell also pairs them with a double. Such an arrangement is also not seen in Austen's works. In *Ruth*, the heroine's troubled relationship with gifts from men is mirrored in Jemima Bradshaw's protests against the analogy between marriage and the marketplace. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Sylvia's attitude towards Philip's presents stands in contrast to Hester Rose's view. These structural parallels extend the scope of Gaskell's investigation into women's connections with commodities.

Gaskell's more detailed exploration of the women-object issue can be attributed to the specific historical and social backgrounds of her composition. As Nataalka Freeland in her analysis of *Ruth*'s economies has pointed out, 'the description of women as a form of property was a timeworn trope, but it assumed particular urgency amidst the fluctuating markets and political unrest of the early nineteenth century'.²⁷³ Nevertheless, it is also significant that *Ruth* and *Sylvia's Lovers* are set in periods that could have been Austen's own. The references to elections in *Ruth* indicate that the novel's action takes place after the 1830s, but the majority of the events are not time specific.²⁷⁴ *Sylvia's Lovers*, although its exact dating remains imprecise,²⁷⁵ is set in the 1790s. The temporal distance Gaskell adopts when writing these two novels may serve to gain her a greater

²⁷³ Nataalka Freeland, 'Ruth's Perverse Economies: Women, Hoarding, and Expenditure', *ELH*, 70 (2003), 197-221 (p. 198).

²⁷⁴ Angus Easson has discussed the setting of the novel in detail in his notes to the Penguin Classics edition of *Ruth* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 376.

²⁷⁵ See Appendix I in Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 436-37.

degree of freedom in her investigation, but it also indicates women's subjection to men through objects was as prevalent in her time as in Austen's.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that women were totally under the control of male power when they were gifted by domineering men. I have shown in Chapter 3 how Fanny alters the meaning of an undesirable luxury, Henry's gold necklace, and personalises it for her own purposes. As Jill Rappoport argues, with the support of Jane Eyre's observation that 'a present has many faces', 'gifts take the guise of welcome, reciprocal overtures that produce close relations or poisonously unilateral, hierarchical gestures that stipulate dominance and dependence'.²⁷⁶ The multifaceted character of presents allows women, who are often in the passive position of recipients, to withstand the power of patriarchal authority often inhering in gifts from men. This chapter analyses the ways in which Ruth and Sylvia deal with their presents and compares their human-object relationships with those of their doubles. By examining Gaskell's nuanced portrayal of giving and receiving, I want to illustrate how she, through objects, lays bare women's subjugation under the ideological structure of patriarchy and explores ways out of the restraints of patriarchal symbolism.

RUTH HILTON AND HER MISCELLANY OF GIFTS

I have discussed the imbalanced power relations often found in men's gifts for women in *Mansfield Park*. There, a ball gown from Sir Thomas and a gold necklace from Henry Crawford are indicators of male authority over Fanny and demonstrate Fanny's demeaning position in a patriarchal society. Ruth is portrayed to be in a similar situation. Her sense of unease at certain moments of gift-receiving is clearly spelled out

²⁷⁶ Jill Rappoport, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 47.

in the text. The banknote of fifty pounds from her lover's mother Mrs Bellingham speaks of her abandonment, and she feels that the various types of fabric Mr Bradshaw sends her are a means of imposing obligation. These are some of the gifts that Ruth turns down. One reason for her refusal, as Freeland convincingly argues, is that she can distance herself from the social system in which women's sexuality was viewed and manoeuvred from a capitalist perspective.²⁷⁷ Nevertheless, there are gifts from men to which Ruth does not object: for example, she happily accepts clothing and jewellery from Bellingham when she believes they are signs of his love; she also welcomes Mr Farquhar's thoughtful generosity to Leonard. Moreover, Ruth is offered various things by women throughout the novel. As Ruth does not view all her gifts in the same way, nor do her presents come only from men, Freeland's proposition that Ruth performs 'a kind of passive expenditure' cannot adequately explain all of Ruth's relationships with her gifts.²⁷⁸ I would like to show, with examinations of her gift-receiving principle, that Ruth's dealings with gifts are subtler than Freeland suggests.

Before Ruth's relationships with gifts are analysed, it is important to note the connection between her destitute state and her subservience, which the novel establishes at the very beginning. When Ruth's employer Mrs Mason, displeased with her shabby 'Sunday black silk', suggests that she 'should write and ask [her] guardian to send [her] money for another gown', Ruth replies, 'I do not think he would send any if I wrote', adding that '[h]e was angry when I wanted a shawl, when the cold weather set in'.²⁷⁹ Ruth's words show that her guardian does not provide for her even the bare necessities of life. In such circumstances the new gown Mrs Mason refers to is certainly out of the question.

Ruth's economic vulnerability plays a key role in the development of her

²⁷⁷ Freeland, pp. 189-99.

²⁷⁸ Freeland, p. 212.

²⁷⁹ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth* (1853), ed. by Angus Easson (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 14. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

relationship with Bellingham. Not only does the event that brings them into closer contact involve expenditure, but one of the factors that contribute to Ruth's 'fall' is also inextricably bound up with money issues. After their first encounter at the shire-ball, Ruth and Bellingham are brought together by their common interests in a drowning boy. Having rescued Tom, Bellingham gives Ruth money and the responsibility of administering to the needs of the boy and his family. This entrusted task, while producing in her mind a false impression of his character, provides her with access to a sense of power she has never before enjoyed:

his careless liberality of money was fine generosity; for she forgot that generosity implies some degree of self-denial. She was gratified, too, by the power of dispensing comfort he had entrusted to her, and was busy with Alnaschar visions of wise expenditure, when the necessity of opening Mrs Mason's house-door summoned her back into actual present life, and the dread of an immediate scolding. (pp. 26-27)

The reference to the *Arabian Nights* lends an atmosphere of romantic fantasy to Ruth's delight in putting money to good use. Like the rosy picture Ruth paints of Bellingham's generosity, her ecstasy at the prospect of dispensing charity shows the rarity of such an opportunity. Here Ruth's unusual encounter with a rich man, along with her romanticised vision of what his riches can accomplish, is immediately juxtaposed with her gritty everyday life. The contrast highlights Ruth's humble background and implies that her naïve view of life is attributed to her inexperience in both love relationships and matters concerning money.

The link between Ruth's financial circumstances and her condition of being easy prey to men's power is vividly illustrated in the critical scene where taking a route other than living with Bellingham appears impossible. After Ruth agrees to go to London with

Bellingham, which marks the beginning of her 'fall', she does for a moment feel that it is not right and draws up an alternative plan. Having reasoned with herself, she comes to the conclusion that 'it would be better to go to [old Thomas and Mary], and ask their advice, at any rate' (p. 52). Her ideas are turned into action when she 'put on her bonnet, and opened the parlour door', but the scheme comes to a halt as soon as she sees 'the square figure of the landlord standing at the open house-door, smoking his evening pipe, and looming large and distinct against the dark air and landscape beyond' (pp. 52-53). The presence of this imposing male figure is significant because it serves as a sharp reminder of Ruth's penniless state: 'Ruth remembered the cup of tea she had drank; it must be paid for, and she had no money with her. She feared that he would not let her quit the house without paying' (p. 53). The narrator goes on to explain that to Ruth 'the difficulty of passing the landlord while he stood there, and of giving him an explanation of the circumstances (as far as such explanation was due to him), appeared insuperable, and as awkward, and fraught with inconvenience, as far more serious situations' (p. 53). Although the narrator's tone suggests that Ruth's worry has been exaggerated, the text's subsequent emphasis on the formidable obstacle to Ruth's plan posed by the macho landlord's presence is worth examining:

[Ruth] kept peeping out of her room, after she had written her little pencil note, to see if the outer door was still obstructed. There he stood, motionless, enjoying his pipe, and looking out into the darkness which gathered thick with the coming night. The fumes of the tobacco were carried by the air into the house, and brought back Ruth's sick headache. Her energy left her; she became stupid and languid, and incapable of spirited exertion. (p. 53)

Ruth's plan is finally thwarted, the last straw being the tobacco smoke, a product of the masculine act of smoking. Thus the image of a creditor in the form of a strong man

blocking Ruth's path and, with his tobacco smoke, paralysing her body is symbolic of her total subjection to male power in her penniless state. Ruth is all too alive to her financial dependence, even in her frail body. When Bellingham later returns to make payment and take her away, 'the jingling of money' is the only sound she can clearly identify after her endeavour to '[hush] her beating heart' and 'stop her throbbing head' (p. 53). This moment presents multiple layers of irony: Bellingham's control over Ruth is ironically translated into his power to relieve the financial pressure on her, and her loss of respectability – a serious issue – is ironically caused by her inability to pay the cost of a cup of tea, which must have been a paltry sum. It is also worth noting that while Ruth loses her reputation following Bellingham's 'treat' of a cup of tea, Tom, the boy to whom Bellingham has earlier given an excessive amount of money, is not subjected to such contradictory repayment as Ruth is to make. Ruth's financial dependence is thus intricately shown to be bound up with her sexual vulnerability.

While in these early chapters Ruth's humble background and ignorance of money matters lead her to misinterpret Bellingham's conduct and, despite her misgivings, to accept his arrangements, by the end of her relationship with him she has developed the ability to negotiate her place and become relatively unhampered by her financial situation. Ruth's arrival at a less male-dominated position is demonstrated through her policy of gift-receiving. Throughout the novel she is offered various objects. There are certain presents that she rejects, but she gratefully accepts others. In the following analysis, Ruth's gifts are divided into two major categories: those which are given from within a social structure that promotes male dominance, and those which are presented to serve purposes other than male-centred ones. Included in the first category are the fifty-pound banknote given by Mrs Bellingham, the fabrics offered by Mr Bradshaw, and the clothing and jewellery bought by Bellingham. The second category contains clothes and accessories from Faith Benson and Sally. I will show how Ruth's gift-receiving principle reflects her struggle for a place in her society.

Among the gifts of patriarchal origin, money, a stark reminder of Ruth's economic vulnerability, is probably the most uncomfortable present Ruth is ever offered in the novel, and she does not hesitate to reject it. In an attempt to separate Ruth from her son, Mrs Bellingham gives her a fifty-pound note, which is enclosed with a note in an envelope. Although the money is offered by Mrs Bellingham and delivered by her maid, it essentially serves to protect Bellingham's social standing. As Mrs Bellingham makes clear in her letter, her offer is made '[i]n accordance with my son's wishes' (p. 78).

Ruth's refusal to accept the money is significant. It demonstrates that a powerless woman could at least have the power of rejection.²⁸⁰ The ability to refuse a gift is not as natural as it may seem, as formerly Ruth was unable to turn down Bellingham's offer of cohabitation. Even Faith, who initially expressed serious reservations about her brother's decision to take Ruth under their wing, admits that she 'admired her at the time for sending away her fifty pounds so proudly' (p. 107). In her repeated expression of her admiration for Ruth's act, she uses the word 'cavalierly' to describe it (p. 108). As an adverb, 'cavalierly' implies carelessness, and this sense is certainly perceivable because Faith concedes that she worries about 'not hav[ing] enough to pay the doctor's bill' (p. 108). Nevertheless, Faith's parenthetical comment that she 'can't help admiring [Ruth]' for returning the money suggests another reading of the word 'cavalierly' (p. 108). As a noun, 'cavalier' refers to a mighty man of distinction, 'a horseman, *esp.* a horse-soldier; a knight' (*OED Online*, italics in original). Viewed in this light, Ruth assumes the power that is analogous to her male superior even though her decision appears thoughtless. If Ruth is malleable when relying on Bellingham to pay for her tea, she has acquired a degree of agency by the time she turns down the fifty-pound note sent by his mother.

More significantly, in returning the fifty-pound note, Ruth repudiates the

²⁸⁰ Rappoport on pp. 58-59 presents a similar argument in her discussion of Aurora's repudiation of Romney's gift in *Aurora Leigh*.

hypocritical patriarchal ideology the note represents. In the Bellingham household, everyone believes that offering money to Ruth is an act of great generosity. Mrs Bellingham's maid Simpson declares that 'it's well for [Ruth] she has to do with a lady who will take any interest in her' (p. 91), and Bellingham knows that 'his mother, always liberal where money was concerned, would "do the thing handsomely"' (p. 78). There is a certain irony in Simpson's and Bellingham's description, as the motives behind Mrs Bellingham's presentation of fifty pounds are entirely self-seeking. In giving Ruth money, Mrs Bellingham is paying Ruth for her 'services' as if she were a prostitute, paying her off, as well as bribing her to leave. She thus turns Ruth's romantic relationship with her son into a commercial transaction and writes off his emotional debt with a financial gift.

Not only does Mrs Bellingham use the banknote to maintain the façade of patriarchal largesse, she also employs it as a means of replacing her direct, human-to-human contact with Ruth. When she learns of Mr Benson's plea for her help, she shies away from personal involvement by reiterating the existence of the fifty-pound note: before writing to Mr Benson about the 'provision to the amount of 50*l.*', she tells her maid that '[Ruth's] fifty pounds will keep her a week or so, if she is really unable to travel, and pay for her journey' (p. 91). By offering a fifty-pound note, therefore, Mrs Bellingham shows her wish to assuage her own feelings of guilt about leaving Ruth behind rather than an earnest desire to provide considerate help for her. When the self-serving purposes of preserving family reputation and personal conscience are taken into account, the large denomination of a fifty-pound note, which the Bellinghams take as evidence of their generosity, becomes an ironic indicator of their hypocrisy.

In fact, the fifty-pound note might have plunged Ruth into trouble instead of contributing towards her well-being. However thoughtful Mrs Bellingham chooses to consider herself, she is out of touch with what problems a fifty-pound note could pose

for Ruth. The issuing of paper currency was highly constrained in the first half of the nineteenth century except for a period of ‘suspension’ from 1791 to 1821. The Bank Charter Act 1844 prohibited commercial banks other than the Bank of England from issuing new banknotes, and notes of a high denomination were only payable in London.²⁸¹ Ruth would have had difficulty breaking the large note even if she had accepted it. Furthermore, a poorly-dressed girl like Ruth in possession of a large banknote would have aroused people’s suspicion. In nineteenth-century London the starting wage for skilful seamstresses just completing their apprenticeship was about eight shillings per week,²⁸² which amounts to around twenty pounds a year. At the beginning of the story Ruth, being constantly scolded by her mistress, is clearly not a seasoned worker, so her annual income would have been lower than twenty pounds, and Mrs Bellingham’s fifty-pound note would have lasted Ruth three years if she maintained her simple lifestyle. Given the restricted circulation of banknotes and Ruth’s financial situation, Mrs Bellingham’s financial gift could have led people to cast doubts on Ruth’s moral integrity. By refusing the money offered to her, Ruth manages not only to stay clear of patriarchy’s Janus-faced meaning-assigning operation but also to avoid sticky situations connected with her possession of a large note.

Freeland views Ruth’s lack of interest in money as an indication of her excessive emotional dependency. She argues that in considering Mrs Bellingham’s money to be ‘dirty’, Ruth ‘[violates] a central rule of the exchange economy—that money is impersonal, with no origins or emotional value attached to it: *pecunia non olet* [money does not stink]’.²⁸³ It is true that Ruth’s aversion to money appears unreasonable, or even romantic, as Faith’s comment – that Ruth ‘so cavalierly sent off the fifty-pound note’ – indicates (p. 108). However, Ruth’s unmercenary attitude towards money does

²⁸¹ M. J. Daunton, *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 348.

²⁸² Arthur Sherwell, *Life in West London: A Study and a Contrast* (London: Methuen, 1897) <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/westlondon-2.htm#CHAPTER_VII> [accessed 25 March 2015]

²⁸³ Freeland, p. 213.

not mean that she is unaware of its economic value. Her explanation to Faith for having returned the banknote demonstrates that she not only knows the established conception of value but also attempts to resist it:

‘I have a strong feeling against taking it. While he,’ said she, deeply blushing, and letting her large white lids drop down and veil her eyes, ‘loved me, he gave me many things – my watch – oh, many things; and I took them from him gladly and thankfully because he loved me – for I would have given him anything – and I thought of them as signs of love. But this money pains my heart. He has left off loving me, and has gone away. This money seems – oh, Miss Benson – it seems as if he could comfort me, for being forsaken, by money.’ And at that word, the tears so long kept back and repressed, forced their way like rain. (p. 106)

Ruth’s confession shows that emotional reciprocity is key to her value system, which the Bellinghams do not recognise. As I have suggested, Mrs Bellingham employs the monetary value of a large-denomination banknote to replace various forms of personal debt and involvement, so the sentimental weight Ruth ascribes to the banknote, as indicated by her viewing it as compensation ‘for being forsaken’, would have been the last thing on the Bellinghams’ mind. Ruth may be unrealistically romantic in considering the banknote to be her lover’s act of comforting her, but the fact that the word ‘money’ triggers her tears indicates she is fully aware of the clash between her favoured ideology and that of the Bellinghams. By leaving Mrs Bellingham’s dictatorial letter and the fifty-pound note ‘lying quite promiscuous, like waste paper, on the floor of her room’ (p. 90), Ruth challenges accepted notions of value and distances herself from associations with prostitution. The problematic judgement of promiscuity that Mrs Bellingham tries to pass on Ruth through the banknote is thus arrested. If Ruth was unaware of the socially perceived reputation she would lose when she depended on

Bellingham to pay for her tea, she is now able to reject society's meaning-assigning system by refraining from participating in it.

While Ruth refuses the money offered by the Bellinghams on grounds of its being lacking in emotional investment, she does not have a morbid attachment to the jewellery and fabrics Bellingham gave her when they were still in love. She asks the landlady Mrs Hughes to sell her watch in order to pay for her medical treatment and accommodation; she asks Sally to exchange her rings for new dress material; and she alters 'the fine linen and delicate soft white muslin' to make clothes for her child (p. 133). To Ruth, the watch, rings, and dress material were once 'signs of love' (p. 106), but Ruth's treatment of them following her desertion demonstrates her recognition of the multiple meanings of things and her ability to avoid an unhealthy obsession with her gifts, which a single-minded attachment to objects' emotional significance might have produced.

The watch is in the end sold to Mr Jones, the doctor who attends to Ruth on her sickbed. This sale achieves two ends: it endows the watch with new meanings, as well as solving Ruth's financial problems. Before Mr Jones makes the purchase, Mrs Hughes has guessed that the doctor, as he is about to get married, perhaps 'would like nothing better than to give this pretty watch to his bride' (p. 108). Mr Jones, indeed, is 'only too glad to obtain possession of so elegant a present at so cheap a rate' (p. 108). The watch's new lease of life as a wedding gift is significant. Formerly a young man's insincere love token to a girl whom he did not intend to marry, Ruth's watch was tainted with the illegitimacy of a liaison. In being bought to mark the beginning of a lawful relationship, however, the timepiece now acquires legitimate as well as affective importance. Like the gold chain Henry Crawford gives to Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, which is freed of negative connotations after Fanny's efforts at reconception, Ruth's watch is cleansed of its tarnish through a process of meaning transformation.

Ruth may not know to what new use Mr Jones puts the watch, but she must be aware that the sale produces the immediate effect of reducing her financial stress. As

Mrs Hughes has predicted, Mr Jones ‘ “paid money for it;” more than was required to defray the expenses of Ruth’s accommodation’ (p. 108). In addition, Ruth’s act of having her watch sold aligns her with the Bensons and secures her place in their favour. In the letter that summons his sister to his, and by extension Ruth’s, aid, Mr Benson urges Faith to pawn his prized copy of Jacopo Facciolati’s *Lexicon Totius Latinatus* if money is short. Ruth’s willingness to part with an emotionally meaningful object for the sake of relieving her own as well as the Bensons’ economic pressure shows that like Mr Benson, she is able to exploit the monetary value of an object if need be. The Bensons’ reaction upon hearing about Ruth’s decision to have her watch sold indicates that Ruth has won their approval. Faith finds ‘her sense of justice satisfied’, and Mr Benson frankly acknowledges that ‘her goodness just helps us out of our dilemma’ (p. 108). Demonstrating flexible ways of conceiving of her watch, Ruth turns what could have been an emotional burden into a signifier of love for another couple, a financial solution, and a catalyst for her new friendships.

Like the watch, other gifts from Bellingham are also dealt with in a sensible and regenerative manner by Ruth:

She asked Sally to buy her (with the money produced by the sale of a ring or two) the coarsest linen, the homeliest dark blue print, and similar materials; on which she set busily to work to make clothes for herself; and as they were made, she put them on; and as she put them on, she gave a grace to each, which such homely material and simple shaping had never had before. Then the fine linen and delicate soft white muslin, which she had chosen in preference to more expensive articles of dress when Mr Bellingham had given her *carte blanche* in London, were cut into small garments, most daintily stitched and made ready for the little creature, for whom in its white purity of soul nothing could be too precious. (p. 133)

The rings Bellingham has given Ruth are apparently love tokens, but as Bellingham has no intention of marrying Ruth at the time, they cannot be viewed as symbols of a solemn promise. Signifying neither marriage nor engagement, these rings never carry the legitimate meaning sanctioned by society. By exchanging ambiguous jewels for the dress materials that match her newly adopted role of a young widow, Ruth transforms problematic indicators of her marital status into signifiers of a socially acceptable role. Moreover, it is important to note that Ruth's individuality is not lost in the process of fitting the conventional image of a coarse-linen-clad woman. In '[giving] a grace to each [article of dress], which such homely material and simple shaping had never had before' (p. 133), Ruth injects novel meanings into objects whose social significance has become generic.

What Ruth does with the white muslin Bellingham has bought her is in the same vein. Unlike the white gown Mr Gibson insists that Molly should wear in *Wives and Daughters*, which signifies a man's overt attempt to infantilise a woman, the white muslin in *Ruth* is the result of the heroine's free choice. It is true that she does not reject the fabric's traditional association with innocence, nor does she dismiss its material worth, as indicated by her thought that 'nothing could be too precious' for her expected child. However, she adds a personal touch to the rigidly symbolic item by breaking up the original piece and turning it into a mark of motherly love. Recognising the multiple layers of meaning in her gifts and demonstrating an ability to maximise the significance that best suits her circumstances, Ruth shows powerful agency in her dealings with things.

Bellingham is not the only man in the novel who gives presents to Ruth. After she settles down in Ecclestone, the local patriarch Mr Bradshaw repeatedly offers her fabrics as undisguised marks of patronage. The first gift from Mr Bradshaw is 'a whole piece of delicate cambric-muslin' (p. 130), which, as revealed in Mrs Bradshaw's note, is sent because 'her husband had wished her to' (pp. 130-31). This gift represents Mr

Bradshaw's seal of approval, as on the previous Sunday he has 'nodded his head in token of satisfaction' after seeing Ruth, a newcomer to the community, for the first time (p. 130). Such an act of male social dominance is not lost on the Bensons, but they interpret it differently. Faith positively thinks of it as 'a mark of high favour' (p. 131), while Thurstan suspects Mr Bradshaw's motive, suggesting that 'he may have been self-seeking, and only anxious to gratify his love of patronising' (p. 132).

It is noteworthy that the cambric-muslin, like the fifty-pound note Mrs Bellingham gives Ruth according to her son's wishes, is a present from a man mediated through a woman. The employment of a female proxy giver between a male giver and a female recipient can make it more difficult for the recipient to refuse the gift, as indicated in the episode in *Mansfield Park* where Fanny receives a gold necklace from Mary Crawford, which comes ultimately from her brother Henry. In such a case the male giver's distance from the female recipient serves the paradoxical purpose of facilitating the demonstration of his patronising power: because the person who is in direct contact with the recipient is also a woman, other meanings can be attached to the present to reduce its original patriarchal connotations and, consequently, more easily coerce the recipient into accepting the gift. While the Crawfords' scheme is somewhat effective on Fanny, Ruth is unflinching in her determination to reject unwanted gifts, even when they are made through a woman. She has resolutely refused the fifty-pound note, and now she does not scruple to make clear that she wants to return the muslin. As revealed in her explanation to Faith, she feels the force of an unsolicited gift from a man:

'There are people to whom I love to feel that I owe gratitude – gratitude which I cannot express, and had better not talk about - but I cannot see why a person whom I do not know should lay me under an obligation. Oh! don't say I must take this muslin, please, Miss Benson!' (p. 131)

This passage echoes Ruth's earlier remarks about refusing Mrs Bellingham's fifty-pound note. What she values is the reciprocal emotional currency inhering in presents. A gift made by a loved one, even if it is expensive, is congenial to her. This is why she gladly accepted Bellingham's jewellery and fabrics when she believed he truly loved her. Although no gifts are innocent and an implicit demand for repayment is always present when a gift is made, in a good relationship the recipient is at least comfortable with such feelings of indebtedness towards the giver. Thus Fanny can live comfortably with the gold necklace from Henry after she re-conceives of it as an object received in Edmund's honour. In contrast, if the recipient is not willing to accept the imbalanced power relation created by gifts, costly consumer goods become more explicitly problematic, because their high monetary value can easily translate into the giver's high expectations of reward. As Ruth rejects Mr Bradshaw's muslin, she is refusing to enter an imbalanced relationship with him by resisting the luxury that incarnates patriarchal control.

I have briefly touched upon Ruth's similarity to Fanny in *Mansfield Park*, who is also given an unwanted item that comes ultimately from a man. Both heroines demonstrate an ability to shift the target of their feelings of indebtedness to another person so as to cleanse their gifts of unpleasant associations: Fanny accepts the gold necklace from Henry for the sake of her cousin Edmund, and Ruth decides to keep the muslin from Mr Bradshaw in compliance with Mr Benson's advice. However, Ruth's repudiation of gifts from men is more forceful than Fanny's. While Fanny, persuaded by Edmund's argument that gratitude must be due to Mary Crawford, in the end acknowledges her proxy giver's claim and is able to appreciate the appearance of the necklace, Ruth remains unconvinced by Mr Benson's reasoning and never notes the fabric's aesthetic qualities:

Ruth listened to Mr Benson; but she had not yet fallen sufficiently into the tone of

his mind to understand him fully. She only felt that he comprehended her better than Miss Benson, who once more tried to reconcile her to her present, by calling her attention to the length and breadth thereof. (p. 132)

Mr Benson proposes that 'giving only the very cool thanks' will diminish the importance of the present and thus decrease the recipient's subjection to imposed obligation (p. 132). However, Ruth does not want to leave any room for ambiguity in her rejection. It is perhaps because she is even more disadvantageously situated than either Fanny or Mr Benson that she adopts a more radical stance. Although Ruth, against her will, finally promises Mr Benson that she will accept the muslin, she turns it into a stimulus to creativity. '[T]he present gave a new current to Ruth's ideas' (p. 133), galvanising her into a series of actions that adapt Bellingham's gifts of rings and delicate linen for her new life.

While Ruth accepts Mr Bradshaw's first gift because of Mr Benson's intervention, she does not scruple to return his subsequent presents, among which is a silk gown given to her after Mr Bradshaw thinks she has complied with his request to reprimand his daughter for her treatment of Mr Farquhar. Seeing that Jemima behaves more to his liking, Mr Bradshaw decides to buy Ruth 'a handsome silk gown the very next day' (p. 193). Among the things Ruth is given, this silk gown most vividly reveals the sense of male control a gift from a patriarchal source can acquire, as indicated by the narrator's depiction of Mr Bradshaw's mind:

He did not believe she had a silk gown, poor creature! He had noticed that dark-grey stuff, this long long time, as her Sunday dress. He liked the colour; the silk one should be just the same tinge. Then he thought that it would, perhaps, be better to choose a lighter shade, one which might be noticed as different to the old gown. For he had no doubt she would like to have it remarked, and, perhaps, would

not object to tell people that it was a present from Mr Bradshaw – a token of his approbation. He smiled a little to himself as he thought of this additional source of pleasure to Ruth. (pp. 193-94)

Here Mr Bradshaw blatantly conceives of Ruth's body as a site for displaying his power, and in thinking Ruth enjoys material objects, he wilfully reads her as what he wants her to be rather than what she really is. Using the female body to demonstrate male power through attire is not new in literature. As I have argued in Chapter 3, the ball gown Fanny receives from her uncle shows his intention to sell her in the marriage market. However, Fanny's subjection to her uncle's sartorial moulding is not as clearly spelled out as in Ruth's case, and Ruth's position is more vulnerable than Fanny's, as she is not even related to the man who attempts to exploit her body.

In Mr Bradshaw's eyes, the degree of female submission is in proportion to the material worth of the 'reward' he prepares to give. As he becomes 'more and more pleased', he 'raised the price of the silk, which he was going to give Ruth, sixpence a yard during the time' (p. 195). Ruth's refusal to accept the grey silk dress disrupts this male-centred idea and wins herself a true ally, Jemima. Even after learning about her father's plan of regulating her behaviour through Ruth and wrongly believing Ruth to have sided with her father, Jemima is 'thankful and glad to see a brown-paper parcel lying on the hall-table, with a note in Ruth's handwriting, addressed to her father' (p. 197). Personal grudges against Ruth do not prevent Jemima from crediting her with performing an anti-patriarchal act.

In fact, Mr Bradshaw's attempts to patronize Ruth through dress material bear witness to the ludicrousness of patriarchal ideology. His confidence in his own judgement is ironically mocked in the text by the discrepancy between his interpretation of Ruth's style of dress and the reality, as indicated in this passage: 'The love which dictated [Ruth's] extreme simplicity and coarseness of attire, was taken for stiff, hard

economy by Mr Bradshaw, when he deigned to observe it' (p. 133). This discrepancy reveals the instability of the socially-constructed symbols on which Mr Bradshaw is fixated, and exposes, yet again, his misreading of Ruth's true disposition.

Furthermore, Ruth's graceful figure challenges the established conception of women's class, which depended substantially on attire. Jemima's early observation of Ruth's appearance shows the problematic practice of judging a person's class by his or her clothes:

Ruth was very beautiful in her quiet mournfulness; her mean and homely dress left her herself only the more open to admiration, for she gave it a charm by her unconscious wearing of it that made it seem like the drapery of an old Greek statue – subordinate to the figure it covered, yet imbued by it with an unspeakable grace. (p. 153)

Ruth's association with a Greek statue brings to mind Margaret Hale in *North and South*. While Margaret's queenly qualities are contributed partly by her upper-middle-class upbringing and partly by luxurious items such as Indian shawls, Ruth's elegance is independent of both her social background and her taste in dress. The equivocal social position that Ruth's appearance denotes is the most clearly laid bare when the narrator points out that Jemima, a rich manufacturer's daughter, 'could have kissed [Ruth's] hand and professed herself Ruth's slave' (p. 153). Ruth's affinity with women from classes that are higher than her humble origins is also remarked upon by Bellingham when they meet again after years of separation: 'Her face was positively Greek; and then such a proud, superb turn of her head; quite queenly! A governess in Mr Bradshaw's family! Why, she might be a Percy or a Howard for the grandeur of her grace!' (p. 229).

One man whose offerings are not objected to by Ruth is Mr Benson. Their

untypical pattern of interaction provides a clue. While Bellingham and Mr Bradshaw both present gifts to Ruth to showcase what they are capable of achieving and thus create an imbalanced power relationship with her, Mr Benson and Ruth interact in a way where neither person holds undisputed power, as is revealed in their first encounter and the episode where Mr Benson offers to take the lately deserted Ruth back to his lodgings. When they first meet, Ruth is caught in the middle of a river, and Mr Benson is in a position to give her a helping hand. The air of power an assistance-provider may well exude, owing to his ability to give, is reduced in this case because the text stresses Mr Benson's deformity:

[Ruth] looked up and saw a man, who was apparently long past middle life, and of the stature of a dwarf; a second glance accounted for the low height of the speaker, for then she saw he was deformed. As the consciousness of this infirmity came into her mind, it must have told itself in her softened eyes, for a faint flush of colour came into the pale face of the deformed gentleman. (p. 58)

Being physically frail, Mr Benson looks more like a person who requires help than a person who is capable of assisting others. His role of giver becomes more obscure because Ruth 'gives' him something – showing her compassion with 'softened eyes' – before accepting his offer. This interaction indicates a lateral relationship and is in stark contrast to the first meeting between Ruth and Bellingham. There Bellingham appears with his glamorous dance partner and, in Ruth's hasty observation, is 'young and elegant' (p. 16). This ennobled image of Bellingham places him in a dominant position in the relational pattern he shares with Ruth, and Ruth's subsequent body posture also illustrates the disparity in power between them. During the course of their brief meeting Ruth is kneeling on the floor mending Miss Duncombe's dress. Regardless of Bellingham's actual posture, Ruth feels his presence from a bottom-up angle: she does

not 'look up to thank him' when he holds a candle close to her to facilitate her work, and she receives his present of a camellia 'with a grave, modest motion of her head' (p. 17). Unlike Ruth's first meeting with Mr Benson, then, this scene of interaction shows a hierarchical relationship.

The egalitarian nature of Mr Benson and Ruth's relationship is even more clearly shown in the episode where he attempts to offer shelter to the lately deserted Ruth. Notably, what makes Ruth stop in her flight from his intervention is not his power; it is by his 'unfortunate fall' that she returns to his side (p. 82). As by this time Ruth has been considered 'fallen' in public opinion, Mr Benson's 'fall' is symbolically significant: it brings him 'down' to Ruth's level and shows that his offering to help stems from sympathy, not a desire to display power. The description detailing their journey back to Mr Benson's rented place is also worth noting:

'Can you help me to rise now?' said he, after a while. She did not speak, but she helped him up, and then he took her arm, and she led him tenderly through all the little velvet paths, where the turf grew short and soft between the rugged stones. Once more on the highway, they slowly passed along in the moonlight. He guided her by a slight motion of the arm, through the more unfrequented lanes, to his lodgings at the shop. (pp. 83-84)

The intricate process of bringing Ruth under his protection begins by his request for help, but he does not remain thoroughly passive. First it is 'she' that helps him stand up; then 'he' takes her arm; but 'she' soon leads the way; and finally the two of them walk together 'in the moonlight'. The alternate subjects of 'he' and 'she' obscure the difference between the giver and the recipient, indicating a mutually fulfilling relationship. Such a pattern may explain why Ruth is at ease with Mr Benson's offerings, but not entirely comfortable with either Bellingham's or Mr Bradshaw's. While Mr

Benson seeks to create a lateral relationship with what he gives, Bellingham and Bradshaw only want to reinforce the hierarchy between men and women that is already present in their society.

As Mrs Bellingham's and Mr Bradshaw's examples show, gifts of patriarchal origin represent the giver's attempt at gauging Ruth's worth by male-centred standards. Mrs Bellingham views Ruth's romantic relationship with Bellingham as her sexual services. In offering Ruth fifty pounds, she puts a price tag on her emotional investment and thus commodifies her person. Mr Bradshaw equates Ruth's degree of submission with the monetary value of the dress material in which he is about to clothe her. In doing so, he, like Mrs Bellingham, also treats Ruth as a commodity, whose value is represented only in economic terms. Ruth's gift-receiving principle regarding patriarchal presents, then, indicates her ability to resist her society's objectifying forces. When faced with presents that carry problematic patriarchal ideologies, Ruth either refuses to be a recipient or transforms the meanings of given objects. By returning Mrs Bellingham's fifty-pound note and Mr Bradshaw's dress material, Ruth challenges their attempts to fix her value through objects, and by repurposing Bellingham's presents of jewellery and luxurious fabrics, Ruth demonstrates her ability to exploit the different meanings – including monetary significance – objects hold. More importantly, through the less troubling relational pattern Ruth has with Mr Benson, Gaskell shows that when relationships between the sexes do not feature men's commodification of women, they can be more balanced.

In the eyes of the novel's upholders of patriarchy, Ruth's worth is measured only in financial terms and measurable only when her conduct can be interpreted within the framework of conventional ideologies. When her affair with Bellingham is known, that is, when she violates her society's standards for respectability, she becomes worthless. It is in these moments that women's presents take centre stage. During the course of the novel Ruth accepts dresses, accessories, and a wedding ring from Faith, two widow's

caps from Sally, and farm produce from the poor, presumably women, in the local community. This section considers the functions of these gifts as opposed to their patriarchal counterparts, and investigates the significance they may bear in terms of the novel's comments on the subject of fallen women.

In the novel most of the things Ruth receives from women are presented by Faith. The first item is a black gown, offered on the day after Ruth's watch is sold to the doctor. Unlike Mr Bradshaw, who dispatches his gifts of cambric-muslin and a silk gown without having enquired whether or not Ruth would like them, Faith asks Ruth's opinion before she makes the offer. Her question is also carefully framed: 'Would you object to my buying you a black gown?', she says hesitantly (p. 108). After a short discussion with Ruth about her motive for offering a black gown, Faith timidly puts forward her proposal again: 'Then I may get you a black gown?' (p. 109). Here the black gown is offered not as a man's tool to represent a woman's worth in material forms, like the muslin and silk gown from Mr Bradshaw, but as a means of protection provided by a woman for another woman. In giving Ruth a black gown, Faith fabricates a new identity for her to shield herself and her child from the patriarchal world's harsh judgement of an unmarried mother. It is true that the black gown's role as a means of disguise remains disturbing, but its significance is great nonetheless. Ruth is now deemed morally worthless in patriarchal thinking and unrepresentable using patriarchy's habit of connecting moral superiority with items of high economic value. Faith offers a way of representing Ruth that is simultaneously within and outside the patriarchal framework. By associating Ruth with an object that is low in economic but high in moral value, the black gown being a widely-recognised symbol of respectability, Faith disrupts her society's tendency to put a price tag on every type of value while ensuring Ruth's worth is legible to the respectability-obsessed public.

The offer of a black gown is also bound up with a non-material gift: a new name for Ruth. To pass Ruth off as a widow, there needs to be a family name on which her

new identity can be predicated. Faith originally proposes to use Ruth's own last name 'Hilton', but Ruth opposes the idea of being called the same as her mother. It is significant that they finally settle on the maiden name of Faith's mother 'Denbigh'. Although the novel does not stress that Denbigh is the maiden name of the Bensons' mother, it can be easily deduced from the context. By offering Ruth the maiden name of her mother, Faith ushers her into a virtual all-female family, providing her with a sense of belonging the conventional institution of the male-headed family is unwilling to give.

In addition to the black gown and the widow's title, Faith presents yet another item in aid of the construction of Ruth's new identity: a wedding ring. The wedding ring once belonged to Faith's grandmother. It cannot be ascertained whether it was Faith's paternal or maternal grandmother who owned the ring, but the female provenance accords with Ruth's adoption of the maiden name of Faith's mother. The scene where Faith gives Ruth her grandmother's wedding ring is also worth noting because it reinforces female bonding with a crucial feature of heterosexual marriage. Having extracted the ring from the depth of her drawer, Faith 'hurried it on Ruth's finger' (p. 120). This act re-enacts the custom of giving and receiving rings at the Victorian wedding ceremony, where the groom placed a ring on the finger of his bride.²⁸⁴ A woman in Ruth's situation could hardly expect to get married in the conventional sense, apart perhaps from marrying her seducer,²⁸⁵ but Faith's offer of a wedding ring provides an alternative route. In placing her grandmother's ring on Ruth's finger, Faith not only symbolically marries Ruth but also includes her in a circle of female family members. Thus the wedding ring, originally a sign of heterosexual marriage, is turned into an emblem of female friendship.

In addition to Faith, Sally, the Bensons' female servant, also helps shape Ruth's

²⁸⁴ Charles Oman in *British Rings, 800-1914* (London: Batsford, 1974) notes that at the wedding ceremony of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert in 1840, only the Queen received a ring. Although Queen Victoria also gave Prince Albert a ring, it was given informally after the service was completed (p. 35).

²⁸⁵ [W. R. Greg], 'Prostitution', *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, 53 (1850), 448-506 (p. 472).

new life through gifts. What Sally provides are 'two widow's caps of commonest make and coarsest texture' (p. 121). Like the black gown offered by Faith, these caps also serve the purpose of representing Ruth's unrepresentable worth. Low in monetary but high in moral value, they express Ruth's character without linking it with material worth. Although Sally's initial motive for forcing Ruth to wear widow's caps is to further secure Ruth's new identity so as to prevent her master and mistress from becoming the talk of the town, she soon changes her attitude. After Ruth quietly submits to the violent assault on her hair, Sally relents and sees the caps in a different light. Her parting words to Ruth are: 'You'll put on them caps to-morrow morning. I'll make you a present on them.' (p. 122). Here the widow's caps, which begin as marks of stigma in Sally's eyes, become symbols of a friendly relationship. They now join the black gown and wedding ring offered by Faith as marks of female bonding against patriarchal discrimination.

It has to be noted, however, that although Faith's and Sally's gifts achieve the good end of shielding Ruth from the harmful effects of her 'fall', they are not entirely unproblematic. Their major role as a means of deception remains troubling, and the process of their acceptance by Ruth as revealed in the text has a tinge of sadness. Unlike rings exchanged at a real wedding, the wedding ring from Faith is placed on Ruth's finger unceremoniously and with no preceding solemn words that resemble marriage vows. Moreover, instead of wearing a bridal dress, Ruth at her 'wedding' must have been wearing mourning clothing of some sort, as Faith has previously decided on her new attire to pass her off as a widow. Ruth's fabricated identity is finally completed by Sally's offer of two widow's caps, which is accompanied by an act that deprives Ruth of one major aspect of her femininity: 'her luxuriant brown hair' (p. 121). Ruth's rapid transformation from a girl to a 'bride' and a 'widow' is indeed poignant. She is given a wedding ring without being married, and her 'widowhood' is determined even before the 'wedding' takes place. Nevertheless, her suffering may be a necessity within the patriarchal framework of 'a cruel, biting world' (p. 102). Viewed in this light, the

disturbing aspects of Faith's and Sally's gifts represent implied criticism of the public's idea about women's 'fall', and Ruth's initiation into a ménage consisting of two single women and a feminised man signals patriarchal society's inefficacy in addressing the issue of fallen women.

With their gifts, the Bensons create an unconventional micro-society inside patriarchy that accepts Ruth and mediates between her and the patriarchal world. The congenial social functions of the Bensons' gifts are captured in the episode where they dress Ruth before she goes to the Bradshaws' for tea:

'Ruthie, what gown shall you wear to-night? Your dark-grey one, I suppose?' asked Miss Benson.

'Yes, I suppose so. I never thought of it; but that is my best.'

'Well, then, I shall quill up a ruff for you. You know I am a famous quiller of net.'

Ruth came down-stairs with a little flush on her cheeks when she was ready to go. She held her bonnet and shawl in her hand, for she knew Miss Benson and Sally would want to see her dressed.

'Is not mamma pretty?' asked Leonard, with a child's pride.

'She looks very nice and tidy,' said Miss Benson, who had an idea that children should not talk or think about beauty.

'I think my ruff looks so nice,' said Ruth, with gentle pleasure. And indeed it did look nice, and set off the pretty round throat most becomingly. Her hair, now grown long and thick, was smoothed as close to her head as its waving nature would allow, and plaited up in a great rich knot low down behind. The grey gown was as plain as plain could be.

'You should have light gloves, Ruth,' said Miss Benson. She went up-stairs, and brought down a delicate pair of Limerick ones, which had been long treasured

up in a walnut-shell.

‘They say them gloves is made of chicken’s-skins,’ said Sally, examining them curiously. ‘I wonder how they set about skinning ’em.’

‘Here, Ruth,’ said Mr Benson, coming in from the garden, ‘here’s a rose or two for you. I am sorry there are no more; I hoped I should have had my yellow rose out by this time, but the damask and the white are in a warmer corner, and have got the start.’ (p. 190)

Here are members of Ruth’s new ‘family’ decking her out with accessories. This scene is a reversal of what they did to her when she first arrived. Back then, Ruth was subjected to a humiliating, though not ill-intentioned, treatment of dressing that sought to decrease her attractiveness,²⁸⁶ but now everyone in the family is keen to enhance her appearance. Her feminine beauty is straightforwardly pointed out by her son Leonard, and the narrator openly comments on the body parts that denote her sex appeal: Faith’s ruff ‘set[s] off the pretty round throat’, and her hair is described as being ‘long and thick’. The adjectives ‘round’, ‘long’, and ‘thick’ clearly evoke a sensual image.

This episode is similar to, yet subtly different from, the scene where Bellingham dresses Ruth up in a Welsh woodland. In that scene, Bellingham places water-lilies in Ruth’s hair and urges her to look at herself in the pond. The setting and Ruth’s passivity recall the Wordsworthian tradition, which, as Hilary Schor has pointed out, sees the seduced woman as a representation of ‘aesthetic perception itself’, a figure ‘at once empty and overfull of meaning’.²⁸⁷ For the male artist, the female subject is an object that ‘serve[s] as a receptacle for his reflection on his feelings’.²⁸⁸ Bellingham’s treatment of Ruth is akin to such a pattern. The sense that he views Ruth as his

²⁸⁶ Here I agree with Jill L. Matus, who in *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 117-19, interprets Sally’s cropping of Ruth’s hair as a means of regulating her sexuality.

²⁸⁷ Hilary Schor, *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 51.

²⁸⁸ Hilary Schor, p. 50.

plaything is strong when he is depicted as arranging her hair with ‘the joyousness of a child playing with a new toy’ (p. 64). Moreover, when he encourages Ruth to admire her own reflection in the water, he indeed assumes the role of a Wordsworthian artist. When he gazes at Ruth gazing at herself in the pond, he is looking at double reflections of his creative power: Ruth herself, whom he has just groomed to his liking, and Ruth’s image in the water, which is a reflection of his freshly arranged ‘toy’. In decorating Ruth’s hair with water-lilies, therefore, Bellingham dehumanises her and strips her of her personality.

Schor argues that ‘*Ruth* asks about the sexual politics behind the sexual poetics’ and suggests that Gaskell, in her creation of Ruth, contrary to literary men of her time such as Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, ‘refuses to ignore the possibility that a woman’s beauty is a fact not in an abstract moral or aesthetic situation but in a very real context in a socially determined world’.²⁸⁹ This is indeed how the Bensons’ dressing up of Ruth differs from that by Bellingham, as Gaskell situates Ruth’s physical attractiveness in an environment free from emblems that serve to stimulate men’s imagination. It is true that the setting in which Ruth’s sexuality is allowed to show is a sanitised, domestic one: her ‘prettiness’ is expressed by her own child and soon superseded by the moral-sounding ‘tidiness’ proposed by Faith, and the way Faith’s ruff complements her throat is in a ‘becoming’ way. However, the fact that Ruth’s beauty is still allowed to be presented is remarkable in a novel where female sexuality is taboo.

What is more significant about this scene is that the Bensons, in contributing to Ruth’s outfit, provide a sense of community that is otherwise inaccessible to a woman in Ruth’s situation. The ruff from Faith is hand-quilled by her. Because Faith’s quilling skill is well-known in her circle, she passes on her public recognition to Ruth as she hands her the ruff. The gloves retrieved to complement Ruth’s outfit are also socially significant. The fact that they have been ‘long treasured up in a walnut-shell’ suggests

²⁸⁹ Hilary Schor, pp. 51, 56.

that they, like the wedding ring Faith has given Ruth, bear stories of former human relationships (p. 190). In lending Ruth her cherished items, Faith reinforces the affective power of an object and incorporates Ruth into her web of emotional ties. The roses presented by Thurstan, in addition to marking his regard for Ruth, perform an important social function as well. When Ruth works as a seamstress at Mrs Mason's, what touches her in the workroom is a wall painted with 'every flower which blooms profusely in charming old-fashioned country gardens', among which are 'crimson roses' (p. 9). The reason for Ruth's strong affinity is the connection between these flowers and 'other sister-flowers that grew, and blossomed, and withered away in her early home' (p. 10). Mr Benson's gifts of damask and white roses, then, provide a sense of home that Ruth has lost and is yearning for, as indeed 'China and damask roses' are the flowers that were previously grown 'against the casement-window of what had been her mother's room' (p. 35).

It is worth noting that while Mr Benson's damask and white roses are cultivated in a domestic garden, the water-lilies Bellingham uses to decorate Ruth's hair are wild plants. The wild setting of the water-lilies accords with Bellingham's imagining of Ruth as a wild animal. As the narrator observes, Bellingham thinks '[i]t would be an exquisite delight to attract and tame her wildness, just as he had often allured and tamed the timid fawns in his mother's park' (p. 31). The excuse he devises to see Ruth again after her task of looking after the drowning boy is completed is also telling. He asks her to check if 'an old hunting-piece painted on a panel over one of the chimney-pieces' in Mrs Mason's house, which belonged to his mother's ancestors, is still there (p. 29). It does not matter, however, whether or not the painting exists and is available for him to purchase. What he cares about is Ruth, the prey he is really chasing after. Unlike the Bensons, who by presenting Ruth with choice items build up social circles for her, Bellingham isolates and objectifies her with his gifts.

In addition to the Bensons, Ruth also receives gifts from the wider community in

which they move. When Leonard is sick, the poor show their sympathy through material objects: 'They brought what they could – a fresh egg, when eggs were scarce – a few ripe pears that grew on the sunniest side of the humble cottage, where the fruit was regarded as a source of income' (p. 257). Like the Bensons' ruff, gloves, and roses, these gifts are endowed with a strong emotional power that is absent from either the Bellinghams' or Mr Bradshaw's presents. In fact, any monetary value an object may have is superseded by its affective worth, as the 'scarce' eggs and profit-yielding pears become signs of regard. These objects are a testimony to Ruth's acceptance in Eccleston.

Among the Eccleston circle of benign gift-givers, Mr Farquhar is an anomaly. His social position is on a par with those of other powerful men, such as Bellingham and Mr Bradshaw, but his gifting practice is more akin to that of the novel's humbler characters. His more nuanced gifting relations with Ruth show the intricate pattern of a power structure embedded in object-mediated links between men and women. Although his attention to Ruth, like Bellingham's, is tinged with a sexual interest, as he once considered marrying her instead of Jemima, he does not treat her like a plaything. Rather, he identifies Ruth's son as the beneficiary of his friendly acts. Like Eccleston's more disadvantaged dwellers, who foster relationships with Ruth by eking out tokens of goodwill to her child, Mr Farquhar sends 'fruit for the convalescent Leonard' and brings 'a little gentle pony on which Leonard, weak as he was, might ride' (p. 257). Despite serving a similar affectionate purpose, Mr Farquhar's gift of fruit is probably more of a valuable commodity bought at a shop than agricultural produce produced by the poor, with its worth resembling that of the basketful of grapes and peaches selected by Mr Thornton at a Milton fruit-shop to give to Margaret's bedridden mother in *North and South*. Ruth's reaction reveals that the sense of dominance conveyed by a valuable gift requires special handling to be lessened. Although the monetary value of Mr Farquhar's fruit does not put Ruth off accepting her gift, she attaches no special significance either

to the gift or the giver: she includes Mr Farquhar 'in the general gratitude which she felt towards all who had been kind to her boy' (p. 258). By grouping Mr Farquhar and her less prosperous gift-givers together, Ruth is able to avoid the controlling power that can all too easily accompany a gift of high monetary value.

Mr Farquhar's less expensive gift seems less problematic. In a visit to the Bensons after Ruth's history is known in Eccleston, he offers Mr Benson his newspaper, which according to him 'is really waste-paper' after twelve o'clock (p. 304). The word 'waste-paper' brings to mind the fifty-pound note from Mrs Bellingham, which to Ruth carries such unbearable patriarchal authority that she discards it like rubbish. These two waste-paper-like objects function in opposite ways. While Mrs Bellingham's note stamps Ruth as a fallen woman and serves to banish her from society, Mr Farquhar's used newspaper metamorphoses from a purposeless object into a medium that contributes towards Leonard's re-entry into social life. By asking Leonard to fetch the newspaper, Mr Farquhar provides him with a chance of going out to face the world. Like Faith's black gown and wedding ring, and Sally's widow's caps, Mr Farquhar's newspaper also serves the aim of facilitating social acceptance for those whom the patriarchal society deems outlaws.

Mr Farquhar's departure from other patriarchal examples of gift-giving in the novel is significant in terms of his union with Ruth's double, Jemima. Being a rich manufacturer's daughter, Jemima is more economically advantaged than Ruth. However, she is keenly aware of the object-like condition to which almost all middle-class women were subjected. When she mistakenly believes that Mr Farquhar consciously approves her father's scheme of marrying her to him, she bitterly resents '[his] cold way of looking out for a wife, just as [he] would do for a carpet, to add to [his] comforts, and settle [him] respectably' (p. 185), lamenting her prospect of being transferred from the father to the husband 'as a sort of stock in trade' (p. 189). With such a strong antipathy towards her father's manoeuvre, Jemima, like Ruth, is uninterested in gifts that bear

signs of patriarchal control. When her mother indicates that she will surely be rewarded with a gown by her father for her obedience, as long as she asks, Jemima is cold and indignant. When she is on an errand to the new dressmaker Mrs Pearson's, she looks at some bonnets not because she loves finery, but because she wants to 'show her recognition of her mother's kind thought' (p. 262).

The unmaterialistic Jemima, however, in the proposal scene specifically names an object she has received from Mr Farquhar. She tells him: 'I don't think you know how faithful I have been to you ever since the days when you first brought me pistachio-candy from London – when I was quite a little girl' (pp. 307-308). Compared with what her father is ready to bestow upon her as a reward, a silk gown like the one sent to Ruth, the pistachio-candy Jemima so vividly remembers is low in monetary value. However, this trivial gift, like the things Mr Farquhar kindly offers Leonard and the good-natured presents made to Ruth, must signify an abundance of genuine care, so Jemima can appreciate it without the fear of appearing subjected to a man's material control.

Jemima and Mr Farquhar's relationship is presented as one in which gender roles are more fluid. After their mutual affection is revealed between them, Jemima says, 'You won't forbid my going to see Ruth, will you? because if you do, I give you notice I shall disobey you' (p. 307). Mr Farquhar 'clasped her yet more fondly', revelling in 'the idea suggested by this speech, of the control which he should have a right to exercise over her actions at some future day' (p. 307), but the text soon reveals that it is Jemima who 'imposed very strict regulations on Mr Farquhar's behaviour; and quarrelled and differed from him more than ever' (p. 308). This verbal exchange is like Margaret and Thornton's jostling for power in the closing chapter of *North and South*. The two couples' unconventional gender roles may be what Gaskell envisages to be a key factor in an optimal marriage. If Ruth seems to be destined for death, her ways of managing her gifts do point towards a better relationship with men to which middle-class women

could aspire. In terms of the achievement of a more balanced relationship between men and women, the novel is not so much a tragedy as the ending suggests. While Ruth is able to establish an egalitarian relationship only with a physically weak man, Mr Benson, her double, Jemima, better fulfils this aim in her marriage to Mr Farquhar, a man whose success is socially recognised.

SYLVIA ROBSON AND HER GIFTS OF GARMENTS AND ACCESSORIES

Like Ruth, Sylvia also has an uneasy relationship with gifts. The first few chapters of *Sylvia's Lovers* concern Sylvia's excitement about choosing and deciding on the style of her first cloak. Her parents kindly provide the money for her purchase and allow her considerable freedom of choice, but the cloak on which Sylvia sets her heart bears a tension between Sylvia and her mother that is never fully resolved. Such a tension is bound up with her relationship with her cousin Philip, who gives her various presents throughout the novel, among which are a ribbon and dress materials. The man with whom Sylvia is truly in love, Charley Kinraid, is also involved in a complex web of gift relations with her. These details in *Sylvia's Lovers* have been discussed only very briefly. For example, Clare Pettitt notes the cloaks, ribbons, and handkerchiefs in *Sylvia's Lovers*, but her focus is on how "Gaskell conjures phenomenological presence with painstaking tactile detail" and "counters this palpable presence by inserting into the novel unmappable stretches: of the distant horizon, of the ocean, of the battlefields far away".²⁹⁰ It is true that Gaskell's use of cloaks and ribbons helps create a reality effect, but placed within the framework of things' multiple, often gendered signifying capacities, these objects also tell the stories of Sylvia's unfulfilled life and reveal the

²⁹⁰ Clare Pettitt, 'Time Lag and Elizabeth Gaskell's Transatlantic Imagination', *Victorian Studies*, 54 (2012), 599-623 (p. 617).

problems of over-determined patriarchal symbolism.

The first gift Sylvia receives in the novel is a new cloak from her indulgent parents. Cloaks could be expensive in the late eighteenth century. In John Styles's study of the clothing consumption pattern of twenty-eight female servants between 1768 and 1792, only seven bought cloaks, 'at prices ranging from 7s. to 20s.'²⁹¹ Although the Robsons are among the relatively better off in their neighbourhood, being able to employ a live-in male servant and having only one surviving child to provide for, their willingness to allow their daughter to 'buy a bran-new duffle cloak all for herself, with not even an elder authority to curb her as to price' shows their dotting love (p. 14).²⁹² It is little wonder that Sylvia's playmate Molly Corney, who comes from a larger family with less means, can only bestow 'as much sympathy as was consistent with a little patient envy of Sylvia's happier circumstances' (p. 14). Even Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, a doctor's daughter, has to content herself with wearing her deceased mother's black mode cloak when visiting the local land-owning family.

Although the Robsons appear liberal, in terms of their daughter's sartorial choice as well as her expenditure, there is an underlying current of maternal discipline: while Sylvia wants a red cloak, Mrs Robson has a strong preference for a grey one. Mrs Robson's objection to a red cloak may be based on practicality, as she wishes Sylvia to get a cloak that 'does na' spot' and 'were to wear i' bad weather' (pp. 40, 41). However, if the social functions of expensive clothes are taken into account, Mrs Robson's attempted curb on Sylvia's colour choice can be read as her unwillingness to recognise her daughter's sexual maturity. As Styles's study of eighteenth-century plebeian fashion shows, young working-class women bought gowns whose prices 'overlapped with the lower end of the range of prices paid for gowns by provincial women from lesser gentry,

²⁹¹ John Styles, 'Involuntary Consumers? Servants and their Clothes in Eighteenth-Century England', *Textile History*, 33 (2002), 9-21 (p. 14).

²⁹² Elizabeth Gaskell, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 14. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

professional and mercantile families'.²⁹³ For these young adults, 'genteel' clothes could mark their coming of age, help them attract suitors, and later begin a courtship that ends in marriage. Although Sylvia is not a working-class woman, her reason for choosing a red cloak is charged with budding sexual consciousness, as indicated in her explanation to her mother: 'And I chose the red; it's so much gayer, and folk can see me the farther off' (pp. 40-41). Her delight in attracting attention with an eye-catching outfit is similar to that of William Hutton, a sixteen-year-old apprentice to a stocking weaver in 1739, who wrote after acquiring the best clothes he could: 'The girls eyed me with some attention; nay, I eyed myself as much as any of them'.²⁹⁴

Although Sylvia's attention-seeking reason for her choice of a red cloak is not explicitly sexually motivated, the episodes where her red cloak appears offer telltale signs. It is on the day she purchases her red cloak that she first hears about Kinraid. She later uses asking Molly's advice on the style of her cloak as an excuse, for herself as well as for her mother, to visit the Corneys and elicit further information about the wounded sailor. When Kinraid stays at the Corneys' during his convalescence, Sylvia visits him with her father, 'dressed in her new red cloak and hood, her face peeping out of the folds of the latter, bright and blushing' (p. 79). Here Sylvia apparently considers her red cloak appropriate for an occasion where she is to meet her beloved, so the link between the garment and her sexual maturity becomes explicit. As Mrs Robson also has reservations about Sylvia's closeness with Kinraid, her previous disapproval of her daughter's red cloak can be read as her refusal to recognise the development of Sylvia's sexuality.

Philip, who later becomes Sylvia's husband, accords with Mrs Robson on the subject of her cloak colour. He may not share his aunt's attempt to regulate Sylvia's sexual growth, but in preferring the grey colour, he evinces the same tendency to make

²⁹³ Styles, 'Plebeian Fashion', p. 111.

²⁹⁴ Quoted in Styles, 'Plebeian Fashion', p. 111.

Sylvia conform to certain patriarchal standards. One of the reasons Philip gives for choosing the grey is that '[it] is a respectable, quiet-looking article that will go well with any colour' (pp. 26-27). The word 'respectable' is significant because it sums up Philip's view of women's clothing and, by extension, women's place. For him, women's dresses serve mainly as signifiers of respectability, which ultimately reflects the male breadwinner's social position. Later in the novel this attitude is to have an important bearing on his married life with Sylvia.

Philip's desire to fit Sylvia into the 'respectable lady' mould through clothing is more explicitly shown in the episode where he decides on her wedding gown. He recalls 'one pretty, soft little dove' (p. 291), which he always associates with Sylvia, and chooses 'a certain piece of shot silk' with the same colours found in the dove's feathers (p. 292). Shot silk is a fabric that 'changes in tint when viewed from different points' because it is woven 'with warp-threads of one colour and weft-threads of another' (*OED Online*). Its iridescence, combined with its association with a docile animal, points towards Philip's social ambition. In his imagination, a wife must be as gentle as a dove and dressed in expensive fabrics that reflect the wealth of her husband. This attitude is carried into their newly married life:

And now Philip seemed as prosperous as his heart could desire. The business flourished, and money beyond his moderate wants came in. As for himself he required very little; but he had always looked forward to placing his idol in a befitting shrine; and means for this were now furnished to him. The dress, the comforts, the position he had desired for Sylvia were all hers. She did not need to do a stroke of household work if she preferred to 'sit in her parlour and sew up a seam.' Indeed Phoebe resented any interference in the domestic labour, which she had performed so long, that she looked upon the kitchen as a private empire of her own. 'Mrs Hepburn' (as Sylvia was now termed) had a good dark silk gown-piece

in her drawers, as well as the poor dove-coloured, against the day when she chose to leave off mourning; and stuff for either gray or scarlet cloaks was hers at her bidding. (pp. 296-97)

Although Philip appears altruistic in piling luxuries on Sylvia rather than on himself, his gifts of class markers reveal his obsession with respectability. The 'good dark silk gown-piece', the 'dove-coloured' gown, and the 'stuff for either gray or scarlet cloaks' are chosen because they constitute 'the position he had desired for Sylvia'. Sylvia's position is, after all, his, otherwise she would not have been forced to 'leave off her country dress, her uncovered hair, her linsey petticoat, and loose bed-gown, and to don a stiff and stately gown for her morning dress' (p. 297).

Not every woman in the novel is averse to such a symbolising force carried by garments. Molly Corney, after she marries a Newcastle shopkeeper and becomes Mrs Brunton, beams with pride when displaying 'her new bonnet and cloak' to those who are 'less fortunate in matrimony than she was' (p. 377). As a woman, she looks upon her husband's standing as her legitimate source of empowerment. Sylvia, in contrast, is indifferent to the new material objects with which Philip surrounds her. Apart from her lack of affection for Philip, Sylvia's love of adventure and the outdoors is an important factor in her feeling of 'comfortable imprisonment' in her marital home (p. 304). She yearns for 'solitude and open air, and the sight and sound of the mother-like sea' (p. 304). Her attachment to the ocean may be under the influence of her lover, Kinraid, but she has shown an adventurous disposition before meeting him, in the scene where she and Molly stop at the waterside on their way to Monkshaven. While Molly 'sate down on the grassy bank to wash her feet', Sylvia 'placed her basket on a gravelly bit of shore, and, giving a long spring, seated herself on a stone almost in the middle of the stream' (p. 14). Her adventurous spirit can also be observed from her choice of a red cloak, which associates her with 'little Red Riding Hood' (p. 79), and her dislike of wearing

shoes. As the narrator points out, the fact of having her foot ‘encased in its smartly buckled shoe’ is ‘not slightly to [Sylvia’s] discomfort, as she was unaccustomed to be shod in walking far; only as Philip had accompanied them home, neither she nor Molly had liked to go barefoot’ (p. 40). Here Sylvia conceives of dressing respectably as a form of control. It is then difficult to imagine her accepting the dove-like role Philip prepares for her. Indeed, she refuses the shot silk he purchases for her to make her wedding dress with and, after her daughter is born, turns the fabric into a mark of motherly love by having it made into ‘a cloak for [the baby] to go to church in’ (p. 306). Like Ruth, who regenerates the white muslin from Bellingham by reusing it for her expected child, Sylvia uses a similar strategy to cleanse a male gift of disturbing associations.

The last dress material Philip presents to Sylvia, ‘a fine Irish poplin dress-piece’ (p. 364), carries as much symbolic weight as the dove-coloured silk. This item is given to Sylvia through Philip’s partner Coulson after Philip leaves Monkshaven, and Coulson gives Sylvia a detailed account of the purchase:

‘My missus had one on at th party at John Foster’s last March, and yo’ admired it a deal. And Philip, he thought o’ nothing but how he could get yo’ just such another, and he set a vast o’ folk agait for to meet wi’ its marrow; and what he did just the very day afore he went away so mysterious was to write through Dawson Brothers, o’ Wakefield, to Dublin, and order that one should be woven for yo’. Jemima had to cut a bit off hers for to give him t’ exact colour.’ (p. 364)

This anecdote reveals that the Irish poplin Philip orders is closely connected with his career. The fabric ‘was originally made of silk and worsted’ fibre (*OED Online*). The use of silk would have given it a shiny lustre, just like the dove-coloured shot silk Philip buys for Sylvia to make her wedding gown. This property of poplin is ideal for it to be a

class marker, and indeed Philip notices the material on the wife of his business partner at his former employer's party. It is true that he probably orders it after seeing Sylvia's admiration for Jemima's dress, but the connotation of class consciousness lurking in the background cannot be overlooked.

Sylvia's reaction upon being presented with the Irish poplin shows that if she ever was in love with the item, it was a passing interest and not connected with an intention to rival Coulson's wife. She has to try hard 'to recollect where she could have seen its like' and says nothing 'but that it was very pretty' (p. 364). Being 'Philip's especial choice' (p. 366), the poplin gown also represents his love for her, which Sylvia cannot happily accept. This time an unwanted gift from Philip is again put to a new use by Sylvia: she first gives the poplin to Hester, to whom she begins to pour out 'her own former passionate feelings for Kinraid' after Philip's mysterious disappearance, and after she finds Hester resolutely refusing the gown, puts it by 'for the little daughter' (p. 366). In giving the poplin gown to people she loves, Sylvia transforms a symbol of the aspirations and love Philip attempts to impose on her into her own gestures of friendship and motherly care.

While Sylvia can withstand her mother's attempt to regulate her body by ignoring her wishes, she cannot reject her husband's gifts without giving offence, given the close ties between them. After all, he is her cousin and the man her mother has always wished her to marry. The challenge Sylvia faces of resisting patriarchal control from people close to her therefore reveals women's demeaning place in the domestic scene. However, Sylvia shows ingenuity in her dealings with unwanted gifts from Philip. Although she can only passively accept the symbol-laden dress materials from him, she is not complicit in sustaining the patriarchal system of producing meaning. Instead of having Philip's gifts made into gowns to exhibit his status, Sylvia offers them to Hester or her daughter. In transforming these class markers and signifiers of undesired personal ties into her means of relationship-building, she attaches new significance to the dress

materials given by Philip.

Not only do expensive fabrics chosen by Philip bear his projected image of Sylvia's domestic role, accessories of low monetary value such as ribbons can also become carriers of his ideology. Silk ribbons, which cost 'as little as 6*d.* a yard' in the late eighteenth century,²⁹⁵ were affordable items even for servants. The ribbon 'with a little briar-rose pattern running upon it' that Philip chooses for Sylvia before the Corneys' party (p. 119), then, cannot compare with either the dove-coloured silk or the Irish poplin in monetary worth. However, the briar-rose pattern indicates that Philip attaches more significance to the item than simply his love for Sylvia.

This gift, though showing Philip's deep affection for Sylvia, carries his own social aspirations and an unsettling sense of possessiveness. Crucial to the ribbon's problematic implications is its briar-rose pattern. In the narrator's description of the moorland near Monkshaven at the beginning of the novel, the briar-rose is among the native flora of the rugged landscape. This can be a textually unimportant detail to be quickly passed over, but the narrator's subsequent digression into the North/South divide in gardening and Philip's later recollection of planting flowers for Sylvia at Haytersbank Farm indicate the briar-rose's significance. The narrator, after enumerating the few plants indigenous to the moors, adds an explanation of Northerners' different attitudes to gardening:

[I]f the farmer in these comparatively happy valleys had had wife or daughter who cared for gardening, many a flower would have grown on the western or southern side of the rough stone house. But at that time gardening was not a popular art in any part of England; in the north it is not yet. Noblemen and gentlemen may have beautiful gardens; but farmers and day-labourers care little for them north of the Trent, which is all I can answer for. (p. 8)

²⁹⁵ Styles, 'Involuntary Consumers', p. 15.

It is important to note the narrator's shift from a story-telling past tense to the present. If the present tense and the pronoun 'I' are taken to indicate Gaskell's reference to her own time, historical evidence suggests that the North/South divide in gardening emphasised in the above quotation is actually a class difference. Records show that the upper middle classes in Manchester were already ordering plants for their gardens in the late eighteenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become common among residents of Manchester's new suburbs to pursue gardening. After the Gaskells moved into their house in Plymouth Grove in 1850, gardening was one of Gaskell's many household concerns.²⁹⁶ Therefore, at the time of *Sylvia's Lovers*' composition gardening was as popular 'north of the Trent' as in the south, except that it was restricted to 'noblemen and gentlemen'. In *Wives and Daughters*, which is set in a fictional town based upon Knutsford in the early nineteenth century, the two characters portrayed as enthusiastic about gardening are from relatively privileged backgrounds: Molly Gibson, a doctor's daughter, and Mrs Hamley, a squire's wife.

Given the fact that types of gardens served more as class markers than as indicators of geographical differences in gardening attitudes, Philip's transformation of the Robsons' garden at Haytersbank can be read as his attempt to raise the family's social position. Moreover, as he is related to Mrs Robson and intends to marry Sylvia, such a gesture also indicates his own aspirations for social-climbing, and hints at the beautifying and confinement of women that status-raising entails. As he remembers, there has been a practical garden 'planted with berry-bushes for use' and 'southernwood and sweet-briar for sweetness of smell' before the Robsons move in (p. 202), but he implements, albeit temporarily, an aesthetically orientated gardening plan. He remembers 'laying out his few spare pence in hen-and-chicken daisies at one time, in

²⁹⁶ For gardening trends in the Victorian era, gardening literature available to Gaskell, and the garden of Plymouth Grove, see Ann Brooks, 'Understanding Elizabeth Gaskell's Garden and its History', *The Gaskell Journal*, 27 (2013), 22-48.

flower-seeds at another; again in a rose-tree in a pot' (p. 202). In introducing bedding and ornamental plants into the garden, Philip alters its original characteristics, either those of moorland or those of a simple, practical patch of land. Instead, he creates an orderly environment where plants are carefully orchestrated and controlled. The flowers Philip brings into the garden also bear the hallmark of his expectations for Sylvia. The hen-and-chicken daisy, its name indicating the feature of little flowers coming from under the main one (*Fig. 5*), evokes the image of a woman fulfilling the traditional role of a mother in the domestic sphere. In addition, as daisies have traditionally been fastened together to make a chain in children's games,²⁹⁷ the flower can also be tinged with Philip's infantilization of Sylvia. The sense of a hemmed-in lady continues with the rose bush Philip substitutes, which, as opposed to the wild briar-rose indigenous to the native landscape, is 'in a pot', in other words, confined. This image of an enclosed decorative flower likewise corresponds to the role Philip desires Sylvia to assume after he marries her.

²⁹⁷ In Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), Alice is considering making a daisy chain when she notices the White Rabbit with a pocket watch.



Fig. 5: The hen-and-chicken daisy. George Nicholson, *The Illustrated Dictionary of Gardening*, Div. VI (London: L. Upcott Gill, 1884).

In this context, Philip's later choice of a briar-rose-patterned ribbon for Sylvia becomes problematic. His description of the pattern indicates that what he sees is a domesticated version of the wild briar-rose, and by extension a tamed and gentrified image of Sylvia: 'the briar-rose (sweetness and thorns) seemed to be the very flower for her; the soft, green ground on which the pink and brown pattern ran, was just the colour to show off her complexion' (p. 119). The briar-rose, or sweet-briar, is a species of rose with 'strong hooked prickles, pink single flowers, and small aromatic leaves' (*OED Online*), so the two characteristics – 'sweetness and thorns' – Philip singles out are the

flower's most distinctive features (*Fig. 6*). The fact that the briar-rose is indigenous to the moors and predates the Robsons suggests that the plant in the novel is connected more with a pre-settlement environment than a cultivated garden. Philip's identification of Sylvia with the briar-rose, then, suggests that he sees in her a free spirit analogous to a flower growing in the wild. However, when he compares the briar-rose with Sylvia, he glosses over the 'thorns' and dwells only on the 'sweetness'. He describes the green ground as 'soft' and pictures how it will complement Sylvia's skin tone. Because the fragrance of the briar-rose comes from its leaves, which are green, Philip's emphasis on the ribbon's green background indicates a wish to improve Sylvia's 'sweetness'. As the 'pink and brown pattern' must refer to the briar-rose's pink petals and yellow stamens, thorns disappear in both the visual representation of the flower and Philip's conception of Sylvia.

Philip's scheme of domesticating Sylvia, like his gardening plan, proves futile. The garden eventually falls back into its original state, with only 'the most useful things' such as 'pot-herbs, marigolds, potatoes, [and] onions' remaining (p. 203), while Sylvia, as their subsequent marital discord indicates, becomes untameable. Philip's failure to acknowledge Sylvia's need of freedom, like his vain attempts to transform the Haytersbank garden into a genteel space, reveals the problem of viewing women as class-signifying symbols.



Fig. 6: The sweet briar rose. From *A Collection of Flowers* (1795) by John Edwards. Held in the Botany Library at the Natural History Museum, London.

In addition, the way in which Philip handles the ribbon as if it were Sylvia is profoundly disturbing:

[H]e touched it tenderly, as if he were caressing it, when he thought of her wearing it; [...] And she would in a way belong to him: her cousin, her mentor, her chaperon, her lover! While others only admired, he might hope to appropriate; for

of late they had been such happy friends! (p. 119)

In Philip's imagination, Sylvia will become his possession when she wears the ribbon, as indicated by the word 'belong'. When assessing his chances of winning her heart as opposed to other suitors, he even refers to her as if she were an object to be unceremoniously acquired, as the word 'appropriate' conveys a sense of forced ownership. Although Philip expresses his regard for Sylvia by investing her qualities in the inanimate ribbon, he quickly dehumanises her by dwelling on her state as his possession. The ribbon with a briar-rose pattern thus becomes a fetish and functions as a conduit for him to envisage tying her to himself. He chooses a pattern which he thinks suits her, only to mark his objectification of her and her subjection to him.

At first Sylvia accepts Philip's ribbon as a simple token of cousinly love, but once she is provoked into recognising the sexual interest and matrimonial intentions Philip invests in his gift, she does not scruple to disown it. At the Corneys' New Year party, the Corney sisters quickly point out the embedded significance of the ribbon as soon as they know who the giver is. As Molly jocularly says to Sylvia: 'Oh, oh! our cousin Philip, is it? and he'll not be living so far away from your mother? I've no need be a witch to put two and two together.' (p. 122) The Corney sisters' unceremonious unveiling of a meaning Sylvia was either only dimly aware of or unwilling to recognise makes her adopt an attitude towards the giver that leaves no room for ambiguity: she 'secretly determined not to speak a word more to Philip than she could help' (p. 122). Later when the ribbon is snatched away from her in the game of crying the forfeits, Sylvia is further challenged to face the matrimonial connotation the ribbon carries: if she does not kiss the candlestick, the role being eagerly played by Kinraid, she will have to give up her ribbon. Here the audience demands that Sylvia make a gesture of affection towards a jokingly objectified person, someone they think she does not care about, to make known the emotional weight they believe she bestows upon a lover's gift. With sentiments

contrary to what the audience understand her to be possessing, Sylvia does not comply with their request. To Sylvia, Kinraid is more than a random 'candlestick', and the ribbon carries no affectionate associations, so she refuses to kiss Kinraid as if he were an inanimate object and explicitly declares, 'I don't care for t' ribbon' (p. 129).

As with the fancy dress materials Philip gives Sylvia, the ribbon with a briar-rose pattern is transformed by Sylvia for her own use. On the day Philip witnesses Kinraid's capture by the press-gang, he notices a piece of ribbon tied to Kinraid's hat, and it is the same ribbon he has given to Sylvia prior to the Corneys' party. It is reasonable to infer that on New Year's Eve Sylvia exchanges her cousin's gift for a brown ribbon during the period of a quarter of an hour where both she and Kinraid disappear from their merrymaking fellows, as at the end of her absence, Sylvia returns 'looking lovelier than ever, her complexion brilliant, her eyes drooping, her hair neatly and freshly arranged, tied with a brown ribbon instead of that she was supposed to have forfeited' (p. 130). Although the actual exchange of the ribbon, like Sylvia and Kinraid's kiss, happens offstage, the text does hint at the fact that Sylvia uses what represents Philip's social ambition and control as her own love token for Kinraid. When Daniel Robson, in an attempt to divert Sylvia's attention from Kinraid's disappearance, proposes to buy Sylvia 'a bonny ribbon for thy hair out o' t' cousin's own shop' (p. 207), Sylvia declines, and the narrator explains that '[s]ome thought of another ribbon which had once tied up her hair, and afterwards been cut in twain' must have crossed her mind at this point (p. 208). Presumably Sylvia and Kinraid each possess a portion of the ribbon.

Sylvia's repurposing of the ribbon, however, is fraught with problems. For one thing, the ribbon still signifies Philip's genuine attachment even if it carries connotations of his patriarchal control. In passing the ribbon Philip has given her on to Kinraid, Sylvia spurns Philip's advances and, more significantly, allows his love token to be possessed by his rival as a mark of his defeat in love. Another issue concerning Sylvia's reuse of Philip's gift is whether or not Kinraid regards the ribbon entirely as an

expression of her love. In Daniel Robson's view, he is like a 'vain peacock' when he wears Sylvia's ribbon on his hat (p. 204). The open display of an object signifying a mutual attachment that is best kept a secret indicates that Kinraid values his own romantic conquest as much as, if not more than, Sylvia's love for him. In this regard, Sylvia's mark of affection becomes a trophy that commemorates another man's achievement. Sylvia may escape from Philip's class-conscious possessiveness only to fall victim to Kinraid's male conceit.

It is noteworthy, however, that Sylvia replaces the briar-rose-patterned ribbon with a plain brown one. What this replacement demonstrates is a covert action of rebelling against conventional roles for women and expressing female sexuality. Brown is a muted colour, and like the grey colour of the cloak Mrs Robson and Philip wish Sylvia to purchase, it evokes the image of a prim and proper lady. Indeed, Sylvia's neatly arranged hair tied with the brown ribbon exemplifies such an image. Under this mask of respectability, Sylvia is able simultaneously to dissociate herself from the imposed love and control inhering in Philip's ribbon and secretly proclaim her affection for another man. In this regard, she manages legitimately to rebel against the role Philip prepares for her and show signs of her budding sexuality.

Throughout the novel Sylvia tries hard to distance herself from Philip's gifts, repurposing them to build her own network of relationships, including female bonding with her daughter and Hester, and expressing her love for Kinraid. However, Sylvia's troubled gift relations with Philip seem to come to an end as the novel draws to a close. Their reconciliation is marked by a piece of black ribbon. In the scene where Philip dies, Sylvia reaches for the black ribbon Hester has lifted up from Philip's neck and places it around her own neck. Their reconciliation, however, is ambiguous because it requires two female intermediaries, Hester and Bella, for Sylvia to re-connect with Philip. It is Hester who notices the black ribbon while closing Philip's eyes; it is also she who discovers a key object attached to the ribbon: the half-crown piece that Sylvia has

inserted into a slice of cake intended for Philip, whose real identity was then unknown to Sylvia. However, Hester's initial remarks about the coin fail to attract Sylvia's attention. It is not until Bella 'cre[eps] to her mother's arms' that Sylvia becomes aware of what is happening around her and 'stretche[s] out her hand for the black ribbon' (p. 434). What Hester, Bella, and the black ribbon signify in this reconciliation scene provides a contrast with the briar-rose ribbon episode. The briar-rose-patterned ribbon, connoting Philip's objectification of Sylvia and implying both Philip's and Kinraid's dominance over her, is a symbolically over-determined object that brings about Sylvia's rebellion and the feud between Philip and Kinraid. In contrast, the black ribbon not endowed with obvious patriarchal symbols signals the communion Sylvia experiences within an all-female group and eases the tension between Sylvia and Philip. Such a distinction may be Gaskell's way of criticising the patriarchal symbolism that is too often invested in material objects.

While Philip's gifts, whether expensive or cheap, are overcharged with patriarchal ideologies and thus impose burdens on Sylvia, they produce different effects on other recipients. Apart from Sylvia, two other female characters in the novel are connected with Philip through his gifts: his co-worker, Hester, and his little customer, Phoebe Moorsom. In each case the gifting involves a handkerchief. Given handkerchiefs' social significance in the nineteenth century, Philip's gift relations with Hester and Phoebe can be read as the text's further exploration of his patriarchal ideology.

Nineteenth-century handkerchiefs were not expensive luxuries. With ordinary ones costing as little as 9d and silk ones priced at over 4s, handkerchiefs were affordable even to servants.²⁹⁸ However, their relatively low monetary value did not mean that they were unimportant. As they were meant to be worn around the neck, they functioned as 'a signal of respectability'.²⁹⁹ It is significant that Philip and Coulson always give

²⁹⁸ Styles, 'Involuntary Consumers', p. 15.

²⁹⁹ Wynne, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel*, p. 71.

Hester ‘a silk handkerchief of the prettiest colours they could pick out of the shop, intended for her to wear round her neck’ (p. 141), as their joint present for her on New Year’s Day. In the late eighteenth century, the English fêted at year’s end instead of around Christmas. Although gifting was also an important element in such celebrations, it was conducted differently from that of a modern Christmas. While today Christmas presents are exchanged mainly within the family, the end-of-year festivities in the late eighteenth century featured gifts with clearly recognisable monetary value that were given by the privileged to their social inferiors: what mattered was expressing and consolidating a legible form of hierarchy between the giver and the recipient.³⁰⁰ The gifting relationship between Philip-Coulson and Hester falls into this category. The idea of exhibiting the enterprise’s success is apparent, as indicated by the effort Philip and Coulson make to select the appropriate handkerchief and the conspicuous body part on which the chosen fabric is intended to be displayed. Philip and Coulson’s gift of a silk handkerchief not only shows the disturbing power embedded in men’s gifts but also implies the gender inequality Hester faces. While Philip and Coulson soon succeed their masters as joint proprietors of Foster’s shop, Hester, who has long worked alongside her male colleagues, is not ‘considered as a kind of partner’ until Philip leaves Monkshaven (p. 360). The text does not represent Hester as being troubled by these arrangements. In fact, she would have done anything for Philip because of her love for him. The irony lies in the fact that Philip, envisaging marrying a woman who can share his ideologies of domestic life, is blind to Hester’s willingness and genuine love.

Another female character whose relationship with Philip also involves a handkerchief is a little girl called Phoebe. She visits the shop with her mother on New Year’s Day and wishes to get her reward for complying with Philip’s previous request. As the mother’s muttering indicates, Philip has promised to give Phoebe ‘a barley-sugar

³⁰⁰ See James G. Carrier, *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 181-82.

stick' if she would 'hem him a handkercher' (p. 140). Phoebe, who 'has done her five stitches a day' (p. 140), fits Philip's idea of a wife. In fact, according to Phoebe's mother, the little girl believes Philip has 'promised to g'e her a kiss, and t' make her yo'r [his] wife' (p. 141). This episode, though brief and light-hearted, reveals the problem of Philip's obsession with the male-centred ideologies invested in objects. It is ironic that his image of a dutiful wife is realised in the form of a child open about her desire to be kissed.

PHILIP HEPBURN'S OBJECT LESSON

If Philip is guilty of investing his gifts with patriarchal connotations for the most part of the novel, towards the end he seems to be going on a journey of atonement to reconceive things' meanings. Hilary Schor has discussed Philip's reconciliation with Sylvia in the context of literary tradition. The novel presents Philip as having read and imagined himself playing the role of the hero in 'the story of Guy of Warwick in *The Seven Champions of Christendom*', who when returning after a long absence from home was initially not recognised by his wife but finally reunited with her through 'a secret sign known but to them twain' (p. 403).³⁰¹ Schor argues that such a representation offers an 'improbable reunion' because Sylvia cannot recognise this model of a conciliatory narrative.³⁰² While I agree with Schor that Philip's relationship with Sylvia is not represented as fully restored, I propose that if Philip's new object relations are taken into account, his conciliatory gesture is not as gloomy as Schor suggests.

³⁰¹ *Renowned History of the Seven Champions of Christendom* by Richard Johnson was published in 1596 and in fact does not include the story of Sir Guy, which is summarised by the narrator in the novel. However, Francis O'Gorman, editor of the *Sylvia's Lovers* edition used in this thesis, explains that 'both *Seven Champions* and the story of Guy had an active life as chapbooks in the eighteenth century, frequently bound together since connections of plot and subject matter made them natural companions' (p. 470).

³⁰² Hilary Schor, p. 170.

First, Philip is stripped of almost every object that can serve as an outward sign of male authority. He has to live on his meagre pension of sixpence a day, and his disfigurement deters him from going back to his home 'with authority' (p. 417). Not even the affective associations of things are available to him. He only dares to walk 'for hours and hours round the house which once was his, which might be his now, with all its homely, blessed comforts, could he but go and assert his right to it' (p. 417). Nevertheless, Philip does not lose contact with all material objects. Among the few belongings Philip possesses in the final part of his life, the cloak given by Lieutenant Pennington and the watch he inherited from his father are two objects that play a key role in embodying his ideological remoulding. The cloak, given its associations with war, could have been viewed as a mere symbol of national pride, just as the 'marks of active service' on Philip's body are 'reverenced by the rustic cottagers as though they had been crowns and sceptres' (p. 396). To Philip, however, the cloak represents more comradeship than macho prowess, as he remembers its being presented by Lieutenant Pennington to keep him warm on his homeward voyage. If Philip, when joining Mrs Robson in persuading Sylvia to choose a grey cloak rather than a red one, upheld the view that clothing was primarily a signifier that amplifies patriarchal symbolism, now he values individual sentiment over empty connotations.

Ironically, however, Philip still has to undergo the suffocating power of patriarchal symbolism in things before he can reconnect with Sylvia. The warden at St Sepulchre happens to be Lieutenant Pennington's father. Recognising the cloak as indeed belonging to his son, Mr Pennington takes it upon himself to use the garment as a reference to Philip's character and half-coerces him to remain in St Sepulchre as a bedesman. It is noteworthy that Philip becomes 'restless and uneasy in the midst of all this peace and comfort' (p. 402), just as Sylvia constantly wanted to flee from the comfortable house he had constructed for her. In thus suffering from the restrictive force of symbolic meaning in things, Philip seems to be punished for the restraints he has

imposed on Sylvia. Viewed in the context of Philip's final reunion with her, his time at St Sepulchre serves as a purgatorial period for him to unlearn his symbol-obsessed world view.

By the end of the novel, Philip is presented as having moved from a male-centred, symbolic way of understanding objects towards a material, emotional interpretation. His changed attitude is embodied in the episode where he sells the watch left by his father and turns the half-crown coin given by Sylvia and Bella into a pendant. The watch, being 'the most decorative item worn by a gentleman' and worn on the waistcoat with a chain,³⁰³ was a potent and visible symbol of a man's worldly success in the Victorian period. Jeremiah Foster, one of the novel's affluent male characters, has a 'great gold watch' (p. 354). The timepiece possessed by Philip may not be especially elaborate, but its craftsmanship is highly praised by the watch repairer William Darley. More importantly, as a legacy of Philip's father, it stands for a patrilineal system Philip is keen to sustain. Such patrilineal associations with watches are a recurring theme in Gaskell's novels, as they are also present in the watch and chain Bellingham gives to Leonard in *Ruth*. Hester understands the symbolic weight Philip attaches to this watch and is certain that he took it with him when he left Monkshaven. By putting the watch into circulation, Philip finally chooses to purge it of its patrilineal import. What he achieves is akin to Ruth's selling of Bellingham's watch to her doctor Mr Jones. Both erase the negative implications of an object through the change of hands.

In addition to selling his father's watch, Philip's new conception of value can also be observed in his asking Darley to punch the half-crown coin given by his wife and daughter. The metal coin, an object with seemingly non-existent materiality due to its role as an abstract medium of transaction, is here conceived by Philip in its most material and sentimental form. In turning the coin into a pendant to be worn around his neck, Philip obliterates its monetary worth and replaces it with an emotional

³⁰³ Eve J. Eckstein and G. Firkins, *Gentlemen's Dress Accessories* (Aylesbury: Shire, 1987), p. 5.

significance that pays tribute to the most important relationships in his life. In becoming more alert to objects' relationship-building agency than their patriarchal symbolic meanings, Philip is finally able to reunite with Sylvia. If a touch of sadness still lingers on in the reunion scene, as indeed Philip and Sylvia never truly reach a full mutual understanding, it is perhaps because the power of patriarchal ideology is so great that both Philip and Sylvia are its victims.

It has to be noted, however, that while Sylvia's relationships with objects reveal a pessimistic picture of women's entanglement in things' patriarchal connotations, the novel at the very end adds a more promising counter-example. Sylvia might end up being 'a pale, sad woman' (p. 435), and her daughter might have to emigrate to America to begin a new life, but Sylvia's double Hester Rose develops into a woman who demonstrates an extraordinary power of giving. What Hester is capable of offering are not inexpensive or handmade items, gifts that are more commonly associated with female givers, but 'alms-houses for poor disabled sailors and soldiers' (p. 435). As a single woman who assumes the role of a benefactor to servicemen, Hester reverses the typical gendered power imbalance in gift relations. Unlike Mrs Bellingham and Mrs Bradshaw in *Ruth*, she is not an intermediary acting for a male authority. Rather, she has both the means and the freedom to execute her own decisions. Nevertheless, the kind of giving pattern she initiates is also different from the hierarchical relational structures introduced by the male givers who uphold patriarchal ideologies. As the ultimate goal of her giving is probably to remember the love of her life Philip Hepburn, what she seeks to create through giving is a lateral relationship that involves emotional investment. Through Hester, Gaskell shows a hopeful example of female agency in gift exchange.

Like Austen, Gaskell raises issues of patriarchal control through representing women's relationships with gifts. Her female characters demonstrate similar ingenuity in dealing with unwanted gifts from men: they change the meaning of presents to avoid undesirable obligations and repurpose received items for new uses, especially in cultivating the relationships that are congenial to them. Gaskell, however, dwells more on female gift relations as a way of countering male dominance, as exemplified by Ruth's friendship with her benign Eccleston gift-givers and Sylvia's attachment to Hester and Bella. Gaskell also envisions more possibilities of women's lives in characters that can be viewed as the heroines' doubles. Jemima marries a man who does not treat her like his property, and Hester becomes an independent woman who earns her own living. Women's subjection to male power may have continued from Austen's time to Gaskell's, but Gaskell's representations show that more options were open to women in her time.

Conclusion

Through the course of this thesis, I have discovered the gendered complexities surrounding objects in Jane Austen's and Elizabeth Gaskell's works. These gendered complexities have emerged as strategies used by Austen and Gaskell to question conventions of gender roles and even to challenge the established patriarchal ideology without seeming to overstep boundaries. As women in general, and as female writers in particular, Austen and Gaskell shared a social situation which was governed by double standards. Such ideological contradictions were important to the running of a patriarchal system and, on the level of language use, were sustained by the paradoxical qualities of objects, as indicated in my discussion of nineteenth-century critical language, which featured male reviewers' use of miniatures as a metaphor for a double-edged appraisal of women's literary achievements. Through their literary creations, Austen and Gaskell explore things' multiple signifying capacities and even exploit those allusive possibilities to safely interrogate their society's gender bias. In both of these authors' works, portraying women's associations with domestic interiors and luxuries is more than a matter of recording the established order. Indeed, it also constitutes Austen's and Gaskell's coded protest against patriarchal authority.

What recurs as a theme in the novels I have examined in this thesis is that the symbolic, and often male-determined, meanings invested in objects are counterbalanced or even disrupted by literal, material, and often female-led, ways of interpretation. This theme runs through all three categories of things I have investigated. It can be observed, for example, in Elizabeth Bennet's tour of the Pemberley gallery in *Pride and Prejudice*, in Catherine Morland's obsession with everything Gothic in *Northanger Abbey*, and in Fanny Price's delight in trivial things in *Mansfield Park*. The same motif also appears in

Elizabeth Gaskell's novels and can be seen, for instance, in Mrs Hamley's and Molly Gibson's viewing of a portrait of the Hamley brothers in *Wives and Daughters*, in Molly's lament for her forced disposal of the furniture left by her mother, and in Ruth's ease with no- or low-cost gifts. The repetitive tug-of-war between the merely emblematic and the non-metaphorical in Austen's and Gaskell's works suggests that they both tap into material and experiential ways of viewing things as means to stand up to patriarchy's ingrained symbolism.

Portraits, traditionally ranked higher in the artistic hierarchy and almost always exclusively painted by men, often served as status symbols for men when they graced the walls of country houses, but Austen and Gaskell question such underlying significance when they describe women's relationships with pictures. *Pride and Prejudice* registers the patriarchal meanings of portraits by presenting a symbol-rich figure, Mrs Reynolds, as the commentator that gives supposedly authoritative accounts of the pictures housed in Pemberley. What is more important, however, is that the novel also undermines Mrs Reynolds's authority and the symbolic worth of the pictures she introduces by juxtaposing it with Elizabeth's personal experience of feeling the visual impact of Darcy's portrait. In the scene where Elizabeth meets Darcy's painted eyes, at least, Mrs Reynolds's verbal representation of a model patriarch gives way to Elizabeth's own review of Darcy as an individual. The use of women's sensory experience and personal stories to diffuse the symbolic patriarchal force of portraits can also be observed in *Wives and Daughters*, where Mrs Hamley's account of the story behind a painting of her two sons is set in a room hung with portraits of her husband's ancestors. As the mother of the sitters and thus a viewer who enjoys the portrait for its affectionate associations, Mrs Hamley is less an authority figure than Mrs Reynolds. Indeed, she represents a democratic voice when she actively invites Molly Gibson, a stranger who at this point has not yet met the sitters in person, to express her thoughts on the painting.

In addition to portraits, several highly symbolic domestic objects in Austen's and Gaskell's works also face the danger of losing their full force of patriarchal significance when women view them in a way that is literal or affective. In *Northanger Abbey*, while General Tilney clearly intends his English china, Rumford fireplace, and oak stairs, to serve more as shorthand for his wealth and taste than as objects with functional purposes, Catherine Morland is oblivious to the things he points out to her and shows a seemingly unreasonable interest in the odd and the irregular. Read against General Tilney's obsession with patriarchal symbols, Catherine's excessive attention to the physicality of an old chest can be interpreted as a refusal to accept what the established authority deems to be worthwhile. Likewise, Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters* notes and treasures things for the stories they contain or the emotions they evoke, such as her mother's old furniture. Gaskell's criticism of male-centred symbolism, however, takes a form that is different from the version seen in *Northanger Abbey*. Instead of setting a vain patriarch against a somewhat simple-minded ingénue, Gaskell makes Mr Gibson, a man who is not as mindful of status markers as General Tilney but nevertheless a symbol-sensitive head of household, the sufferer from his own symbolic consciousness by delineating his unhappy second marriage to Hyacinth Kirkpatrick, a woman who is obsessed with outward signs.

When things become signs of patriarchal power, high monetary value also becomes more readily linked with strong male control, and in Austen's and Gaskell's works gifts from men often spell trouble for the female characters who are economically vulnerable. When given by men, expensive fabrics, jewellery, and musical instruments not only carry within them the giver's financial superiority, and by extension the justification for manipulation, but also imply a demand for obedience as repayment. To resist the patriarchal ideology at work behind luxurious gifts, female recipients often shift their focus onto things' materiality or affectionate associations, and in the works I have examined, it is usually inexpensive or handmade objects that are more welcome. In

Mansfield Park, Fanny Price treasures Edmund's handwriting, something that cannot be bought, more than the gold chain he has obtained from London through his brother. In *Ruth*, the heroine defies Mrs Bellingham's attempt to put a price tag on her emotional involvement in a relationship by stressing the waste-paper-like qualities of the fifty-pound note her lover's mother has given her. In *Sylvia's Lovers*, Philip Hepburn, who for the most part of the novel shows a strong penchant for objects that serve as patriarchal symbols, can achieve a form of reconciliation with his estranged wife, Sylvia, only after he renounces his patriarchal heirloom, a gold watch inherited from his father, and turns a half-crown coin, an object whose primary function is signifying monetary value, into a pendant to remember his wife and daughter.

The recurrent pattern in Austen's and Gaskell's representations of women's person-object relationships suggests that their works were shaped by a similar ideological situation. However, as there are still variations in the ways these two authors represent women and objects, it is worth looking at how they differ and the explanation for such a distinction. For one thing, more of Gaskell's literary objects are accorded symbolic status, and the sense of patriarchal dominance they carry is so strong that the mere mention of the name is enough to send an ideological message. Edith's muslin and ribbon in *North and South*, Molly's white dress in *Wives and Daughters*, and Sylvia's dove-coloured wedding gown in *Sylvia's Lovers* are all clear indicators of male authority's attempt to make women conform to an innocent and pliable image. Gaskell alludes to these things with few or no fictional events to demonstrate their symbolic significance. Thus it seems that by her time there had been more rigidity in things' figurative meanings than in Austen's. It is true that Austen also refers to things with the assumption that their symbolic meanings are instantly recognisable to her readers. Sir Walter Elliot's mirrors in *Persuasion* and General Tilney's furniture in *Northanger Abbey* are among those objects that convey such explicit symbolic significance that Austen does not go into further detail. However, the objects that stand out in Austen's

novels are all woven into her intricate story lines. In *Pride and Prejudice*, she brings out the patriarchal traditions in portraiture by presenting an interaction between her heroine and Mrs Reynolds, a figure named after the renowned portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds; in *Emma*, she creates occasions for Jane Fairfax's piano playing to demonstrate the force of male control hidden behind the musical instrument; and in *Mansfield Park*, she also gives examples of how Henry Crawford's gold chain turns out to be the embodiment of his metaphorical attempts to chain Fanny to imposed obligations. These instances all indicate that the meanings of Gaskell's literary objects are more semantically determined than Austen's.

Freedgood has observed that the meanings of things in fiction became more and more standardised after the middle of the nineteenth century. The *Middlemarch* narrator, she argues, describes things 'to the point of exhaustion' so that '[t]he infinite individual possibilities for metonymic interpretation are reduced to proper metaphors' (p. 115). Although the degree of minuteness in Gaskell, let alone in Austen, is far from that evinced in Eliot's works, my examination of Austen's and Gaskell's novels does show a trend towards a higher level of descriptiveness and symbolism as the nineteenth century progressed. However, what I want to point out about the rigidity of things' meanings has a different focus from that in Freedgood's argument. While she emphasises the author's anxiety about the reader's interpretation, arguing that the meanings of things came to be more stabilised in *Middlemarch* because 'Eliot tried to reduce or anticipate the random way in which things, as they are read by readers, can take on meaning' (p. 112), I suggest that Gaskell's novels contain more firmly-established symbols because in her time gendered ideologies had grown more powerful.

If the different potency of things' symbolic meanings suggests varying degrees of patriarchal power, such symbolic potency is reflected in how Austen and Gaskell represent women's agency through their relationships with things. While in Austen women's total objectification is seen only in secondary female characters, in Gaskell it

becomes a norm even among her heroines. Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park*, who is constantly associated with the sofa and the mindless activity of making pieces of needlework, and Mrs Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, who does not even have a voice in the text, may be inept women who are at the mercy of their husbands' control, but the heroines in these novels both show an ability to resist or question patriarchy despite the fact that they are neither economically nor characteristically powerful. Fanny manages to circumvent Henry's attempt at tying her down to him by endowing his gift with private meanings, and Catherine penetrates General Tilney's well-preserved façade of family harmony by probing into areas he either overlooks or wishes to conceal.

Although Austen does portray objectified women who, like Lady Bertram and Mrs Tilney, either do not or cannot challenge patriarchal assumptions about accepted female behaviour, the female characters she focuses on are not completely powerless victims of circumstances. The only one of Austen's women in the novels I have examined who seems to feel but is unable to disentangle herself from problematic object relations is Jane Fairfax in *Emma*. Although Harriet Smith in the same novel and Jane are similarly situated, both being positioned on the periphery of respectability, Harriet does not show signs of discomfort when she is treated like an object in the marriage market by Emma. In comparison, Jane is acutely aware of her plight when she refers to women's slave-like status in the 'governess-trade'. As her marriage to Frank Churchill, a man whose main aim of sending her a piano seems to be to showcase her musical talent, immediately succeeds her escape from the necessity of becoming a governess, her continuing subjugation to the ideology that treats women like embellishments of patriarchal power is looming on the horizon. Jane's lapse into silence after her marriage suggests her inability to dwell on the subject of women's status. While Austen exposes women's object-like status by presenting a secondary character like Jane as being entangled in problematic gift relations, she places the heroine Emma in a position where no such complexities exist. Emma's relationship with Mr Knightley does not involve

gifts, and when she does connect with people through things, she is the one who gives, never the one who receives: she doles out produce from the Hartfield estate to her less well-to-do neighbours, including pork to the Bates and arrowroot to Jane.

By contrast, Gaskell's female characters seem more caught in the gendered conventions of society. Even Margaret Hale in *North and South*, a character with upper-class connections and queenly attributes, cannot be rid of things connoting patriarchal control. Her associations with home furnishings in her aunt's Harley Street house and with sugar tongs and Parian ware in her family's Milton drawing-room suggest a condition of objectification that the text does not explicitly state. In the Gaskell novels I have examined, it is the secondary characters who are ascribed greater power to evade troubles that can come with male gifts. Jemima Bradshaw in *Ruth* is comfortable with the pistachio candy given by Mr Farquhar, and Hester Rose in *Sylvia's Lovers* is happy to receive silk handkerchiefs from Philip. Whether or not the male givers in these two instances intend their gifts to hint at female conformity to patriarchal expectations is a minor matter. Jemima and Hester do not show signs of unease about their presents because they are in love with their male gift givers and perceive what they give as marks of goodwill, if not tokens of love. It is significant that these two characters who are less worried by gifts are also less restricted by conventions of gender roles. Jemima, despite feeling frustrated at her position as a property when she sees through her father's plan of marrying her to his business partner, is described in the proposal scene more as an equal partner than a subordinate to Mr Farquhar, and Hester ends up becoming an unmarried, financially independent woman. The fact that only marginal characters in Gaskell are less troubled by relationships with things and permitted more unconventional life stories may suggest that by her time, the ideological force behind things had become so pervasive that the freedom of departing from the norm could only be given to those who attract less attention. Nevertheless, it is still remarkable that such characters are created at all. They represent Gaskell's attempts to

explore possible ways of transcending social restrictions.

Perhaps because domestic objects and luxuries can wield patriarchal power that is too great for women to cope with in heterosexual relationships, both Austen and Gaskell explore, though only briefly, the possibilities of an all-female community and hint at women's opportunities outside the home. Alternatives to conventional marriages appear in Fanny's relationship with her sister Susan in *Mansfield Park*, in Ruth's life with the Bensons, and in Sylvia's cohabitation with her daughter, her husband's colleague Hester, and Hester's mother.³⁰⁴ *Cranford*, though not discussed in this thesis, is a work in which the theme of single women is more fully developed by Gaskell. In their last novels, Austen and Gaskell also represent women who are less associated with the home and with the things contained in it. More significantly, these heroines are offered the prospect of leading less house-bound lives. Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* will marry a sailor, and Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, though the novel is not finished and thus the ending not fully defined, is likely to become the wife of an explorer. These instances suggest that having reached an advanced point in their writing career, both Austen and Gaskell began to envision a widening of life experiences for women as a more effective way of acquiring agency.

None of the novels I discuss here openly asks to be read as a commentary on gender issues. In fact, describing women's connection with art, homely goods, and finery, objects which were conventionally considered to be 'feminine', seems to reinforce society's ideology. However, even if Austen and Gaskell stay within the bounds of patriarchal tradition in their choice of subjects, they lay bare problems within their social system, and the subtle protests manifested through their depictions of women and things cannot be overlooked. It is in representing the physical experience of

³⁰⁴ When commenting on the newly formed world of women in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Hilary Schor points out that 'women would still have to abandon sexual desire' to be free from the danger of becoming objects in patriarchal culture (p. 171). While this inherent limitation of all-female communities cannot be overlooked, I focus on the fact that Gaskell, and indeed Austen, experiment with alternative ways of life for women.

the ideological system that sustains women's frustrations that Austen and Gaskell express their criticism. In addition, by deep engagement with material objects in their plots, Austen and Gaskell make readers' participation necessary in order for these things' hidden meanings to be understood. Their readers must share with them the same knowledge about socially received symbols, as well as the same active involvement in the plot, if they are more fully to appreciate the authors' works. In this way, Austen and Gaskell are highlighting, and possibly resisting, patriarchy's symbolic force with a call for a literal and prolonged reading of things.

Bibliography

PRIMARY SOURCES

Austen, Jane, *Emma* (1816), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

---, *Mansfield Park* (1814), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

---, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

---, *Persuasion* (1818), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

---, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

---, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), ed. by James Kinsley (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

Gaskell, Elizabeth, *Cranford* (1853), ed. by Elizabeth Porges Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008)

---, *North and South* (1855), ed. by Angus Easson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)

---, *Ruth* (1853), ed. by Angus Easson (London: Penguin, 2004)

---, *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

---, *Wives and Daughters* (1866), ed. by Pam Morris (London: Penguin, 2003)

SECONDARY SOURCES

- Adburgham, Alison, *Shops and Shopping 1800-1914: Where, and in What Manner the Well-Dressed Englishwoman Bought her Clothes* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964)
- Alexander, Peter F., ‘“Robin Adair” as a Musical Clue in Jane Austen’s *Emma*’, *The Review of English Studies*, 39 (1988), 84-86
- ‘Amber’, *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 11 (1894), 209-11
- Appadurai, Arjun, ed., *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986)
- Arnold, Dana, *The Georgian Country House: Architecture, Landscape and Society* (Stroud: Sutton, 2003)
- Arnold, Dana, ed., *The Georgian Villa* (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996)
- Austen, Caroline, *My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir* (London: Jane Austen Society, 1952)
- Austen, Jane, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, 4th edn, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)
- Ayres, James, *Domestic Interiors: The British Tradition, 1500-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)
- Barchas, Janine, ‘Mrs. Gaskell’s *North and South*: Austen’s Early Legacy’, *Persuasions: The Jane Austen Journal*, 30 (2008), 53-66
- Barnaby, Alice, ‘Dresses and Drapery: Female Self-Fashioning in Muslin, 1800-1850’, in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 89-104
- Barthes, Roland, ‘The Reality Effect’, in *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by

- Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975; repr. 1989), pp. 141-48
- Baudot, Laura, ‘“Nothing really in it”: Gothic Interiors and the External of the Courtship Plot in *Northanger Abbey*’, *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 24 (2012), 325-52
- Bazell, Beatrice, ‘The “Atrocious” Interior: Wallpaper, Machinery and 1850s Aesthetics in *North and South*’, *The Gaskell Journal*, 26 (2012), 36-51
- Bell, Susan G., ‘Women Create Gardens in Male Landscapes: A Revisionist Approach to Eighteenth-Century English Garden History’, *Feminist Studies*, 16 (1990), 471-91
- Berg, Maxine, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005)
- Berg, Maxine and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury: Consumer Culture in Europe 1650-1850* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999)
- Berg, Maxine and Elizabeth Eger, eds., *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)
- Berger, John and others, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972)
- Bertelsen, Lance, ‘Jane Austen’s Miniatures: Painting, Drawing, and the Novels’, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 45 (1984), 350-72
- Blackwell, Mark, ‘“The Setting Always Casts a Different Shade on It”: Allusion and Interpretation in *Sense and Sensibility*’, *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 17 (2004), 111-25
- , ‘Harriet’s “Tooth Amiss” and Transplantation in *Emma*’, *Modern Philology*, 103 (2006), 474-97
- Blackwell, Mark, ed., *The Secret Life of Things: Animals, Objects, and It-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University

- Press, 2007)
- Blank, Antje, 'Dress', in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 234-51
- 'Book Review', *The British Critic*, 30 (1807), 688
- Bove, Alexander, 'The "Unbearable Realism of A Dream": On the Subject of Portraits in Austen and Dickens', *ELH*, 74 (2007), 655-79
- Bray, Joe, 'Belinda, Emma, and the "Likeness" of the Portrait', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 33 (2011), 1-15
- Brewer, John and Roy Porter, eds., *Consumption and the World of Goods* (London: Routledge, 1993)
- Briggs, Asa, *Victorian Things*, rev. edn (Stroud: Sutton, 2003)
- Brodie, Laura F., 'Society and the Superfluous Female: Jane Austen's Treatment of Widowhood', *Studies in English Literature*, 34 (1994), 697-718
- Brontë, Charlotte, *Selected Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Brooks, Ann, 'Understanding Elizabeth Gaskell's Garden and its History', *The Gaskell Journal*, 27 (2013), 22-48
- Brown, Bill, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)
- , 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2001), 1-22
- Bryson, Norman, *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (London: Macmillan, 1983)
- Büchel, Kurt F., ed., *Letter Openers: Works of Art on the Desk* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2011)
- Burman, Barbara, 'Pocketing the Difference: Gender and Pockets in Nineteenth-Century Britain', *Gender & History*, 14 (2002), 447-69
- Bury, Shirley, *An Introduction to Sentimental Jewellery* (London: H.M.S.O.,

1985)

Butler, Marilyn, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975)

Byrde, Penelope, *Jane Austen Fashion: Fashion and Needlework in the Works of Jane Austen* (Ludlow: Excellent, 1999)

Byrne, Paula, *The Real Jane Austen: A Life in Small Things* (London: HarperPress, 2013)

Carrier, James G., *Gifts and Commodities: Exchange and Western Capitalism since 1700* (London: Routledge, 1995)

Cecil, Lord David, *Early Victorian Novelists: Essays in Revaluation* (London: Constable, 1934)

Cheshire, Jim and Michael Crick-Smith, 'Taste and Morality at Plymouth Grove: Elizabeth Gaskell's Home and its Decoration', *The Gaskell Journal*, 27 (2013), 1-21

Cleere, Eileen, 'Reinvesting Nieces: *Mansfield Park* and the Economics of Endogamy', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 28 (1995), 113-30

Cohen, Deborah, *Household Gods: The British and their Possessions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)

Cohen, Monica F., 'Persuading the Navy Home: Austen and Married Women's Professional Property', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29 (1996), 346-66

Conway, Alison M., *Private Interests: Women, Portraiture and the Visual Culture of the English Novel, 1709-1791* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001)

Coombs, Katherine, *The Portrait Miniature in England* (London: V&A Publications, 1998)

Copeland, Edward, 'The Austens and the Elliots: A Consumer's Guide to *Persuasion*', in *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and Her Profession*, ed. by Juliet McMaster and Bruce Stovel (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 136-53

Copeland, Edward and Juliet McMaster, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Jane*

- Austen*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)
- Craik, W. A., *Elizabeth Gaskell and the English Provincial Novel* (London: Routledge, 2013)
- Crozier, W. R., 'Self-Consciousness, Exposure, and the Blush', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 34 (2004), 1-17
- D'Albertis, Deirdre, 'The Life and Letters of E. C. Gaskell', in *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell*, ed. by Jill L. Matus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 10-26
- Daly, Suzanne, *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011)
- Daunton, M. J., *Progress and Poverty: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1700-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995)
- Despotopoulou, Anna, 'Fanny's Gaze and the Construction of Feminine Space in *Mansfield Park*', *Modern Language Review*, 99 (2004), 569-83
- Doy, Gen, *Drapery: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002)
- Duckworth, Alistair M., *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971)
- Eckstein, Eve J. and G. Firkins, *Gentlemen's Dress Accessories* (Aylesbury: Shire, 1987)
- Edgeworth, Maria, *Letters from England, 1813-1844*, ed. by Christina Colvin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971)
- Ehrlich, Cyril, *The Piano: A History* (London: J. M. Dent, 1976)
- Eliot, George, *Adam Bede* (1859), ed. by Valentine Cunningham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)
- Erickson, Lee, 'The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library', *Studies in English Literature*, 30 (1990), 573-90

- Fennetaux, Ariane, 'Women's Pockets and the Construction of Privacy in the Long Eighteenth Century', *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 20 (2008), 307-34
- Finn, Margot, 'Men's Things: Masculine Possession in the Consumer Revolution', *Social History*, 25 (2000), 133-55
- Foster, Vanda, *A Visual History of Costume: The Nineteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1984)
- Fraser, Hilary, 'Women and the Ends of Art History: Vision and Corporeality in Nineteenth-Century Critical Discourse', *Victorian Studies*, 42 (1999), 77-100
- Freedgood, Elaine, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006)
- Freeland, Natalka, 'Ruth's Perverse Economies: Women, Hoarding, and Expenditure', *ELH*, 70 (2003), 197-221
- Frey, Anne, 'A Nation without Nationalism: The Reorganization of Feeling in Austen's *Persuasion*', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 38 (2005), 214-34
- Galperin, William H., 'Austen's Earliest Readers and the Rise of the Janeites', in *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, ed. by Deidre Lynch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 87-114
- Gamman, Lorraine and Margaret Marshment, eds., *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture* (London: Women's Press, 1988)
- Gaskell, Elizabeth, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1966)
- Gemmill, Katie, 'Jane Austen as Editor: Letters on Fiction and the Cancelled Chapters of *Persuasion*', *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 24 (2011), 105-22
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979)
- Girouard, Mark, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural*

History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978)

Goggin, Joyce, 'Pride and Prejudice Reloaded: Navigating the Space of Pemberley', *Persuasions On-Line*, 27 (2007)

<<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol27no2/goggin.htm>> [accessed 1 August 2013]

Goodheart, Eugene, 'Emma: Jane Austen's Errant Heroine', *Sewanee Review*, 116 (2008), 589-604

[Greg, W. R.], 'Prostitution', *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, 53 (1850), 448-506

Grootenboer, Hanneke, 'Treasuring the Gaze: Eye Miniature Portraits and the Intimacy of Vision', *Art Bulletin*, 88 (2006), 496-507

Gunn, Simon and Rachel Bell, *Middle Classes: Their Rise and Sprawl* (London: Phoenix, 2003)

Hadjiafxendi, Kyriaki and Patricia Zakreski, eds., *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013)

Halperin, John, ed., *Jane Austen Bicentenary Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)

Harris, Jocelyn, '“Domestic Virtues and National Importance”: Lord Nelson, Captain Wentworth, and the English Napoleonic War Hero', *Eighteenth Century Fiction*, 19 (2006), 181-205

Hart, Francis R., 'The Spaces of Privacy: Jane Austen', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30 (1975), 305-33

Harvey, W. J., 'The Plot of *Emma*', *Essays in Criticism*, 17 (1967), 48-63

Hatano, Yoko, 'Fanny Price and Molly Gibson: Bearers of the Country House Tradition', *Gaskell Society Journal*, 10 (1996), 92-101

Heffernan, James A. W., *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer*

- to *Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)
- Howe, Beatrice, *Antiques from the Victorian Home* (London: Batsford, 1973)
- Hudson, Glenda A., *Sibling Love and Incest in Jane Austen's Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999)
- Hughes, Clair, 'Talk about Muslin: Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*', *Textile: The Journal of Cloth & Culture*, 4 (2006), 184-97
- Hunt, Kerri E., ' "Nouns that were Signs of Things": Object Lessons in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *The Gaskell Journal*, 26 (2012), 3-17
- Jackson-Stops, Gervase and James Pipkin, *The English Country House: A Grand Tour* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993)
- Jefferys, James B., *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954)
- John, Juliet, 'Things, Words and the Meanings of Art', in *Dickens and Modernity*, ed. by Juliet John (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012), pp. 115-32
- John, Juliet, ed., *Dickens and Modernity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012)
- Johnson, Claudia L., *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012)
- , *Jane Austen: Women Politics and the Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)
- Jones, Ann R. and Peter Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
- Kagawa, P. K., 'Jane Austen, the Architect: (Re)Building Spaces at *Mansfield Park*', *Women's Studies*, 35 (2006), 125-43
- Kanwit, John P., ' "Mere Outward Appearances"? Household Taste and Social Perception in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*', *Victorian Review*, 35 (2009), 190-210
- Kaufman, Paul, 'The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social

- History', *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, 57 (1967), 1-67
- Kerfoot, Alicia L., 'Replacing the Old Silver Knife: The Convergence of Antislavery Rhetoric and Legal Discourse in *Mansfield Park*', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 85 (2008), 275-91
- Knox-Shaw, Peter, 'Fanny Price Refuses to Kowtow', *The Review of English Studies*, 47 (1996), 212-17
- Kopytoff, Igor, 'The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process', in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. by Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 64-91
- Korba, Susan M., '“Improper and Dangerous Distinctions”: Female Relationships and Erotic Domination in *Emma*', *Studies in the Novel*, 29 (1997), 139-63
- Kramp, Michael, 'The Woman, the Gypsies, and England: Harriet Smith's National Role', *College Literature*, 31 (2004), 147-68
- Lane, Maggie, *Jane Austen and Food* (London: Hambledon Press, 1995)
- Larner, Andrew J., '“A Transcript of Actual Life”: Headache in the Novels of Jane Austen', *Headache: The Journal of Head & Face Pain*, 50 (2010), 692-96
- [Lewes, G. H.], 'The Novels of Jane Austen', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 86 (1859), 99-113
- , 'A Word about Tom Jones', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 87 (1860), 331-41
- Lindner, Christoph, *Fictions of Commodity Culture: From the Victorian to the Postmodern* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003)
- , 'Outside Looking in: Material Culture in Gaskell's Industrial Novels', *Orbis Litterarum*, 55 (2000), 379-96
- Loesser, Arthur, *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History* (London: Constable, 1990)
- Logan, Thad, *The Victorian Parlour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

2001)

Longmuir, Anne, 'Consuming Subjects: Women and the Market in Elizabeth

Gaskell's *North and South*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 34 (2012), 237-52

Lupton, Christina, 'Theorizing Surfaces and Depths: Gaskell's

Cranford', *Criticism*, 50 (2008), 235-54

Lynch, Deidre, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the*

Business of Inner Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998)

Lynch, Deidre, ed., *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 2000)

Marcus, Sharon, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian*

England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007)

Matus, Jill L., *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and*

Maternity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995)

Matus, Jill L., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Elizabeth Gaskell* (Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press, 2007)

McKendrick, Neil, John Brewer and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer*

Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England (London: Europa, 1982)

McMaster, Juliet and Bruce Stovel, eds., *Jane Austen's Business: Her World and*

Her Profession (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996)

Michie, Elsie B., 'Austen's Powers: Engaging with Adam Smith in Debates about

Wealth and Virtue', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 34 (2000), 5-27

Miller, Andrew H., *Novels Behind Glass: Commodity Culture and Victorian*

Narrative (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995)

Moler, Kenneth, *Jane Austen's Art of Allusion* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska

Press, 1968)

Moore, Simon, *Pocket Fruit Knives: A Synopsis of their History from the United*

- Kingdom, France, Northern Europe & USA* (Farnham Common: Antique Knives, 2008)
- , *Penknives and Other Folding Knives* (Princes Risborough: Shire, 2006)
- Moretti, Franco, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, trans. by Albert Sbragia, new edn (London: Verso, 2000)
- Morgan, Elizabeth, 'Pertinacious Industry: The Keyboard Etude and the Female Amateur in England, 1804-20', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 69-87
- Morrison, Paul, 'Enclosed in Openness: *Northanger Abbey* and the Domestic Carceral', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 33 (1991), 1-23
- Mulvey, Laura, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989)
- Muthesius, Stefan, *The Poetic Home: Designing the 19th-Century Domestic Interior* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2009)
- Newman, Beth, '“The Situation of the Looker-on”: Gender, Narration, and Gaze in *Wuthering Heights*', *PMLA*, 105 (1990), 1029-41
- Nickerson, David, *English Furniture of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963)
- Oman, Charles, *British Rings, 800-1914* (London: Batsford, 1974)
- Osborne, Katherine D., 'His, Hers, and Theirs: Gendered Ownership in Victorian Marriage and Friendship' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Kentucky, 2010)
- , 'Inherited Emotions: George Eliot and the Politics of Heirlooms', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 64 (2010), 465-93
- Palser Havelly, Cicely, 'Emma: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 42 (1993), 221-37

Parakilas, James and others, *Piano Roles: A New History of the Piano* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002)

Parissien, Steven, *Interiors: The Home since 1700* (London: Laurence King, 2009)

Parker, Rozsika, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women's Press, 1984)

Parrinder, Patrick, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from its Origins to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Pettitt, Clare, 'On Stuff', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008), 1-12

<<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/474/334>> [accessed 18 May 2013]

---, 'Time Lag and Elizabeth Gaskell's Transatlantic Imagination', *Victorian Studies*, 54 (2012), 599-623

Pevsner, Nikolaus, 'The Architectural Setting of Jane Austen's Novels', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 31 (1968), 404-22

Piggott, Patrick, *The Innocent Diversion: A Study of Music in the Life and Writings of Jane Austen* (London: Douglas Cleverdon, 1979)

Plotz, John, 'Can the Sofa Speak? A Look at Thing Theory', *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts*, 47 (2005), 109-18

---, *Portable Property: Victorian Culture on the Move* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)

Plunkett, John, 'Light Work: Feminine Leisure and the Making of Transparencies', in *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Artistry and Industry in Britain*, ed. by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 43-67

Pointon, Marcia, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in*

- Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)
- , *Strategies for Showing: Women, Possession, and Representation in English Visual Culture, 1665-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)
- , ‘“Surrounded with Brilliants”: Miniature Portraits in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Art Bulletin*, 83 (2001), 48-71
- Ponsonby, Margaret, *Stories from Home: English Domestic Interiors, 1750-1850* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)
- Poovey, Mary, *Uneven Developments: The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988)
- , *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley and Jane Austen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984)
- Preus, Nicholas E., ‘Sexuality in *Emma*: A Case History’, *Studies in the Novel*, 23 (1991), 196-216
- Rappoport, Jill, *Giving Women: Alliance and Exchange in Victorian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)
- Retford, Kate, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006)
- Reynolds, Sir Joshua, *Discourses on Art* (1797), ed. by Robert R. Wark (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975)
- Ribeiro, Aileen, *A Visual History of Costume: The Eighteenth Century* (London: Batsford, 1983)
- Richardson, Alan, ‘Reading Practices’, in *Jane Austen in Context*, ed. by Janet Todd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 397-405
- Sales, Roger, *Jane Austen and Representations of Regency England* (London: Routledge, 1994)
- Sattaur, Jennifer, ‘Thinking Objectively: An Overview of “Thing Theory” in

- Victorian Studies', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40 (2012), 347-57
- Saumarez Smith, Charles, *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1993)
- Scarisbrick, Diana, *Jewellery in Britain 1066-1837: A Documentary, Social, Literary and Artistic Survey* (Wilby: Michael Russell, 1994)
- Schaffer, Talia, 'Craft, Authorial Anxiety, and "The Cranford Papers"', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38 (2005), 221-39
- Schor, Hilary M., *Scheherazade in the Marketplace: Elizabeth Gaskell and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)
- Schor, Naomi, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (London: Methuen, 1987)
- [Scott, Walter], 'Review of *Emma*', *The Quarterly Review*, 14 (1815), 188-201
- Seed, John, 'From "Middling Sort" to Middle Class in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century England', in *Social Orders and Social Classes in Europe since 1500: Studies in Social Stratification*, ed. by M. L. Bush (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 114-35
- Shackleford, Steve, ed., *Blade's Guide to Knives & their Values* (Iola, WI: Krause Publications, 2010)
- Shears, Jonathon and Jen Harrison, eds., *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013)
- Sherwell, Arthur, *Life in West London: A Study and a Contrast* (London: Methuen, 1897)
- <http://www.victorianlondon.org/publications/westlondon-2.htm#CHAPTER_VII>
[accessed 25 March 2015]
- Skinner, John, 'Exploring Space: The Constellations of *Mansfield Park*', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 4 (1992), 126-48
- Southam, Brian, 'The Silence of the Bertrams: Slavery and Chronology of

- Mansfield Park*, *Times Literary Supplement*, (17 Feb. 1995), 13-14
- Spyer, Patricia, ed., *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces* (New York: Routledge, 1998)
- Staves, Susan, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990)
- Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993)
- Stokes, Myra, *The Language of Jane Austen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991)
- Styles, John, 'Clothing the North: The Supply of Non-élite Clothing in the Eighteenth-Century North of England', *Textile History*, 25 (1994), 139-66
- , 'Custom or Consumption? Plebeian Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England', in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. by Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 103-15
- , 'Involuntary Consumers? Servants and their Clothes in Eighteenth-Century England', *Textile History*, 33 (2002), 9-21
- Tait, Hugh, *Clocks and Watches* (London: British Museum, 1983)
- Thornton, Peter, *Authentic Decor: The Domestic Interior 1620-1920* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984)
- Todd, Dennis and Cynthia Wall, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections on Occasional Forms: Essays in Honor of J. Paul Hunter* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001)
- Todd, Janet, ed., *Jane Austen in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
- Tristram, Philippa, 'Jane Austen's Aversion to Villas', in *The Georgian Villa*, ed. by Dana Arnold (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1996), pp. 25-31
- , *Living Space in Fact and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989)

Trotter, David, 'Household Clearance in Victorian Fiction', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 6 (2008), 1-19

<<http://www.19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/article/viewFile/472/332>> [accessed 18 May 2013]

---, 'On the Nail: Functional Objects in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*', in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities*, ed. by Jonathon Shears and Jen Harrison (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 115-27

Van Ghent, Dorothy, *The English Novel: Form and Function* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961)

Vickery, Amanda, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998)

---, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

Wainwright, Valerie, *Ethics and the English Novel from Austen to Forster* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007)

Wall, Cynthia, 'The Rhetoric of Description and the Spaces of Things', in *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections on Occasional Forms: Essays in Honor of J. Paul Hunter*, ed. by Dennis Todd and Cynthia Wall (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), pp. 261-79

Wallace, Robert K., *Jane Austen and Mozart: Classical Equilibrium in Fiction and Music* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1983)

Walsh, Germaine P., 'Is Jane Austen Politically Correct? Interpreting *Mansfield Park*', *Perspectives on Political Science*, 31 (2002), 15-26

[Whateley, Richard], 'Review of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*', *The Quarterly Review*, 24 (1821), 352-76

Wiesenfarth, Joseph, 'Emma: Point Counter Point', in *Jane Austen Bicentenary Essays*, ed. by John Halperin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp.

207-20

Wilson, Ross J., ‘“The Mystical Character of Commodities’: The Consumer

Society in 18th-Century England’, *Post-Medieval Archaeology*, 42 (2008), 144-56

Witemeyer, Hugh, *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (New Haven: Yale University

Press, 1979)

Wynne, Deborah, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s Frocks and *Shirley*’s Queer Textiles’,

in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities*, ed. by

Jonathon Shears and Jen Harrison (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 147-62

---, *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate,

2010)

Yeazell, Ruth B., *Art of the Everyday: Dutch Painting and the Realist*

Novel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008)

Zlotnick, Susan, ‘From Involuntary Object to Voluntary Spy: Female Agency,

Novels, and the Marketplace in *Northanger Abbey*’, *Studies in the Novel*, 41 (2009),

277-92