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LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT?
JANE AUSTEN AND THE TRANSFORMATIVE MALE GAZE

BY RACHEL GRATE

SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF THE BACHELOR OF ARTS

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Abbreviations

NA is *Northanger Abbey*

S&S is *Sense and Sensibility*

P&P is *Pride and Prejudice*

MP is *Mansfield Park*

E is *Emma*

P is *Persuasion*

Introduction

Jane Austen's reputation precedes her. Over twenty film adaptations have been made of Austen's works, and modern interpretations like *Clueless* or *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* have adapted her famous courtships to new eras. But what perhaps no film can capture is the careful way in which Austen uses language to signal the power dynamics of courtship. This language becomes especially significant surrounding sight. As I started to realize while delving deeper into Austen's works, the language of sight works in very intricate ways in the courtship process in her novels. Investigating further, I found several critics who had considered the same moments I was – moments of connection, of transformation, and, as I would come to call it, gazing. However, none had connected quite all the dots as I began to once I found the theory to help articulate my findings: that of the male gaze.

In this thesis, I claim that the gaze is central to the courtship process in Austen's novels. I also propose that an analysis of the gaze is crucial to understanding the gendered power dynamics that are central to these relationships. We tend to think of male gazers as having all the power, but one of Austen's subversive arguments is that women can also be subjects of the gaze and transform through it. However, limits exist to their power.

Before I launch into my use of ideas about the male gaze and begin applying the concept to Austen's works, it is important to take a step back and define what I mean when I talk about the power dynamics of the gaze, which is intimately connected with patriarchal and also individual power. When I discuss the power of characters in Austen's novels, I am referring to their ability to act according to their own desires rather than according to societal norms. For men, this power is inherent in their status in society. The

men of Austen's novels are constantly breaking societal norms, but are rarely punished for their transgression. (The most obvious example is a man like Darcy who marries outside of his class without lasting consequences.) On the other hand, the women who transgress these bounds are more frequently punished. Whether something small, like Marianne's illness or Louisa Musgrove's fall, or something more drastic like the two Elizas of *Sense and Sensibility* falling into prostitution and death, there are often consequences to transgressive behavior, especially if that behavior includes enacting a desire that challenges norms of feminine modesty.

Applied to the gaze, power dynamics often enable men to project their desires onto the world around them, while women must carefully observe societal rules before challenging them with their own gaze. The difference in how society treats these attempted subversions is why the power for men and women to transform those around them through their gaze relies on distinct methods. As I will argue, while men are able to simply project their transformative gaze, women must first use their gaze to perceive their societal position before successfully having a transformative effect. In other words, while men can simply enact their desires upon the world, women must first assess their place in society before being able to alter it. To illustrate this, I must begin by situating myself within the many theoretical interpretations of the male gaze, and investigate how the theory can be applied to literature and more specifically shed new light on Austen's classic novels.

I. THE MALE GAZE AND FEMALE RESISTANCE

Laura Mulvey introduced the theory of the male gaze in her groundbreaking 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in which she connected analysis of films with ideas of the gaze from Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Michel Foucault. Mulvey links Foucault’s theory that the gaze is connected to power and surveillance, giving the person who gazes power over the person who is the object of the gaze, with feminist theories of gender. Mulvey argues:

The look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox... In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. (Mulvey 19)

Mulvey argues that in film, women are reduced to images that embody male desire. This is done through a combination of camerawork and the gazes of male characters within the film. Thus, Mulvey concludes that while men take active pleasure while gazing upon women, the women of the film are limited to a passive response. Mulvey also describes the male gaze as having the power to actively change the female form, because of the overwhelming influence of the male perspective in patriarchal society, and the production of films. She argues that in a patriarchal society, the “spectator in direct scopophilic contact with the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male fantasy)... gain[s] control and possession of the woman within the diegesis” (Mulvey 21). This “control and possession” includes the ability to transform the woman by asserting his “fantasy” upon her through his gaze. As Mulvey continues, “the actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man” can “thereby produc[e] an illusion cut to the measure of desire” (Mulvey 25-26). In other words, a man is able to “produce” a woman as a malleable, transformable object under his desiring gaze. While Mulvey is

addressing the scopic world of film, I will later show that the patriarchal marriage market of Austen's novels is also scopophilic. Thus, in Austen's novels as in film, the power of the male gazer is his ability to project his desire onto his object, transforming the world for his pleasure.

However, also crucial to understanding Austen's portrayal of the gaze is an understanding of the role of the female gaze, which I define as the desiring gaze without the implicit power of a patriarchal society enforcing its fantasy. In my analysis of Austen's works, I will explore Mulvey's interpretation of the gaze as transformative while disputing Mulvey's claim that the female position toward the gaze can only be passive. While Mulvey's analysis was instrumental in introducing the concepts that revolutionized feminist media studies, there are two central points I contend with. The first is Mulvey's assignment of women to the "passive" role as objects of the gaze, without considering how women's own pleasure in this position could be complicating this narrative. The second, related departure I have from Mulvey's analysis is her dismissal of the desiring female gaze – what she calls a "temporar[y] accept[ance] of 'masculinization'" – as a source of agency or resistance (Mulvey 40). Mulvey later expanded her thoughts on the "female spectator" in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,'" but her analysis is still limited to seeing women's resistance as futile within broader theoretical lens of Foucault's "panopticon" of discipline through observation (Mulvey 40).

Modern interpretations of the gaze have agreed with Mulvey, arguing that the female gaze is not proof of agency but instead evidence of an internalized male gaze. Ten years after Mulvey, *Re-vision: Essays in Feminist Film Theory* editors argued:

Defined in terms of her visibility, [a woman] carries her own Panopticon with her wherever she goes, her self-image a function of her being for another... The subjectivity assigned to femininity within patriarchal systems is inevitably bound up with the structure of the look and the localization of the eye as authority. (Doane, Mellencamp and Williams 13)

This analysis relies on Foucault's idea of discourse theory, and as a result, concludes that even the female gaze turned inwards has been structured by the male gaze. Thus, the woman cannot resist the male gaze with her own gaze, because in the patriarchal system the gaze itself is masculine and authoritative.

However, this point of view is limited by its framing of women as passive victims. This flaw is rooted in both theories' basis in Foucault, for as Joan Copjec details in *The Delirium of Clinical Perfection*:

The insurmountable and often noted problem of Foucault's theory is the inadequate theorization of resistance. Though it seems, like power, to be everywhere, it never *amounts* to a counterforce; it seems to be only a local pulling back, a pure negativity opposed to positive power. There seem to be no *relations* of resistance, only relations of power... Such a collapse enables the delirium of clinical perfection which is the cineramic [panoptic and cinematic] gaze and which makes the woman's desire an effect deduced from male commands. (Copjec 62)

In other words, Copjec finds that Foucault's theory of the gaze does not allow for the possibility of resistance. This is because it focuses on broad systems of oppression rather than individual, personal interactions, and thus does not recognize a woman's desire as power, but instead as a result of internalized patriarchy.

While I agree that the system of the gaze is a gendered system, and that as a patriarchal system the gaze is more often than not oppressive to women, women's gazes are not simply evidence of internalized oppression. This perspective overlooks the potential for the female gaze to effectively challenge the male gaze, perhaps not in toppling an entire system of oppression but certainly in dismantling normative

expectations of women. As E. Ann Kaplan wrote, “The gaze is not necessarily male (literally), but to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the conscious, is to be in the ‘masculine’ position” (Kaplan). However, being in the “masculine” position does not imply being oppressed by such a gendered occupation – instead, it resists typical gendered power dynamics of the gaze.

It is worth noting that this interpretation dates back to theories of the gaze before Mulvey applied the gaze to film theory. In his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger explained, “Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it” (Berger 46). Berger agrees with the general consensus that the female gaze involves interiorization, but this interiorization is not oppressive. Rather, this process of gazing and of adapting one’s own appearance as object of the gaze gives the woman power to “control” and “contain” the male gaze. A woman can turn her gaze inwards without internalizing an oppressive gaze, but instead while maintaining her agency and actively resisting objectification. This connection between a woman’s power of perception and her control over the gaze is a crucial to my thesis, as I will focus on how descriptions of the gaze and of transformation overlap in Austen’s works to expose and challenge traditional gender norms.

Despite my disagreements with traditional theory of the male gaze, I will continue to use the terminology because of its crucial societal connotations. Most central to my analysis of Austen’s novels is Mulvey’s argument that “the determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 19). While the gazes I observe in Austen’s work are not always masculine in gender, they do

hold transformative power. As I have discussed and will show in my first chapter, Austen illustrates the power of the male gaze by describing a transformation in female appearance as a projection of male characters' fantasies. However, her heroines are not passive in the face of this gaze; through close observation and manipulation, they are often able to manipulate the situation and affect their own transformation. Austen shows this "female gaze" as a potential source of agency, rather than portraying her heroines as passive victims of the gaze. Using Mulvey's concept of "producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire," I propose that transformation through the gaze in Austen's novels is the ability for a character to enact their desires and fantasies onto the world around them, regardless of if these desires align with societal norms.

Nonetheless, the female gaze is not equal in power to the male gaze in Austen's works. What distinguishes the male gaze from the female gaze is its method of transformation. While the "determining male gaze projects its phantasy," transforming through an act of projection, women gain access to this transformative power through acts of perception. Because women are more strictly monitored by society than men are, their power of transformation relies on being able to perceive societal norms and how best to change or escape them. This is why so many of Austen's novels are classified as novels of education – the heroines must learn to perceive the world around them accurately before achieving their happy ending. Male characters, on the other hand, have their transformative power not limited but reinforced by the patriarchal marriage market.

My distinction between the transformative powers of the female and male gaze may best be understood using Lacan's notion of an "indeterminate gaze," rather than Foucault's concept of the "panoptic gaze" also often used in male gaze theory. Lacan

argues that “the look” is the voyeur’s act of staring, and “the gaze” is when “we sense ourselves as beings who are looked at” (Lacan 75). Using these distinctions, Lacan argues that “the gaze is the inverse of the omnipotent look... [It is what] surprises the subject in its desiring” (Cowie 288). Thus, Lacan asserts that one looks if one’s observation is unnoticed, whereas one gazes if one’s look and its desire or significance is sensed by the object of the gaze. I argue that the power of perception of the female gaze could be allied with what Lacan refers to as “the look,” for it is an observation that is not perceived by society at large. The male gaze, however, is noticed by its object, for it projects its power and “desiring.” However, I resist the implication that the perceptive “look” is not a gaze, for as I will show in Austen’s work, what I call the female gaze can too have a transformative effect on its object. As Nancy Armstrong writes, “Austen’s novels [are] striving to empower a new class of people – not powerful people, but normal people – whose ability to interpret human behavior qualifies them to regulate the conduct of daily life and reproduce their form of individuality” (Armstrong 136). Applying her words to the gaze, the ability to perceive and “interpret” others’ behavior enables women to “regulate” or transform both how others behave, and produce new possibilities for their own behavior or “individuality.”

This is not to say that I believe all female adaptations of the gaze are always empowering. There are many examples in Austen’s novels when female characters turn scrutinizing gazes upon each other, evidencing their internalization of the male gaze. One of the most famous examples is Miss Bingley trying to direct Darcy’s gaze when she asks Elizabeth to take a turn about the room in *Pride and Prejudice*. Miss Bingley begins by walking about the room by herself, but though “her figure was elegant... Darcy, at whom

it was all aimed, was still inflexibly studious” (*P&P* 47). Miss Bingley’s “elegant” beauty is not enough to attract Darcy’s gaze, so she turns to one whose beauty she knows can: Elizabeth. As soon as she requests Elizabeth join her, “Miss Bingley succeeded no less in the real object of her civility; Mr. Darcy looked up” (*P&P* 47). Here the narrator identifies Miss Bingley’s goal explicitly as attracting Mr. Darcy’s gaze. However, even with Elizabeth present Darcy sees through her manipulation. When Miss Bingley asks Darcy to join their walk, Darcy refuses because he is aware of her strategy. He explains that she must be “conscious that your figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking... I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire” (*P&P* 48). Darcy easily perceives how Miss Bingley is attempting to manipulate his gaze with this “advantage” to her “figure,” but while he admits he will “admire” them, he does not take her desired action. Even with the power of Elizabeth’s beauty added to her own, Miss Bingley still fails to direct Darcy’s gaze. In this case, Miss Bingley is acting out what Copjec described as the behavior of the oppressed woman under the male gaze; “The *clinical* gaze describes *perfectly* the situation of the woman under patriarchy: that is, she monitors herself with a patriarchal eye” (Copjec 61). However, this monitoring does not have the effect that Foucault argues and Copjec summarizes as making “the woman’s desire an effect deduced from male commands.”

Film theorist Jennifer Friedlander’s 2008 book *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion* is entirely focused on proposing an alternative understanding for woman’s subversive spectatorship. Using the framework of Lacan and Barthes, Friedlander writes that in the modern theoretical framework, the question has become:

How should *women* look in order to avoid both the masochism of taking up the viewing position of man as well as the narcissism of identifying too closely with

the fetishized image of woman on-screen?... In spite of the influence of Mulvey's work, there have been attempts to recognize the potential of pleasure to act as a resource for expressing political resistance... I take seriously the suggestion that, in Fiske's words, there is a dimension of enjoyment that 'escapes systems of power.' (Friedlander 49, 51)

I agree with Friedlander's proposition that pleasure – especially female sexual pleasure, constantly undervalued and underestimated in patriarchal society – has a power that expands beyond systems of surveillance. This is a power that Ellen Zetzel Lambert also discusses, asserting that “to enjoy being looked at sexually – when the observer looks with a curious rather than a controlling gaze – is to feel the excitement of being discovered, of being known” (Lambert 20). Applying this concept to Austen, I argue that her novels track this exact transition from a controlling to a curious male gaze, and that a happy ending is only possible once the gaze is pleasurable for both parties. Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, Emma in *Emma*, Catherine in *Northanger Abbey*, and Anne in *Persuasion* are all examples of women who feel a kind of liberation in attracting the male gaze they desire. Elizabeth only finds pleasure under Darcy's gaze after she does not fear its judgment; Emma takes pleasure in Mr. Knightley's gaze of mutual respect but avoids his previous attempts to control her behavior. Catherine and Anne both face controlling male gazes (General Tilney, Sir Elliot) before taking advantage of the curious gaze of their suitor to attract their interest. Marianne achieves her happy ending with Colonel Brandon, the only man who does not try to control her with his gaze, though it is ambiguous how much pleasure Marianne feels under his gaze. Even Fanny, under the controlling gaze of Sir Thomas for the entire novel, is eventually paired with the one man whose gaze makes her feel the “excitement... of being known.”

Perhaps it is true, as Newman writes, that “a gaze that escaped patriarchal specular relations would not simply reverse the positions of male and female... but would eliminate the hierarchy altogether” (Newman 1032). However, while female pleasure and desire may not be mechanisms strong enough to eliminate societal hierarchies, they are powerful modes of resistance. As Newman herself writes, using Lacan’s theory that the gaze of another restores a piece of what has been lost from the self, the powerful “woman’s gaze as an object of male perception is simultaneously feared and desired, desired because it offers the possibility of lost wholeness” (Newman 1038). Thus, the male reaction upon noticing the female gaze reinforces its transformative power, in subverting the patriarchal expectations that limit men as well as women. Austen’s heroes align with Newman’s analysis, alternatively fearing and desiring the heroine’s challenging gazes. While no systems of oppression are broken down in Jane Austen, she does enable female characters to enact their fantasies on the world through their gaze, modeling a method of transformation for readers that is anything but passive.

II. THE MALE GAZE APPLIED TO LITERATURE

While Mulvey introduces the idea of the male gaze in the context of film, the effect of the male gaze is evident in literature as well. Mulvey lays out “three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other,” positions that are easily transported to literature with the narrator as camera, the reader as the audience, and characters (Mulvey 26). Current analysis of the gaze in literature is

rather limited, but both Beth Newman and Patricia Johnson have explored the male gaze as applied to specific literary texts (by Emily Bronte, Henry James and George Eliot).

In transitioning from film to literature, the first important analogy is that of the narrator as the camera, which I will refer to as Austen's "narratorial camera." As

Newman observes:

Visual metaphors have so thoroughly pervaded our theoretical vocabulary for the novel that they have come to seem natural and inevitable... 'point of view', for example, turns on the distinction between a narrator who 'speaks' and a 'focalizer' who 'sees.' Such terms implicitly invoke a gaze: a look that the subject(s) whose perceptions organize the story direct at the characters and acts represented. (Newman 1029)

This connection of the narrator to the gaze is even more emphasized with an omniscient narrator, which Johnson notes implies an all-powerful gaze – "that the all-knowing narrator directs the reader's look" (Johnson, P. 39). However, Johnson contests the generalization that the figure of the omniscient narrator is another way to subject women to "an all-powerful cultural gaze that is implicitly male" (Johnson, P. 40). Newman also agrees that:

It might seem logical for a feminist, then, to contend that novelistic narration as practiced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is inherently antifeminist, inherently genophobic, because its visual underpinnings duplicate the structures of gazing that work almost obviously at the expense of women. Such an argument would extend to fiction what Laura Mulvey... claims for film and would lead to the same renunciation of classical novelistic representation... Despite the fetishizing and appropriating tendencies of novelistic narrative, I do not claim such a pernicious role for the novel. (Newman 1058)

Instead, narration has the power to subvert the all-powerful gaze because it prioritizes the female rather than the male perspective. Johnson and Newman both analyze this ability in other texts, yet their observations about the replication of contradictory perspectives to

avoid an all-powerful male gaze in the novel also are applicable to Austen's narratorial style and use of free indirect discourse.

Going beyond their applications, I propose that one key distinction between Austen's audience and film audiences is the fact that Austen's novels are not directed primarily to men, and thus the gaze of the reader is not inherently masculine in nature. Thus, the gaze of the audience is not one of reductive desire, but one of empathy for the heroine. While Austen shows the negative effects of the vulnerability caused by being an object of the gaze, Austen does not allow the identity of her heroines to be defined by others' gazes. Instead, Austen emphasizes the possibility of a subversive female gaze through her innovative narrative style. Miriam Ascarelli describes the strategy:

Austen's interest in women's ability to reason is also evident in what has been deemed her greatest technical achievement: free indirect discourse. The technique enabled Austen to portray her heroines maintaining the public appearance of propriety while privately evaluating the true nature of a situation, a clear mark of a thinking person. (Ascarelli)

Applying Ascarelli's observation to the male gaze theory, Austen uses her narratorial camera not to voyeuristically describe her heroines' appearance, but to make the reader see from their perspective.

At the same time, Austen uses a focused narration style to highlight the influence of varying characters' gazes. The focus of the narrator on characters' gazes and observations of others functions as a camera, shifting our attention to view characters in a certain way. Stephanie Eddleman writes:

In contrast to the full portraiture provided by her predecessors, Austen gives only line drawings of her heroines... Rather, the significance is to be found in the role of beholder, for as Ellen Zetzel Lambert astutely observes, Austen presents beauty only in 'subjective terms.' (Eddleman 17)

By not describing her heroines in detail, Austen focuses our attention on how the gazes of multiple “beholder[s]” are operating in the novel to influence constructions of beauty.

While Austen endows the male gaze with a transformative effect by often revealing physical transformations through the perspective of male characters rather than the narrator, she also reveals the gaze as flawed by showing contradictory points of view in her narration. As Johnson found in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, Austen too:

struggles to free [the heroine] from an exclusive male gaze by multiplying angles of vision... [To do so, the] narrator first carefully delineates the viewing positions and then shows the conflicts between them. The narrative makes clear, in other words, the currents of power and resistance within the scene, and it positions the reader outside those currents, rather than implicating him/her in them... Instead of employing a monolithic male gaze... [the narrator] presents a variety of viewing positions and draws attention to the tensions among them. (Johnson, P. 40, 49).

In framing the multiplicity of perspectives, no one gaze determines the reader’s point of view. By doing so, Johnson argues, the narrative style actually aligns with feminist practices advocated by Mulvey herself, to break down cinematic codes and their relationship to formative external structures.

By showing so many contradictory and overlapping gazes, Austen is able to acknowledge the complexity of power dynamics in the gaze. While her male characters often have a transformative effect on female beauty, their opinions of women’s appearance are also frequently revealed as flawed and biased; while some female characters – often women of the upper classes – fail in their attempts to utilize the gaze because they have internalized the male perspective, others are successful at challenging the power of the male gaze through their own desire and perception. With so many overlapping interactions of the gaze in Austen, I will focus my analysis on where the gaze affects a transformation in the focal couple of the novel. I choose this focus because, to

borrow the words of literary theorist Beth Newman, “the gaze that interests me is gendered and intersubjective (involving specific, gendered subjects) rather than institutional (like Foucault’s panoptic gaze, where the individual bearer of the gaze is faceless and therefore dispensable)” (Newman 1040). While other Austen scholars have looked at the implications of the gaze in her work, these analyses are focused on Foucault’s panoptic gaze, rather than the gendered and subjective gaze I will be analyzing.

III. BEAUTY AND THE GAZE IN AUSTEN’S PERIOD

The power of a perceptive female gaze is perhaps best understood in the context of Austen’s own time period, during which women were even more explicitly limited as objects. While the male gaze is a modern theoretical framework, theories about the significance and character of beauty were already prevalent in Austen’s time. Ann Bermingham summarized the marriage market Austen’s heroines would have experienced as a “scopic regime... where in the public spaces of cities and spa towns unmarried women were paraded before the male gaze at balls and assemblies, operas and concerts” (Bermingham 97). As I will show, beauty and the gaze are intimately wound together, for the gaze is often instigated by a desire for beauty. As Naomi Wolf writes, “the qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable” (Wolf 13-14). Furthermore, what qualifies a woman as beautiful, and what her beauty represents, are key indicators of a society’s gender structure.

It is necessary to understand the standards of female beauty in the Georgian era to comprehend how Austen's use of the gaze challenges existing definitions of what makes a woman desirable. One of the most comprehensive and influential explorations on beauty in this period was Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Originally published in 1757, the treatise on aesthetics defines beauty as "a social quality; for where women and men... give us a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them" (Burke 39). Burke defines beauty as constructed through a "social" gaze: beauty is what gives one "pleasure in beholding" or gazing upon it. As the object of the gaze, Burke argues that women possess "direct force which they have merely on being viewed," a power from the woman's pleasure in being viewed (Burke 83). However, this power is limited, for Burke connects it only to shameful lust rather than love. Burke explains, "we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us" (Burke 103). In other words, Burke believes that beauty can cause admiration, but not love. Love – what women must inspire for success in the scopic marriage market – is caused by submission, by flattery, and by a feminine embodying of "weakness" (Burke 106). Thus, outer beauty is not enough for a female object of the gaze to gain social influence – she must conform to her feminine gender role as well.¹

Mary Wollstonecraft was inspired to share her radical feminist opinions because of the oppressive beauty structure Burke outlines. Wollstonecraft's lesser-known first work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, was published in 1790 in response to Burke's

¹ The ideal of femininity in this time period was weakness. Burke argues that "an appearance of *delicacy*, and even of fragility, is almost essential" to female beauty (Burke 105). Furthermore, this physical weakness should be representative of the woman's mental state as well. Burke continues, "The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it" (Burke 106). So while beauty can cause admiration, it seems that Burke believes both mental and physical weakness, or submission, are necessary in a woman to cause love.

other work, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, but she took the opportunity to comment on *Enquiry* as well. Claudia Johnson writes:

Wollstonecraft holds that women are morally disabled by the imperative to be lovely and to inspire love, and she dismantles Burke's contention (first in *Enquiry* and later in the *Reflections*) that beauty's weakness and debility arouse the politically efficacious sentiments of love and solicitude in men. (*Equivocal Beings* 27)

This criticism becomes explicit in Wollstonecraft's groundbreaking *A Vindication on the Rights of Woman* in 1792. Wollstonecraft explores how the beauty standard limits women, arguing that "taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (Wollstonecraft 48). In other words, because of theories like Burke's that encourage women to physically and mentally embody weakness as a source of power,² women have actually been prevented from being educated and embracing their own strength – what Wollstonecraft considers a more authentic power than can be achieved through marriage.

Applied to the gaze, one could extend this argument to imply that by focusing on being objects of the gaze as a source of power, women have been prevented from the empowerment that could come from resisting the gaze or from gazing themselves.

Wollstonecraft actually briefly foreshadows theories of the male gaze in *Vindication*:

What can be more disgusting than the impudent dross of gallantry, thought so manly, which makes men stare insultingly at every female they meet? Can it be termed respect for the sex? No, this loose behavior shews such habitual depravity,

² Burke reinforces this ideal repeatedly throughout his treatise, writing, "Perfection... in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection. Women are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness... Beauty in distress is the most affecting beauty" (Burke 100). Healthy women learn to appear weak because beauty the currency available to women in this time period to maintain or raise their social standing. Their lives depend on their ability to attract a husband, and as Burke explains, men are attracted to weakness and fall in love with submission. This lesson in beauty and courtship is tied to the gaze, for as Burke writes, "When we have before us such objects as excite love and complacency, the body is affected... the eyes roll gently with an inclination to the object" (Burke 135). Burke suggests that by embodying weakness both physically and mentally, women will attract the male gaze and eventually secure their social standing.

such weakness of mind, that it is vain to expect much public or private virtue.
(Wollstonecraft 132)

Wollstonecraft sees the masculine tendency to “stare insultingly” at women as vulgar, diminishing the possibility of real virtue in either gender. Wollstonecraft prescribes modesty and respect to overcome this “sensual fondness for the sex, or an affectation of manly assurance” that results in the oppressive male gaze (Wollstonecraft 132).

Wollstonecraft also comments on the negative effects of women focusing on their reputation, in what seems to be a Foucauldian interpretation of the panoptic gaze of society. She writes, “‘Women,’ says some author, I cannot recollect who, ‘mind not what only heaven sees.’ Why, indeed, should they? It is the eye of man that they have been taught to dread” (Wollstonecraft 139). In these subtle moments, Wollstonecraft seems to set a precedent for future analysis of the oppressive elements of both the personal, sexual gaze which I will be exploring, and the panoptic gaze of society.

Wollstonecraft explores in detail why this necessity to be beautiful disempowers women, though it may seem at first like a method to gain influence over men. While women believe they are gaining power by curating their beauty, in reality, they are diminishing their ability to improve their minds and resist their limiting gender role.

Wollstonecraft declares that women are “taint[ed]” by:

folly, pure as she esteems herself, when she studiously adorns her person only to be seen by men, to excite respectful sighs, and the idle homage of what is called innocent gallantry. Did women really respect virtue for its own sake, they would not seek for a compensation in vanity, for the self-denial which they are obliged to practice to preserve their reputation. (Wollstonecraft 148)

While the position of object may at first seem “respectful,” it relies on “self-denial” and undermines “virtue.” In other words, focusing on being “seen by men,” on being an object of the gaze, prevents women from cultivating their own intelligent gaze, which

both Austen and Wollstonecraft see as the key to a more complete sense of self and a more fulfilling role in society. Many of the foils to the female heroines in Austen's works attempt to gain power through this false mode of resistance – a focus on appealing the male gaze that actually undermines one's position. I have already addressed Miss Bingley, but *Northanger Abbey's* Isabella Thorpe, *Mansfield Park's* Mary Crawford, *Emma's* Mrs. Elton, and Anne's sisters Elizabeth Elliot and Mary Elliot Musgrove in *Persuasion* all embody the type of woman Wollstonecraft is here critiquing. (I leave out *Sense & Sensibility*, which I will discuss later, because it is perhaps the exception to this rule, for Lucy Steele seems to successfully gain power under the male gaze while heroine Marianne Dashwood remains an object of it.) As both Wollstonecraft and Austen demonstrate, exerting all one's energy to appeal to the male gaze does not empower women, but instead makes them weak and, as Austen highlights with her satire, ridiculous.³

However, Wollstonecraft theorizes methods of resistance to the limiting power of beauty and the male gaze.⁴ Wollstonecraft recommends education as the alternative, successful path to women's empowerment. She promotes educational reading, observing that “when an author lends [women] his eyes, they can see as he saw, and be amused by images they could not select, though lying before them” (Wollstonecraft 123). While the reliance on a man to provide this education is problematic within modern context, the key

³ Isabella, for instance, illustrates her desire to use her beauty to attract men by commenting that “there are two odious young men who have been staring at me this half hour,” but instead of avoiding their gaze going on to follow them so they can stare some more (NA 27). Isabella is just one of the many foils in Austen's novels who I will not have time to explore in this thesis, but who provide rich material for future analysis on the limits of female power as an object of the gaze.

⁴ It is worth noting that Wollstonecraft seems to acknowledge the ability of pleasure to empower a woman in her gender relations, though she does not use the same words. She writes, “With a lover, I grant, she should be so, and her sensibility will naturally lead her to endeavor to excite emotion, not to gratify her vanity, but her heart. This I do not allow to be coquetry, it is the artless impulse of nature, I only exclaim against the sexual desire of conquest when the heart is out of the question” (Wollstonecraft 61).

takeaway from her theory is that education is a mode of empowerment. Especially crucial to my argument is Wollstonecraft's metaphor of vision in explaining this empowerment, which implies that education can empower a woman to be the subject, rather than the object, of her own gaze.

While it is not certain (though likely⁵) Austen read Wollstonecraft, the influence of her focus on education is reflected in Austen's reinforcement of perception as a source of power. Many of Austen heroines illustrate the power that Wollstonecraft argues can be gained through education.⁶ As Anne K. Mellor explains:

Austen responded positively to many of Wollstonecraft's feminist arguments without ever mentioning her by name. All of Austen's novels are novels of education, in which her female heroines learn from their reading, their wiser mentors, and their own mistakes, to become moral, responsible wives and shrewd judges of human nature... Throughout her novels, Jane Austen endorses Wollstonecraft's belief that the best woman is a *rational* woman, a woman of sense as well as sensibility, who seeks a psychologically egalitarian marriage. (*The Cambridge Companion* 156)

⁵ As Miriam Ascarelli writes in "A Feminist Connection: Jane Austen and Mary Wollstonecraft," "Austen biographer Claire Tomalin offers some convincing evidence that Austen is likely to have known of Mary Wollstonecraft and her work. She notes that Sir William East, the father of one of George Austen's former pupils, was a benefactor of Wollstonecraft. Furthermore, Sir William was a neighbor and friend to Austen's uncle, James Leigh-Perrot. After Wollstonecraft attempted suicide in 1796, Sir William was credited with being particularly kind to her during her recovery. While this does not specifically link Austen and Wollstonecraft, it makes it plausible that the Austen family knew of Wollstonecraft and her ideas (Tomalin 158)" (Ascarelli).

⁶ The power of the female gaze in Austen's novels is reinforced by her descriptions of their beauty. The beauty that attracts the gaze in Austen's novels is the opposite of the weak beauty Burke established. Austen's heroines are instead frequently exercising, and noted as most beautiful after they strengthened their body – subverting the societal expectation of weakness. Similarly, Austen's heroines are most frequently distinguished by their beautiful eyes. This has a significance best described by Burke himself, who wrote, "the *Eye*, which has so great a share in the beauty of the animal creation... the eye affects, as it is expressive of some qualities of the mind, and its principal power generally arises from this" (Burke 108). This physiognomy was generally accepted at the time, showing that eyes have a "power" to express the interior mind. In my analysis especially, eyes are especially important as both a sign of beauty and a signal of the female gaze. Thus, what often makes Austen's heroines most beautiful is their perspective, their power to gaze back at male suitors.

Through learning to rationally perceive the world, many of Austen's heroines are able to become subjects of their own "shrewd" gazes, and thus find equal footing in an "egalitarian marriage."

IV. CONCLUSION

I mean to intervene in the mode of Austen criticism by using concepts of the gaze to shed new light on the gendered power dynamics between the couples slated for marriage at the end of each novel. I argue that while men are able to project their desiring gaze, in Austen's novels this gaze only results in a happy ending if it is pleasurable for the female object as well. Furthermore, while the male gaze has an inherent ability to act upon the world, if women first focus on learning to perceive their social position then they too can use their gaze to enact their desires.

To do so, it is most useful to consider her works not in chronological order, but as they represent different interpretations of the gaze – moving from a focus on the male gaze to the female gaze, and concluding with an example of mutual gazing. I will begin by sketching how the male gaze is established in *Mansfield Park*, in which Fanny enacts Mulvey's passive female, and *Persuasion*, in which Anne begins to illustrate the ability of pleasure to empower the object of the male gaze. Then I will show how the power of perception can enable women to change their societal status through the gaze. In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine is able to resist the transformative power of the male gaze because she investigates and learns to perceive the world around her – however, she does not yet enact a transformation through her gaze. In *Sense and Sensibility*, however, Lucy illustrates the power of perception to transform her role in society, while Marianne learns

that pleasure as an object of the gaze without accurate perception is not enough to make her desire a reality. In *Emma* I will explore how a woman's attempt to adopt the male gaze to transform is complicated by a patriarchal marriage market, which prevents her ability to accurately perceive her status as an object of the gaze. Finally, I will show how Elizabeth and Darcy's mutual gaze in *Pride and Prejudice*, in which both characters take pleasure as an object of the other's gaze and are willing to consider the other's perspective, can transform them both into more empowered individuals and equal partners. By approaching her works not chronologically but in this order, it allows me to explore the novels in which female resistance is arguably least to most transformative. In each novel I discuss, the heroine learns more about how to observe the world around her, and how to use her perception to play a more active role in the instigation of her own happy ending.

By focusing on the gaze, I propose we can understand the transformations of the novel, and the events leading up to the happily-ever-after endings, with a new critical lens. As Johnson writes, "Austen's novels can largely take for granted what is elsewhere so painfully contested. Female subjectivity is not forbidden, degraded, or displaced" (*Equivocal Beings* 18). I propose that this focus on female subjectivity extends to subjectivity of the transformative gaze – as both a subject and object.

Chapter 1:

The Transformative Male Gaze in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*

The male gaze is at its most traditionally transformative in Austen's novels *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. However, Fanny and Anne achieve drastically different levels of power as objects of the gaze. Though among Austen's later works, these novels are the most clear illustrations of the male gaze, and thus the best suited to introduce the my intervention. In *Mansfield Park*, the male gaze transforms Fanny's physical appearance with a power she is unable to resist. While Anne's physical transformation is also enacted by the male gaze in *Persuasion*, it is described in terms of her sexual awakening. This distinction in pleasure as an object of the gaze enables Anne to exert more agency in manipulating the gaze and thus shaping her future than Fanny does.

I. "HARDEN YOURSELF TO THE IDEA OF BEING WORTH LOOKING AT": *The transformation of Fanny's beauty in Mansfield Park*

In *Mansfield Park*, Fanny embodies Mulvey's "passive/female" whose appearance is presented to readers almost only through the interpretation of the male gaze. Fanny is oppressed by this inability to shape herself, especially in a society that values women based on their appearance. Fanny's appearance is both defined and changed by the male gaze, and her inability to resist the power of this gaze illustrates the negative affects of paternalism even on women who largely accept their social role.

Fanny's appearance is only described independently of the male gaze once, and even the narrator describes her appearance in relation to others. When Fanny moved to Sir Thomas's house, "though there might not be much in her first appearance to captivate, there was, at least, nothing to disgust her relations" (*MP* 13). This is the first reference to

Fanny's physical features, yet it does not begin with a description of these features. Instead the description begins, not by describing Fanny's appearance, but by describing how her new relations react to her. Already, Fanny's physical appearance is subjective, largely under the control of those higher in society. Because Fanny starts by "shrinking from notice," Sir Thomas "had to work against a most untoward gravity of deportment" (*MP* 13). Fanny "shrink[s]" from the male gaze, but this only causes Sir Thomas to work harder "against" her natural countenance to style her according to his preferences. Furthermore, Austen's use of the language of physics ("gravity") implies Sir Thomas's behavior is part of a natural system. The participation of the narrator in describing Fanny through the perspective of Sir Thomas shows his paternalistic power over her body.

Once Fanny becomes a woman, her body becomes even more subject to the male gaze. On his return from Antigua, Sir Thomas alerts the reader to a change in Fanny's appearance that had gone previously unmentioned by the narrator – signaling that it is the presence of the male that enacts this change of her form, rather than a transformation Fanny undergoes independently. Sir Thomas, "on perceiving her, came forward with a kindness which astonished and penetrated her, calling her his dear Fanny, kissing her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown!" (*MP* 165). Sir Thomas's perception is "penetrat[ing]," a word that conjures phallic imagery symbolizing the power of the male to invade the female body. For Sir Thomas, his ability to project his fantasy on Fanny's form gives him "decided pleasure" because it reinforces his paternal power, which leads to him feeling an "agitation of joy" (*MP* 165). As Claudia Johnson observes, this pleasure and agitation has "an aura of erotic implication" (*Women, Politics and the Novel* 118). While I disagree that "Sir Thomas never much

notices Fanny at all until she develops into womanhood,” for we have already seen the narrator reflect Sir Thomas’s interest in Fanny, it is clear that “the modest Fanny feels its prurience” (*Women, Politics and the Novel* 118).

Sir Thomas’s voyeurism is not diminished by his paternal role; rather, his paternal role increases the oppression of his male gaze because his power over Fanny is reinforced by both patriarchy and paternalism. Thus, Fanny “knew not how to feel, nor where to look. She was quite oppressed” by Sir Thomas’s observations (*MP* 165). When Sir Thomas “led her nearer the light and looked at her again,” Fanny’s oppression is furthered by an examination that seems similar to the examinations Sir Thomas must have performed on his slaves in Antigua (*MP* 165-166).⁷ Sir Thomas observes that he does not need to inquire about Fanny’s health because “her appearance spoke sufficiently on that point” (*MP* 166). However, it is not Fanny speaking through her appearance; Sir Thomas’s male gaze is what speaks for her. The closest Fanny’s appearance comes to speaking for her is “a fine blush having succeeded the previous paleness of her face,” but even this is taken by Sir Thomas to have “justified” his opinion of her health (*MP* 166). This blush both shows the power of Sir Thomas’s gaze to have immediate transformative effect on Fanny’s physical appearance and the inability of the male gaze to properly interpret her emotions. The blush can be read as Fanny’s only expression of discomfort with the male gaze, but is interpreted as justifying the right of the male gaze to assess her.⁸

⁷ For more on the strong presence of imperialist discourse in this novel, see Gayatri Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” or Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*.

⁸ Mary Crawford later comments on Fanny’s blush, asking, “‘Are you so insensible as you profess yourself? No, no, I see you are not.’ There was indeed so deep a blush over Fanny’s face at that moment, as might warrant strong suspicion in a pre-disposed mind” (*MP* 335). Here Fanny’s blush signals a pre-

Other men soon employ Sir Thomas's male gaze, showing its determining power over Fanny's form. Edmund insists that Fanny will not "get a compliment from me" and that she should "go to my father if you want to be complimented... you will hear compliments enough; and though they may be chiefly on your person, you must put up with it" (*MP* 183). Sir Thomas's male gaze is something Fanny "must put up with" because of his paternal power. Edmund does not have this same level of power over Fanny and thus he insists he will not compliment her, because his male gaze cannot compete with the power of his father's. Instead, Edmund compliments her through the gaze of Sir Thomas, stating, "Your uncle thinks you very pretty, dear Fanny" (*MP* 184). While Fanny "had not been thought very pretty before," Sir Thomas's changed opinion has changed general opinion of Fanny. In fact, his changed opinion has changed Fanny's body physically, for Edmund observes, "Your complexion is so improved! – and you have gained so much countenance! – and your figure" (*MP* 183). Fanny is "distressed" by this expression of the male gaze, but Edmund demands she adjust to it, pretending that his complement is not his own but that of Sir Thomas: "Nay, Fanny, do not turn away about it – it is but an uncle. If you cannot bear an uncle's admiration what is to become of you? You must really begin to harden yourself to the idea of being worth looking at. – You must try not to mind growing up into such a pretty woman" (*MP* 183-184). Fanny "must" learn to "bear" the male gaze, for she is now deemed "worth looking at," illustrating how her "worth" is defined by the opinion of men.

supposed consent, showing how her physical reactions actually disempower rather than empower her in the face of patriarchal power.

Furthermore, when Sir Thomas enters Fanny's room to discuss Henry's proposal, "Fanny obeyed, with eyes cast down and colour rising... Fanny's colour grew deeper and deeper; and her uncle perceiving that she was embarrassed to a degree that made either speaking or looking up quite impossible, turned away his own eyes" (*MP* 289). Here Fanny's blush is a direct consequence of the male gaze, a gaze that makes Fanny too passive to return her own gaze. This is one of the few times, however, that Sir Thomas interprets Fanny's blush correctly.

Once Fanny is the only young lady at Mansfield, the male gaze is shown to shape general opinion of Fanny. When her cousins leave, “it was impossible for [Fanny] not to be more looked at... her value increase[d]” (*MP* 191). With the increasing presence of the male gaze on Fanny, her value in patriarchal society increases likewise. At Fanny’s coming out ball, Sir Thomas “spoke of her beauty with very decided praise... the eyes of the two young men assured him that the subject might be gently touched again” (*MP* 251). Now that Fanny is out she is subject to the male gaze of suitors, which reinforces Sir Thomas’s confidence in his right to comment on her beauty. However, this gaze also changes her beauty, for “the consciousness of looking well made [Fanny] look still better” (*MP* 251). Male opinion of her beauty actually changes her appearance, and while Fanny is initially happy to be admired, soon she “was a great deal too much frightened to have any enjoyment till she could suppose herself no longer looked at” (*MP* 255). Fanny’s discomfort is connected to the revealing of the universal power of the male gaze, for “she was Sir Thomas’s niece, and she was soon said to be admired by Mr. Crawford. It was enough to give her general favour. Sir Thomas himself was watching” (*MP* 255). It is not Fanny’s inherent beauty that has won her “general favour,” rather it is the approval of Sir Thomas’s and Henry’s gazes. While Sir Thomas stops short of “attributing all her personal beauty, as Mrs. Norris seemed to do, to her transportation to Mansfield, he was pleased with himself for having supplied everything else” (*MP* 255), including this general approval.⁹ Fanny’s physical appearance only has value in the context of what Sir

⁹ Mrs. Norris’s confidence in the male gaze is shown in her statement at the beginning of the novel: “Suppose her a pretty girl, and seen by Tom or Edmund for the first time seven years hence, and I dare say there would be mischief... But breed her up with them from this time, and suppose her even to have the beauty of an angel, and she will never be more to either than a sister” (*MP* 8). Here Mrs. Norris illustrates her belief that physical beauty is not what gives Fanny her worth, it is rather the male gaze’s appreciation of her beauty which would give her worth, which she wrongly presumes would not occur between siblings.

Thomas has supplied; only with Sir Thomas's male gaze does Fanny's beauty gain her admirers.

Mary Crawford's resistance to her brother's portrayal of Fanny reveals the fallibility of the male gaze. Henry, like Sir Thomas signals Fanny's physical transformation to the reader on his return from Antigua, once again alerts the reader to a previously unmentioned shift in Fanny's form. Henry observes "the wonderful improvement that has taken place in her looks within the last six weeks" (*MP* 212).¹⁰ However, Mary Crawford, a woman who is constantly challenging societal rules, rejects Henry's male gaze. Mary declares, "Phoo! phoo!... She is just what she was in October, believe me. The truth is, that she was the only girl in company for you to notice, and you must have a somebody" (*MP* 213). Mary declares that Fanny's appearance has not changed, and since she is the only non-male describing Fanny's beauty, the reader is left questioning the reliability of the male gaze. Furthermore, Mary declares that the male gaze "must have a somebody," showing the interchangeability of women under the male gaze since it projects a fantasy on the female form. Mary continues, "Foolish fellow! And so this is her attraction after all! This it is – her not caring about you – which gives her such a soft skin and makes her so much taller, and produces all these charms and graces" (*MP* 213). Here Mary explicitly accuses the male gaze of transforming Fanny's appearance, of misrepresenting Fanny's beauty. Though this is the only time the gaze is challenged in the novel, it draws the reader's attention to the lack of narratorial descriptions of Fanny, causing doubt in the authority of the male gaze.

¹⁰ Furthermore, Henry sees further improvement in her appearance when her brother arrives, for "Fanny's attractions increased" because of "the glow of Fanny's cheek, the brightness of her eye, the deep interest, the absorbed attention, while her brother was describing" (*MP* 218). Fanny's appearance is transformed by William's presence, another illustration of the power of men to change her form.

Despite Mary's challenge, Henry's male gaze still holds power and successfully convinces Lady Bertram of Fanny's transformation. For Lady Bertram, "To know Fanny to be sought in marriage by a man of fortune, raised her, therefore, very high in her opinion. By convincing her that Fanny *was* very pretty, which she had been doubting before," (*MP* 307). Lady Bertram has accepted the male gaze as accurate, and her belief in its power is emphasized when she credits the ball for making Henry fall in love with Fanny. At the ball Fanny "did look remarkably well. Everybody said so. Sir Thomas said so," and thus Lady Bertram believes it must have made Henry fall in love (308). Here, "everybody" is equated with "Sir Thomas," for his male gaze holds power over public opinion. Furthermore, the force this public opinion of Fanny's beauty is what Lady Bertram believes would have swayed Henry, because that is what gives Fanny's beauty worth.

The power of the male gaze to transform Fanny's appearance and define her worth illustrates the patriarchal structure of society in *Mansfield Park*. Claudia Johnson argues that "beauty thus enforces submission and inhibits unruliness... by arousing a melting solicitude... In Austen's hands, of course, the beautiful does not work the way it is supposed to" (*Women, Politics and the Novel* 98-99). Going further, Fanny's inherent beauty is not oppressive, rather the male gaze's enforcement of her beauty is what limits her ability to define herself. The happy ending is only achieved once Fanny is able to enjoy being an object of Edmund's gaze, at which point the male fantasy of beauty no longer transforms her. Thus, when Edmund is learning to love Fanny, the narrator comments, "what was there now to add, but that he should learn to prefer soft light eyes to sparkling dark ones" (*MP* 436-437). Fanny achieves her happy ending with the man

who does not use his male gaze to project his fantasy of female beauty onto her form but instead learns to adjust the preferences of his gaze to better perceive her beauty. Finally, in Fanny's happy ending, she can find pleasure as the object of Edmund's gaze, rather than being oppressed by yet another male attempting to mold her to his desire.

II. "SHE COULD NOT BE INSENSIBLE OF [HIS] EARNEST ADMIRATION"

Anne's Subversive Pleasure and Sexual Reawakening Under the Gaze in Persuasion

In Jocelyn Harris' chapter on *Persuasion* in *Jane Austen's Art of Memory*, she argues that "how [Anne] is restored to youth and beauty... is the story of the novel" (Harris 191). What Harris doesn't note, however, is that Anne's restoration is triggered by her sexual reawakening. Austen ties together Anne's beauty and sexuality by describing her appearance with diction tied to nature and reproduction, and using her connection with nature to instigate her transformation. Furthermore, Anne's physical appearance and transformation is initially observed through the lustful male gaze. Anne notices this gaze and, rather than being oppressed by the gaze as Fanny is, takes pleasure in it. Anne's physical and sexual revival is reflected through the male gaze, which Anne notices and uses to manipulate how others perceive her and shape her happy ending.

In the novel, beauty is connected with a language of sexual rebirth. The word "bloom" occurs nine times in the novel in connection with female appearance. June Sturrock cites Amy King's *Bloom: The Botanical Vernacular in the English Novel* as arguing, "'The marriage plot's focus on the marriageable or blooming girl is like Linnaean botany's focus on the flower's bloom' (76). And blooms, both literal and metaphorical, are for pollination" (Sturrock 41). As King has argued, "bloom" is

connected to sexuality, and signals a woman is ready for marriage and pregnancy. Anne could be described as a “repeat bloomer,” because of her sexual revival, and Sturrock comments that “Anne Elliot’s fluctuating bloom is represented in the context of an exceptional emphasis throughout the novel on physical beauty” (Sturrock 41). In addition to Sturrock’s connection of “bloom” with Anne’s sexuality, “bloom” is also a reference to the changing of seasons. Thus, Anne’s sexual transformation is also explored in terms of nature. Before Anne transforms, she aligns herself with autumn, seeing herself at the end of her sexual life. To comfort herself about the loss of Wentworth’s affections, and, by extension, the fading of her sexuality, Anne was “repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions of autumn,” yet even so “it was not possible” to distract herself “when within reach of Captain Wentworth” (P 78). Thus, even descriptions of the beauty of autumn – of a fading sexuality – are inadequate comforts when the man representing Anne’s sexual desire is present. Once Anne has begun her transformation, she hopes “she was to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty” (P 115). Austen’s use of nature to describe Anne’s beauty connects Anne’s transformation with a sexual revival, just as spring and its blooms represent the potential for sexual rebirth.

Furthermore, even physical descriptions that are not overtly sexual take on sexual tones with Austen’s usage. Austen refers to the “glow” of passion altering character’s appearances thirteen times in the novel. As Harris has argued in *Jane Austen’s Art of Memory*, “‘Glow’ is also Jane Austen’s word for a blush, a sensibility, and erotic awareness, with ‘complexion’ used again and again as a sure indicator of Anne’s condition” (P 192). This glow and its sexual suggestion is at first something Anne lacks, for Louisa is described as “glowing and bright in prosperous love, all that was most

unlike Anne Elliot!” (P 115). Anne is at first excluded from this “glow” and the “love” it implies, but by the end of the novel Anne will have developed her own glow which she learns to control to gain power as she takes ownership of her sexuality.¹¹

Anne’s appearance is first presented through Sir Elliot’s male gaze, whose perspective opens the book to alert the reader to the weakness of the male gaze. The narrator opens expressing Anne’s appearance through her father’s free indirect discourse, observing that Anne “had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early” and she was now “faded and thin” (P 7). Sir Elliot soon takes over the narrative fully, for “her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own)... He had never indulged much hope, he had now none, of ever reading her name in any other page of his favourite work” (P 8). Here Sir Elliot connects Anne’s beauty and sexuality, for her appearance is a reason he will never write her name as married in the baronetage. Furthermore, Sir Elliot’s male gaze is influenced by his own vanity, for he only admits Anne in relation to himself.¹² As Sturrock observes, “he judges everyone he sees or hears of by his own standards of physical beauty” (Sturrock 43). Austen emphasizes this point through her later satire of Sir Elliot, who observes the “eighty-seven women” in Bath “without there being a tolerable face among them,” (P 132). However, Sir Elliot’s absurd gaze is contradicted by Admiral Croft, who comments, “Here are pretty girls enough,” a much more believable assessment than Sir

¹¹ It is worth noting that, while “bloom” seems to apply only to women, “glow” represents passion in both sexes. Captain Harville vouches for “the glow of his soul” when he is reunited with his wife (P 220), and Wentworth’s “cheeks glow” when invited to Anne’s home (P 212).

¹² Much ink has been spilled on Sir Elliot’s vanity (note his collection of “looking-glasses” (P 119)) clouding his male gaze. As Stephanie Eddleman wrote, “The ridiculousness of judging worth by beauty... is most clearly seen in Austen’s portrayal of Sir Walter. Austen no sooner reveals his opinion of his daughters – Elizabeth ‘handsome’ and ‘dear,’ Anne and Mary ‘of very inferior value’ – than she immediately undermines his judgment” (Eddleman 39). Furthermore, as Eddleman doesn’t note, Sir Elliot only admires Elizabeth because her variety of “handsome” is “very like himself” (P 119).

Elliot's (*P* 163). These instances of flaws in perception are emphasized and satirized more in this novel than in *Mansfield Park*, and serve to teach Anne and the reader that the male gaze is fallible and thus can be manipulated.

Unlike Fanny, Anne challenges her patriarch's male gaze. After her transformation Sir Elliot "began to compliment her on her improved looks" and recommends she use "Gowland, during the spring months. Mrs. Clay has been using it at my recommendation, and you see what it has done for her. You see how it has carried away her freckles.' If Elizabeth could but have heard this! Such personal praise might have struck her, especially as it did not appear to Anne that the freckles were at all lessened" (*P* 137). This rich passage illustrates Sir Elliot believing his male gaze has transformed Mrs. Clay's appearance and can define Anne's female gaze, for he directs her to "see" what he does. His investment in Mrs. Clay's beauty is linked with "the spring months" and proves Anne's perception that her father is sexually interested in Mrs. Clay. However, Anne denies that her father's male gaze has had an impact on Mrs. Clay's actual appearance, whose freckles she thinks are not "lessened"; she also implicitly denies her father's desire to alter her own appearance. The novel opens with an interaction between Anne and her father because her father is the archetypal patriarchal figure using his male gaze to define others, and Anne both first learns about, and learns to reject, the male gaze through him.

Anne's "early loss of bloom" is linked to her loss of desire as an object of the gaze after the end of she and Wentworth's engagement (*P* 28). Once she and Wentworth are reunited, this fall from beauty is further emphasized through the male gaze. Wentworth describes Anne as "so altered he should not have known [her] again" (*P* 57).

Anne “fully submitted” to Wentworth’s assessment, declaring “the years which had destroyed her youth and bloom had only given him a more glowing, manly, open look” (*P* 57). While Anne’s “bloom” has been lost with love, Wentworth’s sexuality has felt no harm, for he is only more “glowing” and “manly.” This passage speaks to the different limits placed on the sexes during Austen’s time, for women have only their beauty to prove their femininity, whereas men have careers to prove their masculinity. Anne feels these limits painfully, and Sturrock notes, “the intensity of her awareness of her lost beauty manifests itself in the violence of the language in the free indirect discourse that communicates her thoughts about her looks” (Sturrock 46).

Anne’s transformation begins at Lyme, where she is united with nature and, by extension, her natural sexuality. When Mr. Elliot sees Anne after a walk in Lyme, she looks “remarkably well” because her “very pretty features, having the bloom and freshness of youth restored by the fine wind which had been blowing on her complexion, and by the animation of eye which it had also produced” (*P* 97). Physical contact with “wind” has restored Anne’s natural “bloom” and given her an “animation of eye” representative of the returning power of her own gaze against the male gaze of Mr. Elliot. Anne uses her perceptive eye to note that “she could not be insensible of” his “earnest admiration” (*P* 97), showing her awareness of her own appearance. Anne’s rising power due to her restoration is already evident in her contact with Mr. Elliot, for “Anne’s face caught his eye,” placing Anne as the active participant and Mr. Elliot as her subject. When Anne and Mr. Elliot meet again, she thinks it is “proved gain by the gentleman’s looks, that he thought hers very lovely” (*P* 97). Anne is able to read Mr. Elliot’s “looks,” a perceptiveness which she uses to her own advantage when they finally meet aware of

each other's identities. At this point, Anne, "smiling and blushing, very becomingly shewed to Mr. Elliot the pretty features which he had by no means forgotten" (*P* 133). Again, Anne is the active individual, showing Mr. Elliot her features and making her appearance more sexually suggestive by blushing. Instead of being the subject who Mr. Elliot observes, Anne makes him the subject she presents herself to. However, the female gaze is still not as powerful as the male gaze in this society, for while Anne is the only member of her family to correctly assess Mr. Elliot, her family will not listen to her observations: "They could not listen to her description of him. They were describing him themselves; Sir Walter especially" (*P* 131).

While Mr. Elliot is the first to note Anne's transformation, the influence of one male gaze quickly spreads to another. When Mr. Elliot gazes at Anne, "Captain Wentworth looked round at her instantly in a way which shewed his noticing of it. He gave her a momentary glance, a glance of brightness, which seemed to say, 'That man is struck with you, and even I, at this moment, see something like Anne Elliot again'" (*P* 97). Mr. Elliot viewing Anne sexually is enough for Wentworth to see her sexually again, as he did when they were first courting. Anne remains aware here, clarifying to the reader through her indirect discourse that his "look" is one which illustrates him noticing Mr. Elliot's gaze, and that his "glance" is "a glance of brightness." Anne even literally speaks for Wentworth based on her interpretation of his gaze, showing that while it is the male gaze that instigates Wentworth's changing opinion, Anne uses her own gaze to assert control over the situation. Later that day, Wentworth speaks to Anne with a "glow" which she feels is "almost restoring the past. She coloured deeply" (*P* 106). Both characters' appearances now reflect the sexual attraction they feel to one another. Austen uses the

same word – “restore” – to describe Anne’s “restored” (*P* 97) looks and Anne and Wentworth’s “restoring” sexual attraction; this illustrates that Anne’s return of beauty is linked to her return of sexuality and pleasure under the gaze.

The male gaze also proves to change public opinion in general. After Lyme, Lady Russell compliments Anne’s appearance, and Anne “had the amusement of connecting [the compliments] with the silent admiration of her cousin, and of hoping that she was to be blessed with a second spring of youth and beauty” (*P* 115). As the narrator comments, “either Anne was so improved in plumpness and looks, or Lady Russell fancied her so,” illustrating the subjective nature of the gaze (*P* 115). This subjectivity is highlighted by Mrs. Smith, who assesses that “twelve years had changed Anne from the blooming, silent, unformed girl of fifteen, to the elegant little woman of seven-and-twenty, with every beauty except bloom” (*P* 144). Mrs. Smith disagrees with the narrator’s earlier assessment of Anne’s returned bloom, showing that no gaze, not even the narrator’s, is fully objective. However, once Anne spends time with Wentworth in Bath, Mrs. Smith observes that “your countenance perfectly informs me that you were in company last night with the person whom you think is most agreeable in the world,” though she misinterprets this person to be Mr. Elliot (*P* 183). Public opinion also raises its opinion of Anne’s beauty once she is seen as desired by Mr. Elliot, for once gossip establishes that they will soon be married, a conversation begins about her appearance: ““She is pretty, I think; Anne Elliot; very pretty, when one comes to look at her. It is not the fashion to say so, but I confess I admire her more than her sister.’ ‘Oh! so do I.’ ‘And so do I. No comparison. But the men are all wild after Miss Elliot. Anne is too delicate for them’” (*P* 167). Witnessing Mr. Elliot’s attentions to Anne causes these individuals to see her

through his eyes, changing the hierarchy established in the beginning of the novel of beauty between the sisters. The male gaze is so powerful that both Anne and Elizabeth are valued not for their appearance, but for the “men” who are “wild” after them.

Nonetheless, Anne counters the male gaze with her own perceptive gaze, which she uses to instigate Wentworth’s proposal. When Wentworth and Anne first meet in Bath, Anne uses her awareness to see him before he sees her, and once he does see her “he was more obviously struck and confused by the sight of her than she had ever observed before... She had the advantage” (*P* 166). Anne “observed” to give her the “advantage” to perceive the effect of sighting her on Wentworth. Later, she notes that he speaks to her with “a little smile, a little glow” (*P* 170), perceiving his sexual attraction to her. Once Wentworth tells her he was not interested in Louisa, Anne’s “happiness was from within. Her eyes were bright and her cheeks glowed... his half averted eyes and more than half expressive glance, all, all declared that he had a heart returning to her at last... She could not contemplate the change as implying less. He must love her” (*P* 175). Here Anne’s physical appearance is altered because of her internal “happiness” or realization that her sexuality may be fulfilled; this sexuality causes her physical change. Meanwhile, Anne assumes that Wentworth loves her because of his “glance,” showing his power to read the male gaze. While his eyes are “half averted,” hers are “bright,” placing her gaze as more active in this crucial interaction. Anne once again puts herself in a position of power; she doesn’t just observe Wentworth but also demands that Wentworth “must love her.” Wentworth answers her demand with a letter of proposal, which he gave to Anne “with eyes of glowing entreaty fixed on her for a time” (*P* 222). However, Wentworth will not continue until his sexual gaze is returned by Anne’s;

Wentworth joined Anne “as if irresolute whether to join or to pass on, said nothing – only looked. Anne could command herself enough to receive that look, and not repulsively. The cheeks which had been pale now glowed, and the movements which had hesitated were decided. He walked by her side” (*P* 224-225). Anne consents to his male gaze and, by extension, to his proposal. Anne is able to “command” her appearance, showing her use of her beauty to achieve her desired outcome. In response, Wentworth “glowed” and joined her, symbolizing their union in sexuality and, soon, in marriage.

Anne’s final beauty is a result of her own empowerment. After the proposal, Anne is “glowing and lovely in sensibility and happiness, and more generally admired than she thought about or cared for,” reflecting that her beauty is from her own happiness, not from general admiration (*P* 223). Thus, when Wentworth tells her, “To my eye you could never alter,” Anne “smiled, and let it pass. It was too pleasing a blunder for a reproach. It is something for a woman to be assured, in her eight-and-twentieth year, that she has not lost one charm of earlier youth; but the value of such homage was inexpressibly increased to Anne, by comparing it with former words, and feeling it to be the result, not the cause of a revival of his warm attachment” (*P* 228). Anne recognizes that Wentworth’s male gaze is not objective but instead subjective, especially to sexual attachment. Anne still values the sentiment because she prefers her beauty to be the “result” of the sexual attraction with Wentworth than the “cause” of the attraction, for she knows how fleeting beauty can be. Anne finds pleasure in the male gaze to achieve her own happy ending, taking control of her sexuality to empower herself in one of the few ways available to women in this time.

III. CONCLUSION

Fanny and Anne are both transformed by the male gaze, but Fanny feels its oppression while Anne is able to find pleasure as its object. As a result, Fanny tries to avoid the gaze while Anne observes and perceives how she can manipulate it. Though both novels do show the gaze as fallible, only Anne is able to maneuver as an object of the gaze to actively alter the trajectory of her courtship. In addition to establishing the transformative power of the gaze and the subversive potential of pleasure, this distinction hints at the importance of perception as allowing the female object to make the gaze malleable to their desires. As Austen's oldest heroine with the threat of spinsterhood looming, Anne's cynicism and clear perception of her limited mobility is just as key as her pleasure in enabling her to subvert society's expectations – much like Austen herself.

Chapter 2:

Perception and Investigation as Sources of Agency in *Northanger Abbey*

While the two previous novels do not fit neatly into the category, many of Austen's works are considered novels of education, in which women learn how to accurately perceive the world around them in order to learn and subvert society's expectations. The first and most obvious lesson of perception occurs in Austen's first novel, *Northanger Abbey*. In contrast to the focus on the male gaze in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey* explores the power of the female gaze. While the male gaze is present in the novel, what is most notable is Catherine's agency to both resist the transformative effects of the male gaze by using her own ability to observe and investigate the world around her. Catherine's ability to resist the control of the male gaze can be attributed to her self-education through reading, for as Wollstonecraft argued, education creates women who are active, productive agents in society.

As Catherine progresses in her education through novels, she learns to question and investigate the world around her, a process which pushes her gaze to perceive more than is first evident to those around her. Hugh Hennedy summarizes:

One way to describe *Northanger Abbey* would be to say that it is a novel about a girl who at first sees too little and later sees too much... but though there would be truth in this description, it would finally be an unacceptable oversimplification, for at Bath Catherine does manage to see some things that are really there, and at *Northanger* she fails to see some things that are also really there. (Hennedy 5)

Hennedy accurately picks up that Catherine's gaze holds some power of perception from the beginning of the novel, though I would choose to summarize the novel a little bit differently: *Northanger Abbey* is a novel about a girl learning about and refining her

gaze, which leads to her often imperfect perceptions that are still, however, remarkable in their ability to investigate the world around her.

While Catherine is not flawless in her ability to perceive those around her – most often taking her observations and exaggerating them in a Quixotic fashion – I argue that her powers of perception ultimately establish her gaze as more accurate than the gazes of the men around her.¹³ I will begin my analysis by showing Catherine’s ability to expose the inaccuracy of the male gaze, and will then move on to show how she herself begins to enact a transformative effect through her ability to perceive what others do not.

I. “THEY WILL NEVER THINK OF ME AFTER SUCH A DESCRIPTION AS THAT”

How Catherine resists being transformed by oppressive male gazes

While *Northanger Abbey* illustrates the forceful pressure of the male gaze, the focus always remains on Catherine’s agency as an object of the gaze. As Zlotnick notes, “*Northanger Abbey* shows a particular interest in women’s agency, or female volition, as the repetition of ‘voluntary’ in the novel’s final chapters indicates: England is full of ‘voluntary spies’ (145); Catherine is the victim of ‘a voluntary self-created delusion’ (146)” (Zlotnick 279). Moving past Zlotnick’s observations, I find that the use of the word “voluntary” is often tied directly to concepts of the gaze – “spies” refers to a panoptic gaze, while Catherine’s “self-created delusion” is related to her ability to perceive the world around her. While I will explore the theme of perception in the next

¹³ While the novel is any many ways “a parody of the female Quixote plot” (Neill 163), Catherine’s reading does not disempower her. Instead, reading Gothic novels teaches her to actively use her gaze to investigate the world around her, and “wise and judicious female reading emerges as a possible antidote to female victimization” (Zlotnick 278).

section, Catherine's agency as an object of the male gaze is vital to her ability to form her own perceptions and resist its transformation.

Part of this agency comes from Austen's framing of Catherine as a "heroine," a focus that positions her primarily under the gaze of the reader rather than that of the male characters. Unlike in the two novels I previously discussed, Catherine's appearance is immediately described by the narrator, and the transformation in her beauty occurs quickly and is enacted by Catherine's own agency. Austen begins by introducing Catherine as an unattractive heroine, for "No one who had ever seen Catherine Morland in her infancy, would have supposed her to be born a heroine," (NA 5). This opening statement immediately places Catherine under the universal gaze of anyone "who had ever seen" her to judge upon her beauty, and this gaze is applied to readers through the classification of Catherine as a "heroine." Austen critiques Catherine for being "plain," and because "she could never learn or understand anything before she was taught" (NA 5). However, it is not long before Catherine begins to learn. At fifteen, "appearances were mending... her eyes gained more animation... she grew smart" (NA 6). Just from the first two paragraphs, Catherine's beauty and intelligence are linked forces – especially considering "smart" in Austen's time period was used to denote both intelligence and beauty, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Smart"). Using this intelligence, Catherine transforms her own appearance, curling her hair and being more cleanly, and thus her beauty is a result of her agency.

When Catherine's beauty is first placed under the male gaze, Austen emphasizes not its transformative effect, but its fallibility. While the narrator declares it time for Catherine "to be noticed and admired... "Not one [man], however, started with rapturous

wonder on beholding her, no whisper of eager inquiry ran about the room, nor was she once called a divinity by anybody. Yet Catherine was in very good looks, and had the company only seen her three years before, they would now have thought her exceedingly handsome” (NA 13). By immediately intervening and describing how Catherine should be viewed, rather than how men actually gazed at her, Austen undermines the gaze of men in the novel by correcting them. The male gaze does ultimately land on Catherine here, when she is noticed “with some admiration; for, in her own hearing, two gentlemen pronounced her to be a pretty girl. Such words had their due effect; she immediately thought the evening pleasanter than she had found it before” (NA 13). The “effect” of this male gaze is one of pleasure and empowering emotion.¹⁴ Their gaze does not make Catherine beautiful; instead, they are simply noting what the reader has already known for many pages.

When men do attempt to transform Catherine’s appearance, she resists their descriptions. John Thorpe is the first example of the oppressive male gaze in the novel. While John and Catherine walk along the street during their first meeting, John delivers “a short decisive sentence of praise or condemnation on the face of every woman they met” (NA 32). John assumes women to be parading for his gaze, whether they intend to be or not. Catherine outwardly accepts his behavior because society has trained her not to contradict men, so she is “fearful of hazarding an opinion of its own in opposition to that of a self-assured man, especially where the beauty of her own sex is concerned” (NA 33). However, Catherine’s discomfort is clear. While she is flattered when he calls her “the

¹⁴ Catherine also felt pleasure under the gaze of her parents, when she overhears them saying, “‘Catherine grows quite a good-looking girl – she is almost pretty today,’ ... and how welcome were the sounds! To look *almost* pretty, is an acquisition of higher delight to a girl who has been looking plain the first fifteen years of her life, than a beauty from her cradle can ever receive” (NA 6).

most charming girl in the world” and forgives his former actions, Austen describes his gaze as an “attack,” showing its oppressive power even with a positive assessment (*NA* 33). Catherine herself soon begins to resist John’s gaze more openly. When John asserts his right to Catherine as a dancing partner without her consent, John says he has been “telling all my acquaintance that I was going to dance with the prettiest girl in the room; and when they see you standing up with somebody else, they will quiz me famously” (*NA* 53). Here John places the gaze of the entire room on Catherine, and compliments her appearance in an attempt to make her submit to his will. However, Catherine rejects his request and his description of her, saying, “Oh, no; they will never think of me, after such a description of that” (*NA* 53). Catherine undermines the power of John’s gaze by resisting his assessment of her appearance, and by refusing to dance with him. John reacts by saying, “If they do not, I will kick them out of the room for blockheads,” showing a violent reaction to the challenge to his gaze. While John attempts to construct an idea of Catherine through his gaze and courtship, she refutes his claims and thus his assumed ability to transform her to his liking. Her increased denial of his assertions as the novel continues – from his declaration that she must come with them to the castle to his assumption of their engagement – shows clearly Catherine’s agency under his gaze.

General Tilney is a less overt, but more threatening, example of the male gaze. While John Thorpe is immediately identifiable as oppressive, General Tilney disguises his participation in the “scopic regime” until the end of the novel. Nonetheless, when Catherine first sees the General, she “perceived herself to be earnestly regarded by a gentleman who stood among the lookers-on... and with his eyes still directed towards her, she saw him presently address Mr. Tilney in a familiar whisper. Confused by his

notice, and blushing from the fear of its being excited by something wrong in her appearance, she turned away her head” (NA 57). Catherine becomes “confused” and concerned about her appearance in front of the General because he speaks to Mr. Tilney, connecting him in Catherine’s mind with her current courtship. Unlike with John, whose opinion of her appearance Catherine quickly rejects, Catherine is nervous about what the General thinks of her appearance, so much so that “she turned away her head.” After this moment, General Tilney seems vindicated by his connection with Henry and his amiable behavior, but Catherine is never quite comfortable in his presence.

General Tilney himself describes his gaze and its oppressive power, for at Northanger Abbey he tells Catherine, “My eyes will be blinding for the good of others, and yours preparing for rest by future mischief” (NA 138). While it is ambiguous as to if this “blinding” refers to him blinding others or a reflexive result of reading his legal paperwork, the fact that the word is tied to the law and his enforcement of it exposes the power of his gaze. Throughout the novel, the General uses his gaze to “blind” others to his actions and motivations, though of course in this instance he does not identify his power as oppressive. Meanwhile, the General identifies Catherine’s eyes as mischievous, a word which the *Oxford English Dictionary* reports had connotations of harm, injury and misfortune in Austen’s period (“Mischevious”). Thus, while the General embraces his gaze overpowering others, he sees the female gaze as dangerous. Given Catherine’s eventual ability to overpower his wishes, his fear of the female gaze is justified. By the end of the novel, Catherine is able to identify herself as the former “involuntary, unconscious object” of both General Tilney and John Thorpe’s gazes, the word “involuntary” emphasizing their threat to her agency. However, even General Tilney is

shown as unable to “blind” those around him for long, for he did not accurately perceive Catherine’s background, and thus lacks the power of perception that Catherine possesses.

II. “IN FINDING HIM IRRESISTIBLE, BECOMING SO HERSELF”

How Catherine’s subjective gaze empowers her insight

Catherine’s gaze poses a threat to male control in the novel, for she can perceive what they do not. This both enables her to reject their projections and to influence their gaze, as is made clear in her relationship with Henry. There are more instances in the novel of Catherine gazing at Henry rather than the other way around, which already indicates Catherine’s agency in the relationship. Because Catherine can perceive Henry’s feelings with remarkable accuracy, she can use her gaze to manipulate his behavior in certain ways. When there is a misunderstanding and Catherine fears Henry is angry at her, she spends the night at the theatre, where “every other look upon an average was directed towards the opposite box; and, for the space of two entire scenes, did she thus watch Henry Tilney” (NA 66). This is a reversal of the usual behavior in Austen’s novels, for women tend to glance for shorter periods of time while male characters do the extended staring. Catherine succeeds in attracting Henry to her box with her gaze, but Henry denies being offended. Catherine rejects his denials, saying “I am sure by your look... you were angry” (NA 66). Henry again denies his anger, but Catherine again remains confident in the accuracy of her gaze, saying, “Well, nobody would have thought you had no right who saw your face” (NA 68). Catherine is confident that her gaze is accurate even in the face of Henry’s claims, and eventually Henry stops trying to correct her interpretation, changing the subject and in effect admitting she was right. Her

empowered gaze gives Catherine influence over Henry's behavior, and is even described as what attracts Henry to her in the beginning of their courtship. During one discussion, Catherine "enjoyed her usual happiness with Henry Tilney, listening with sparkling eyes to everything he said; and, in finding him irresistible, becoming so herself" (NA 95). Because Catherine finds Henry irresistible, a result of her gaze, his own opinion of her is transformed. Thus, Catherine's gaze – through her "sparkling eyes" – has a transformative power over Henry's.

While Catherine has agency in Bath, her most remarkable transformations occur when she becomes more actively perceptive at Northanger Abbey. In fact, as David Demarest argues, Catherine places deep trust in her own perception by adopting the role of a female detective:

A good deal of the pleasure the reader finds in an Austen novel derives from a kind of detective story motif (recalling the novel's reiteration of eyes, sight, seeing, etc., one might say with a flash of thoroughly un-Austenian wit, that she writes about the 'private-eye'). Catherine Morland, of course, plays rather literally at being a detective. The other heroines may not spend their time peering into old trunks, but they are forever investigating the façade of social reality and attempting to make accurate judgments. (Demarest 191)

Catherine is unique among heroines for her insistence on discovering the world through her own detection. Once Catherine arrives at Northanger Abbey, her constant spying emphasizes the agency of her gaze. Catherine is determined to find out the truth about the abbey and, through the abbey, General Tilney. When she sees a chest in her room at the abbey, Catherine posits several questions to herself ("What can it hold?- Why should it be placed here?" (NA 119)) and then immediately determines to use her gaze to determine the answers for herself. Catherine's "resolute effort threw back the lid, and gave to her astonished eyes the view" of its interior (NA 120). While the search for a hidden

manuscript may be foolish, and turn up only a receipt, Catherine's investigation is the first time she, as a heroine, is called upon to act heroically. Austen's focus on Catherine's "effort" and her agency in this sentence demonstrates Catherine's strength, bravery, and self-determination.¹⁵

While she has a few hiccups along the way, this investigation allows her to see many elements of reality that others (including Henry) overlook. I agree with Zlotnick's reading of Catherine's education through novels, for "reading Radcliffe turns Catherine herself into the very thing Henry Tilney declares to be one of the hallmarks of modern, enlightened England, a product of its 'social and literary intercourse': a voluntary spy... One of the earliest girl detectives in the literary canon... Catherine becomes a figure of detection and exposure" (Zlotnick 288-9). Catherine's ability to detect and expose is often overlooked due to her exaggerated interpretations of reality – but in fact, Catherine herself perceives the errors in her judgment. Most critics point to her realization that Mrs. Tilney's death was natural as a moment in which Catherine adopts Henry's gaze rather than strengthening her own.¹⁶ Austen's language reinforces that a shift in perception is

¹⁵ While some critics have attributed Catherine's Gothic imagination to the story Henry tells her on the ride to the abbey, this interpretation underestimates Catherine's natural curiosity. While Henry certainly influences Catherine, this urge to explore came not from Henry but from her reading. This is evident when one considers that the way in which Catherine explores Northanger is how she wanted to explore Blaize Castle, but couldn't. When planning a trip to the castle with the Thorpes, Catherine asked, "I should like to see the castle, but may we go all over it? May we go up every staircase, and into every suite of rooms?" (NA 61). Even Catherine's most extreme actions at Northanger – sneaking off on her own to explore the deceased Mrs. Tilney's room – are reflections of her previous desire to investigate, instigated by her reading, not by Henry.

¹⁶ Many critics have even claimed that Catherine adopts Henry's perspective, gazing from his eyes, over the course of the novel, but I disagree. Admittedly, Henry certainly has influence on Catherine and how she sees the world. The clearest instance of this is during their walk, when Henry and Elinor Tilney admire the landscape and teach Catherine to see it as they do. Henry's "instructions were so clear that she soon began to see beauty in everything admired by him," and she begins to join in their aesthetic judgments on the landscape. While this sentence certainly signals Catherine at least temporarily mimicking Henry's gaze, the more significant sign is that Catherine is a subject, not an object, of the gaze in this education. As Wollstonecraft argues in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, those who are educated should "concentrate pictures for their fellow-creatures; forcing them to view with interest the objects reflected

occurring, for Catherine's "visions of romance were over. Catherine was completely awakened. Henry's address, short as it had been, had more thoroughly opened her eyes to the extravagance of her late fancies than all their several disappointments had done" (*NA* 146). The metaphors of "vision," "awaken[ing]," and the "open[ing] of eyes" all reinforce this moment as a switch in Catherine's gaze. Critics like Linda Middleton argue that in this moment Catherine "internalizes Henry's system" and switches to "imaginative passivity, or self-surveillance" (Middleton 105). However, this reading overlooks Catherine's own self-awakening and shift in perspective before her conversation with Henry. When Catherine sees Mrs. Tilney's bedroom, she experiences "astonishment and doubt first... shortly succeeded by a ray of common sense" (*NA* 142). This "ray of common sense" hits again, perhaps more sharply, when shamed by Henry, but Catherine has already awakened herself. When she runs into Henry, it was on her way back to her room, already aware of her "folly" (*NA* 142). As Zlotnick writes, "When Henry asks, 'Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?' (198), Catherine begins some voluntary *self*-spying, an interior surveillance to detect and correct that imaginative unruliness which caused her to project such 'horrors' into a respectable environment" (Zlotnick). This "self-spying" allows Catherine to perceive her own errors and transform her own judgments, rather than simply accepting Henry's. Thus, she herself perceives the flaws in her gaze, and by doing so educates herself to improve her perceptive accuracy.

from the impassioned imagination, which they passed over in nature" (Wollstonecraft 123). While this method of education is easily read as problematic with a modern lens, it fits entirely within the mode of empowering education promoted by Wollstonecraft and seemingly supported by Austen. This is especially clear in Austen's lead-up to this moment, in which Catherine chooses to ask to be educated because she "did not know her own advantages – did not know that a good-looking girl, with an affectionate heart and a very ignorant mind, cannot fail of attracting a clever young man" (*NA* 81). Instead of relying on her beauty and ignorance to attract Henry, limiting herself to being an object of the gaze, Catherine chooses education, and chooses to learn to gaze for herself.

Furthermore, even Catherine's most extreme theories do reflect an element of reality that she perceives and others overlook. Catherine's supposedly devalued visions tend to come at least partially true. Nick Pici summarizes the validity of Catherine's many anticipations:

Catherine's expectations are oftentimes *partially* fulfilled or somehow played out in reality in a distorted or subdued manner. For instance, it storms the first night at Northanger, but not in any remarkably violent way... Perhaps the best example of this fragmented inconsistency between expectation and reality involves Catherine's perceptions of the general. While not the murderer Catherine had at first suspected him of being, General Tilney does indeed turn out to be a cruel, contemptible man who ends up banishing his guest from Northanger... Thus, Catherine's initial perceptions are not wholly inaccurate; they have just been modified to some degree by reality. (Pici 42)

While I agree with Pici's reading of Catherine's perceptions, it is worth considering that it is not her perceptions that have been modified by reality, but rather the reality of the novel that is modified by her perceptions. We are informed of the General's personality solely through Catherine's eyes in the novel, and because she perceives his true nature, we are not surprised by his final actions. However, society in general would find them impossible. Henry himself, when learning of Catherine's suspicions, rebukes Catherine with a speech about how England's network of "voluntary spies" would have made such behavior impossible.¹⁷ In Henry's perception of reality, his father's negligence of his mother – or Catherine – is not plausible. However, this network of spies does not discover what Catherine herself senses immediately as an object of the General's gaze, and by using her own gaze to investigate. Thus, the reality Catherine perceives is not the reality accepted by England's many "voluntary spies" – yet her perception becomes (or one may even say transforms) the reality of the novel. While Catherine's transformative

¹⁷ Henry's faith in this panoptic gaze is quickly thrown into question. As Middleton points out, since the voluntary spy system of this time period often "wrote its own fictions, riddled with gaps, Austen may have felt a justifiable ambivalence about its workings" (Middleton 105).

potential is not fully developed in the novel, it is certain that, as Marilyn Butler agrees, the novel “at least in part vindicates Catherine’s intuition” because she alone was able to see the General’s malevolent nature (Butler 178).

Catherine’s potential to use her gaze to transform becomes clearer in her visit on Woodston. Like investigating Northanger Abbey granted her the ability to perceive its secrets (or lack thereof), gazing at Woodston gives her the potential to transform it. When Catherine comments that the cottage outside is “the prettiest cottage!” the General replies, “You like it – you approve it as an object – it is enough... The cottage remains” (NA 157). Here, her observation has the power to change Henry’s home, the transformative effect Mulvey describes as one of the most powerful elements of the male gaze. Catherine enacts this change simply by voicing out loud what she perceives about the room. While Catherine chooses not to use this power once she realizes she wields it, it still remains clear that her gaze still holds transformative abilities, in this case over Henry’s house, from its power to perceive. (This is especially significant considering the symbolic representation of the man through his estate in Austen’s literature – perhaps most evident with Mr. Darcy and Pemberley, but applicable to Henry and Woodston.)

The ending of the novel reinforces Catherine’s agency in her gaze as key to her happy ending. When Catherine is dispirited back at home, her mother goes to get her a periodical called “The Mirror.” While “The Mirror” is in fact a text, the title is still symbolic, and indicates that gazing upon herself in the mirror in another instance of self-surveillance or self-spying would transform Catherine in another act of perception.¹⁸ This

¹⁸ Austen is of course also mocking these types of meaningless conduct manuals. After all, as Armstrong summarizes, conduct books uphold that “it is a woman’s participation in public spectacle that injures her, for as an object of display, she always loses value as a subject... lack[ing] the subjectivity that makes a woman desirable; she cannot be ‘seen’ and still be vigilant” (Armstrong 77). The use of a conduct book in

reading is emphasized by her mother's belief that she needs the manual because of Catherine's "absent and dissatisfied look," (NA 178). However, when her mother returns Henry has already arrived, and Catherine's "brightened eye made her mother trust" that Catherine would recover without reading the manual. This reference to the "brightened eye" reassures readers that Catherine's gaze is as powerful as ever, as does one of the final summaries of their relationship: "A persuasion of her partiality for him had been the only cause of giving her a serious thought. It is a new circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of a heroine's dignity; but if it be as new in common life, the credit of a wild imagination will at least be all my own," (NA 180). This references the moment I analyzed earlier, in which Catherine attracts Henry because of the power of her own "irresistible" gaze. Finally, Austen's last reference to a "wild imagination" allies her with Catherine, and cements her occasionally inaccurate visions as a "credit" to her character. In describing their happy ending, Austen refocuses on how Catherine's agency as both an object and subject of the gaze is what enacted the change that brought her and Henry together.

III. CONCLUSION

While previous critics have often dismissed Catherine as a Quixotic girl who only improves by adopting Henry's male perspective, the progression of *Northanger Abbey* is much more complex. Not only does Catherine's gaze succeed in perceiving what those around her do not, but she also uses her perceptive gaze to enact change and create her own happy ending. In contrast to *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, *Northanger Abbey*

this scene is then especially ironic, for Catherine has proven exactly the opposite: she developed her subjectivity in Bath while being an "object of display."

highlights how women can gain agency as subjects and objects of the gaze through their ability to perceive. While Catherine does not fully embrace the potential to use this power in a transformative manner, I will next discuss how *Sense and Sensibility* shows just how vital perception is to enact transformation through the female gaze. Whether or not Catherine is fully successful in perceiving and transforming the world around her is arguable, but what is undeniable is the remarkable agency she maintains to create her own happy ending in a hierarchical, oppressive society. The process of developing a perceptive gaze is not always as straightforward or painless a process as *Northanger Abbey* may suggest. In fact, this method of resistance to the male gaze can come at a cost if one attempts to enact more drastic transformation than Catherine.

Chapter 3:

The Manipulation of the Male Gaze in *Sense and Sensibility*

Sense and Sensibility is, in many ways, a novel about observation. While the narration of the novel is most closely aligned with Elinor Dashwood, the majority of the plot of the story centers on the life of her younger sister, Marianne. Elinor's observations – and frequent disapproval – of Marianne and her behavior color how the reader perceives the world of the novel. Unlike Marianne, the reader rarely pauses to gaze at Elinor or consider her perspective.¹⁹ By aligning the narration with Elinor's free indirect discourse while distancing the reader from Marianne, Austen constructs Marianne as the object of the gaze of the reader and other characters. As Shawn Maurer writes:

Particularly in relation to Marianne's interactions with Willoughby, the novel provides surprisingly little direct access to Marianne's intimate thoughts. Refusing to employ narrative techniques, such as free indirect discourse, that would allow the readers the kind of closeness to Marianne that readers often feel for Elinor, ... we view [Marianne] either through a narrative voice aligned with Elinor's point of view or through the judgmental eyes of Elinor herself. (Maurer 731-732)

While Elinor's perspective, and thus her gaze, is vital to the novel, this narratorial point of view distances her from the interactions of the male gaze between characters. For this reason, I will focus my analysis not on Elinor and her perception, but on the sister who embodies the transformative effects of the male gaze. However, this style of narration is important to consider when we realize how important observation and general opinion (frequently represented by Elinor) are to the mechanics of this society. While most of Austen's novels focus on courtship and the politics of the sexually desiring male gaze, in

¹⁹ Upon closer reflection, Elinor does have gaps in her perspective, it is simply that the reader is not inclined to question those gaps. They do however become evident if we consider the "gaps, omissions, and contradictions" that Barbara Seeber notes when Elinor is biased by Willoughby's final visit, and chooses not to share the whole truth with her mother and sister so as not to color their opinions as hers has been.

this novel a societal gaze is also vital to understanding power dynamics and relationships. By framing the entire novel through Elinor's observations of her sister and her antagonist Lucy Steele, Austen prioritizes the societal gaze and emphasizes its disciplinary nature through Elinor's frequent disapproval.

Lucy and Marianne are the two women in the novel who interact with a transformative male gaze. However, both find a way to change the man gazing at them rather than accepting Mulvey's "passive/female" object who has no pleasure in the gaze. Nonetheless, their powers of transformation are limited in a way the male gaze is not: they must succeed in manipulating not just one male gaze but the also a societal gaze to reach their happy ending. While Mulvey considers the male gaze as equivalent to a societal gaze, the two are distinct in this novel: the male gaze is a transformative sexual desiring while the societal gaze does not transform but instead operates in a Foucauldian panoptic way; through its constant observation and restriction it shapes how women must act to maintain their reputation.²⁰

I will begin by exploring how Lucy achieves her happy ending by manipulating not just Edward's gaze, but also welcoming and directing the gaze of general society while performing as the societal ideal of a modest woman. On the other hand, while Marianne does exert a transformative effect on Willoughby, she shuns society's gaze and thus loses her ability to influence general opinion. As a result, her gaze is not powerful enough to maintain its hold on Willoughby, and she becomes weak and malleable under various male gazes. During her illness Marianne turns her gaze inward and finds a new outlook, but in attempting to fix past mistakes, overcompensates and focuses so much on

²⁰ The distinction between these two gazes in the novel versus in Mulvey's theory may be related to that Austen's societal gaze is largely portrayed through female characters, and thus closer aligned with feminine perception than masculine transformation.

the societal perspective that she sacrifices elements of her own identity to embody a perfect woman. By contrasting these two women, I argue that Austen is revealing the inability for women to escape the limits of their gender or class position, except by observing and working within patriarchal power structures.

I. "HER SHARP LITTLE EYES FULL OF MEANING":

How Lucy Steele uses her gaze to manipulate general opinion and rise in class

Lucy Steele is the younger of two sisters from a lower social class and less educated than the Dashwoods. Because of her position in society, Lucy is hyperaware of the power structures oppressing her, and is constantly looking for a way to manipulate them to her advantage. Lynda Hall argues:

By analyzing Lucy's character as a commodity on the marriage market, we can better understand Jane Austen's take on value: what might be perceived as valuable in the marketplace might not have real or intrinsic value. Lucy knows that her value is based on mere perception; in a consumer economy the skill of speculation may be necessary. (Hall 166)

Thus, while Lucy is in no way a likeable character, she is a successful one: she knows that she is an object of the gaze, and she uses that position to act in a way to rise in "value" in the economic marriage market. Lucy achieves her happy ending while Marianne does not because Lucy knows that for her transformation to be effective, she cannot just focus on the male gaze, but must consider the gaze of society at large. Because of her low class status, Lucy knows she will only achieve her aspirations if she shapes herself in every other way to be palatable as perceived by high society.

From her first moment of introduction, Lucy consciously tries to manipulate the gazes of those around her. Austen immediately frames her as an object of the gaze, for

“in [Lucy]... they acknowledged considerable beauty” (S&S 116). This general acknowledgment of beauty is accompanied by a remark on her “sharp quick eye,” showing how intentional and aware she is about how others perceive her. She is incredibly attentive to how her behavior is read, at one point she “looked down” as she spoke, “amiably bashful, with only one side glance at her companion to observe its effect on her” (S&S 124). Lucy is always manipulating how she appears – in this case, “amiably bashful” – and how her companions interpret her appearance. Lucy’s eyes are described as “attentive” (S&S 123), “observant” (S&S 227), and “sharp” multiple times, and Lucy uses her power of observation to influence those around her. This is most evident with Elinor, who she targets after realizing society assumes Elinor and Edward are together – a threat to her position as Edward’s secret fiancé, a position she knows will become reliant on general opinion once it is made public knowledge and challenged by Edward’s family.

Feeling Elinor’s challenge to her powerful gaze, Lucy tells Elinor about her secret engagement in an effort to warn her and make her see the situation from Lucy’s perspective. In this discussion, Lucy has “little sharp eyes full of meaning” (S&S 140) and was “looking significantly” (S&S 142) at Elinor, “narrowly watching” and “eyeing Elinor attentively” (S&S 123) throughout the conversation. Lucy also overtly warns Elinor of her powers of observation, and how closely she would be watching she and Edward’s relationship, for she “was enough inclined for suspicion, to have found out the truth in an instant” if Edward preferred another woman – in this case, Elinor herself (S&S 141). However, immediately after voicing this threat Lucy attempts again to manipulate her perception as someone innocent, and denies the power of her gaze, saying “I do not mean to say that I am particularly observant or quick-sighted in general, but in such a

case I am sure I could not be deceived” (S&S 141-142). As our ever-reliable narrator, Elinor cues us into Lucy’s manipulation and “was not blinded by the beauty, or the shrewd look” of Lucy in her “constant endeavor to appear to advantage” (S&S 119, 122).²¹ Thus, readers are aware of Lucy’s attempts to manipulate societal opinion, without being manipulated in their own opinion of her. While Lucy is not successful in manipulating Elinor, their interactions expose her thought process and the purposeful consideration of society’s gaze behind every action she takes.

Lucy is more successful in using her position as the object of the gaze to secure her spot as part of the Ferrars family. In the brief summaries of her early relationship with Edward, it is clear that she manipulated his male gaze to attract him. Edward’s “youthful infatuation of nineteen would naturally blind him to every thing but her beauty and good nature; but the four succeeding years... must have opened his eyes to her defects... [and] robbed her of that simplicity which might once have given an interesting character to her beauty” (S&S 134). Lucy’s “beauty” had “blind[ed]” Edward in their early relationship, but once they were engaged his “eyes” were “opened.” Edward realizes that the “simplicity” of her “beauty” was false, and in fact was strategically planned by Lucy to attract him. By the time we meet Edward, his “eyes had long been opened” (S&S 341) as to Lucy’s true character.

Edward’s eyes are opened because once Lucy has attracted Edward, she does not waste her time focusing on just his gaze. Instead, she transitions to manipulating the gazes of society in general – and overestimates her power in this regard. When Lucy meets Mrs. Ferrars, Elinor observes that Lucy’s “interest and her vanity... so very much

²¹ Elinor also actively avoids Lucy’s gaze and thus manipulation; Lucy “looked up; but Elinor was careful in guarding her countenance from every expression that could give to her words a suspicious tendency” (Austen 141).

blind her” to the reality of her role (*S&S* 224). Mrs. Ferrars treats Lucy extremely well in an effort to shame Elinor, yet it is “declared by Lucy’s eyes” that she believes Mrs. Ferrars’ preference is significant and a positive sign for her relationship with Edward (*S&S* 224). Lucy’s servile submission to Mrs. John Dashwood shows her belief that her behavior under their observation will have the power to transform their classist bias.

While Lucy is unable to overcome the class biases of the Ferrars, her continued attention to public opinion does secure her status as Edwards’ future wife. Despite the disapproval of the Ferrars’ when the engagement is revealed (and despite Edward’s own disinterest in Lucy), Lucy has positioned herself so that ending the engagement would be to violate precious societal rules. Even though society does not know about the engagement at first, Lucy primes herself in their eyes to ensure that Edward will not break the loveless engagement. While his family does not approve, society in general does; Mrs. Jennings comments, “He acted like an honest man!” and Elinor treats his behavior as what establishes him as a better man than Willoughby (*S&S* 250). Thus, because Lucy positions herself as hopelessly in love, and as a victim of the Ferrars’ cruelty, it is impossible for Edward to break the engagement without lowering society’s opinion of him.

After this success, Lucy then turns her attention to his disapproving family, to transform their opinion of her. When Robert Ferrars visits to convince her not to marry Edward, Lucy takes the opportunity to make Robert return multiple times and interact more. Through observation and careful posing as the object of his gaze, Lucy is able to rise in status further, from the now-poor Edward’s fiancé to the now-rich Robert’s wife. While this switch is sudden, it is explained that “the vanity of the one had been so worked

on by the flattery of the other, as to lead by degrees to all the rest” (S&S 339). In other words, by flattering Robert and carefully positioning herself as an attractive object of his gaze, Lucy is able to secure yet another step up in the social ladder. Lucy then turns to the rest of the Ferrars family, and eventually becomes “necessary to Mrs. Ferrars... a favourite child” (S&S 350-1). By seeing the desires of Robert and the other Ferrars with her “observant” eyes, Lucy manipulates both the male and societal gazes to rise in class status. She does so by first implying she will listen to Robert’s discipline and call off the wedding, and then by embodying compliant feminine behavior toward Mrs. Ferrars. Thus, while Lucy succeeds in rising in class status, she does so at the cost of outwardly conforming to the deferential feminine ideal.

Lucy is able to succeed in her goals by opening her eyes to the workings of society. She is aware that what is rewarded in the marriage market is appearances, not actual understanding. As Claudia Johnson explains in *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, “it is only because that larger world around them is so menacing in the first place that the manners of young ladies are of such consequence. Provided she appear proper and play the sycophant to wealth and power, a coldhearted heroine like Lucy Steele finds a place in the world” (Johnson 50). This awareness is what separates her from the many other women in Austen’s novels who try to manipulate the male gaze by embracing their status of objects.²² These women generally represent what LeRoy Smith in *Jane Austen and the Drama of Woman* calls “the second possibility, collaboration with the patriarchal order” (Smith). While Austen heroines, including Marianne, tend to actively resist this order, these secondary characters often try to gain power by complying. Smith continues, “She

²² These women include Miss Bingley, Isabella Thorpe, and more, who I will not have time to discuss in depth but touched upon briefly in the Introduction.

is one of several examples in Austen's novels of women who work within society and with its weapons in an effort to acquire the place denied them, but whose performance is crass and demeaning. The precarious situation of the single woman helps one to understand their actions. Like other oppressed people they learn to dissemble, to scheme and to act to achieve their ends... Some, such as Lucy Steele, use sexual attraction cold-bloodedly" (Smith 78-9). By working within these oppressive structures of the gaze, Lucy is able to protect herself and ultimately rise in class – and by treating Lucy as a serious threat rather than a satirical annoyance like the other women, it seems Austen too acknowledges that accomplishment is worthy of some respect. After all, Lucy is ultimately able to reject her class status (though at the cost of embracing her gender role), while Marianne's refusal to accept the sway of class or gender over her life costs her a convincing happily ever after.

II. "SHE HAD NO EYES FOR ANY ONE ELSE"

How Marianne's shunning of society makes her vulnerable to the male gaze

While Marianne is certainly the more earnest and authentic of the two characters, her approach to the male gaze and society's influence does not enable her to break from her social role as Lucy does. While Lucy welcomes the opinion of society regarding her relationship with Edward, Marianne keeps her courtship with Willoughby as private as possible, excluding society's gaze. By doing so, she reduces her claim over Willoughby, and losing confidence in her influence becomes susceptible to transformation as an object of the male gaze instead of retaining agency as she did before.

At first, Marianne retains agency and even exerts a transformative power as the object of Willoughby's gaze.²³ The readers actually receive no description of Marianne's (or Elinor's) appearance until after their first interaction with Willoughby, at which point we learn that Marianne is "beautiful":

In her eyes, which were very dark, there was a life, a spirit, an eagerness, which could hardly be seen without delight. From Willoughby their expression was at first held back, by the embarrassment... but when this passed away... she gave him such a look of approbation as secured the largest share of his discourses to herself for the rest of his stay. (*S&S* 48-9)

Because we first hear of Marianne's appearance in detail when Willoughby is introduced, the transformative influence of his male gaze is unclear, but it is certain that Marianne is the object of his gaze. Nonetheless, she has agency in this position, and her "sparkling eyes" cause a reaction ("delight") that is irresistible (*S&S* 46). When Marianne looks back at Willoughby, it secures her his attention, framing her as the active agent in the sentence and in their interaction. Furthermore, in their conversation "if any difference appeared, any objection arose, it lasted no longer than till the force of her arguments and the brightness of her eyes could be displayed. He acquiesced in all her decisions, caught all her influence" (*S&S* 49). Simply the "brightness of her eyes" under his gaze causes him to "acquiesce," showing her power even as the object of his gaze. The narrator comments that "he was exactly formed to engage Marianne's heart, for with all this, he joined not only a captivating person, but a natural ardour of mind which was now roused and increased by the example of her own, and which recommended him to her affection

²³ It is worth noting that Willoughby himself is also framed as an object of the female gaze. Critics have argued that he is Austen's most masculine character, and she wastes no time commenting on his handsome appearance. As soon as he enters the house "the eyes of both were fixed on him" and he is determined "uncommonly handsome" with "manly beauty" (44). Marianne is at first "robbed... of the power of regarding him," showing that to view him is a form of power. However, this female gaze does not hold the power to transform the path of their courtship.

beyond everything else” (S&S 50). Willoughby is “formed” to attract Marianne, but what seems to form Willoughby is Marianne herself. Because he “acquiesces” with all her opinions, and his attitude is “increased by the example of her own,” Willoughby is the one being “formed” by his male gaze, not Marianne. Maurer observes that Marianne loves Willoughby because “he mirrors back herself, albeit in male form” (Maurer 739). While this is perhaps overstatement, it is true that Willoughby shapes himself to Marianne’s desires, and that, as Maurer continues, this “alerts the reader to Austen’s own recognition of something that Marianne... cannot yet see for herself – namely, the danger of mistaking the acquiescence born of flirtation for genuine exchange” (Maurer 738). To apply Maurer’s analysis to the concept of the gaze, it seems that Willoughby’s “acquiescence” is a surface-level transformation, rather than a “genuine” shift. Thus, Marianne’s power, while remarkable, is temporary. In fact, one could argue that Willoughby’s molding of himself to Marianne’s desires actually blinds Marianne to his true nature, making her more vulnerable.

Marianne recognizes that social norms would regulate her behavior and interactions with Willoughby in oppressive ways, and thus resists being an object of society’s gaze. She ignores general opinion, for “when he was present she had eyes for no one else... Such conduct made them of course most exceedingly laughed at; but ridicule could not shame, and seemed hardly to provoke them” (S&S 54). Unlike Lucy, Marianne “had no eyes” for general society, and refuses to consider or be “shame[d]” by their opinion of her behavior. She even refuses to share information about her and Willoughby’s relationship and lack of engagement with her family.²⁴ The closest

²⁴ This unified block of both familial and societal gazes suggests that Marianne finds the domesticity of family life just as restrictive as femininity enforced by society. As Armstrong observes, Austen’s “novels

opportunity for intelligence they receive is when Willoughby announces his departure, and “Mrs. Dashwood looked with pleasure at Marianne, whose fine eyes were fixed so expressively on Willoughby, as plainly denoted how well she understood him” (*S&S* 74). However, while her mother has faith in the power of Marianne’s “fine eyes,” in reality she has not “understood” Willoughby, who has just determined to leave her.

By closing off her family and the public, Marianne removes the potential for societal protection against the threat of Willoughby’s gaze. (This potential harm is made very clear through the story of Eliza, an extreme example of an object of Willoughby’s gaze who falls drastically in society.) Elinor is unsure what to think and thus cannot endeavor to protect Marianne, who ignores her constant warnings to consider public opinion. Elinor, “in spite of every occasional doubt of Willoughby’s constancy, could not witness the rapture of delightful expectation which filled the whole soul and beamed in the eyes of Marianne... Should the result of her observations be unfavourable, she was determined at all events to open the eyes of her sister” (*S&S* 152). Marianne’s behavior leads to a general belief in she and Willoughby’s engagement, and her refusal for Elinor or others to have the chance to conduct their own “observations” prevents anyone from seeing the reality of the situation or from “open[ing her] eyes.” While public knowledge of Lucy’s situation requires Edward to honor their engagement, Marianne makes impossible any such protection.

deal with a closed community of polite country people... In such a community, social relations appear to be virtually the same thing as domestic relations” (Armstrong 135). While family is often posed opposite to society, Marianne groups them together as agents of the gaze. When considered against Lucy’s approach of sharing information with her sister, it seems possible that Marianne’s rejection of feminine companionship as a way to resist the gaze could also be a contributing factor to her failure.

Because of the privacy of their relationship, Marianne and Willoughby never officially are engaged, which Willoughby himself acknowledges as the reason he does not maintain their relationship. When the Dashwood sisters do finally see Willoughby in town, he has already betrayed them:

Elinor perceived Willoughby... [and] soon caught his eye, and he immediately bowed, but without attempting to speak to her, or to approach Marianne, though he could not but see her; and then continued his discourse with the same lady. Elinor turned involuntarily to Marianne, to see whether it could be unobserved by her. At that moment she first perceived him, and her whole countenance glowing with sudden delight, she would have moved towards him instantly, had her sister not caught hold of her... “Pray, pray be composed,” cried Elinor, “and do not betray what you feel to every body present. Perhaps he has not observed you yet.” (S&S 167)

The language makes clear that the Dashwoods are still compelling to Willoughby, for they actively “caught his eye” and Willoughby “could not but see” them, showing his lack of choice in his attraction. However, unlike Marianne, Willoughby has begun to control his emotions, especially under the public eye (and that of his new fiancé). “Perceiv[ing]” what has happened, Elinor warns Marianne to consider the public in her reaction, which she struggles to do. However, when Willoughby does approach and “address[es] himself rather to Elinor than Marianne, as if wishing to avoid her eye,” Marianne can no longer keep composure and Elinor “tried to screen her from the observation of others” (S&S 167-8). We soon learn that Marianne’s transformative effect on Willoughby was short lived when Willoughby is faced with class and societal norms. Due to the opinion of his aunt, another agent of the societal gaze, and his need for income, Willoughby prioritizes his societal standing over his desires. Since Marianne ignored those social realities, she is unable to prevent him from straying.

As a result of this rejection, Marianne loses confidence in her agency as an object of the male gaze, and is transformed physically under several gazes. We first learn of the shift in Marianne's appearance through John Dashwood, who observes, "Poor Marianne!... one must allow that there is something very trying to a young woman who *has been* a beauty in the loss of her personal attractions. You would not think it perhaps, but Marianne *was* remarkably handsome a few months ago; quite as handsome as Elinor. – Now you see it is all gone" (*S&S* 223). While we heard about Marianne's distress previously from Elinor, we learn about her physical transformation through the male gaze. The emphasis on his past tense throughout this monologue (which, notably, is told to Colonel Brandon, one of her suitors, thus giving his words the sexual undercurrent of the male gaze though from a brother) illustrates the drastic change that he perceives. In fact, this description directly contradicts the one we received from the narrator when we first meet Willoughby, when Marianne was declared the more handsome of the two sisters. When Edward pays them a visit, a less insulting but equally transformative male gaze occurs, for he "was the first to speak, and it was to notice Marianne's altered looks" (*S&S* 228). Again, the second time the reader learns about Marianne's transformation in appearance is through a male gaze. The silence of the female characters (especially Elinor) on this transformation suggests that it is constructed by the male gaze, which now views her as less desirable or tainted after her abandonment by Willoughby.

Even Willoughby himself partakes in this transformative and oppressive male gaze. Once Marianne falls sick and Willoughby rushes to see her, he explains to Elinor his opinion of Marianne. He is still captivated by her beauty, describing her as "beautiful as an angel" with "bewitching eyes" (*S&S* 305). He is haunted by "Marianne's sweet face

as white as death” the night he left her at the ball, for “*that* was the last, last look I ever had of her; - the last manner in which she appeared to me” (S&S 305). This rephrasing of his statement shows the influence of his gaze, for while the first description portrays it as him observing Marianne’s “look,” when he repeats his sentiment the phrasing positions Marianne as a passive recipient of his interpretation – what is important is not her actual appearance, but how “she appeared to me.” Then he admits that “when I thought of her to-day as really dying, it was a kind of comfort to me to imagine that I knew exactly how she would appear to those, who saw her last in this world. She was before me, constantly before me, as I travelled, in the same look and hue” (S&S 305). Willoughby is now literally imagining Marianne as it “comfort[s]” him, to fit his pleasure. He draws up a fantasy of her “in the same look and hue” that he last saw, a fantasy that is clearly revealed by the fact that she was not in fact dying that day as he imagined, and in fact likely looked much healthier. Though inaccurate, Willoughby’s reliance even once married on his ability to impose his male gaze on Marianne’s body for comfort illustrates the patriarchal desire to control the woman’s body. This is emphasized further by Marianne’s illness because she conforms to the feminine beauty standard of “weakness” that Burke praises, framing her illness itself as an embodiment of the male gaze and Willoughby’s fantasy of her beauty.

This extreme embodiment of the male gaze makes Marianne take a step back and turn her own gaze inwards. She uses her post-illness “leisure and calmness for serious recollection” and determines that “my own feelings had prepared my suffering” (S&S 350). Marianne realizes that “whenever I looked towards the past, I saw some duty neglected,” (S&S 322), largely that of her duties to members of society who supported

her (such as Mrs. Jennings) and her family, who she now recognizes she should have been open with. This consideration of her role in society helps free her from the male gaze, for we now hear of her physical transformation from the narrator and Elinor. Marianne's "breath, her skin, her lips, all flattered Elinor with signs of amendment; and Marianne fixed her eyes on her with a rational, though languid, gaze" (*S&S* 293). Marianne's gaze is now "rational" and when they return home, she "turned her eyes around it with a look of resolute firmness, as if determined to at once accustom herself to the sight of every object with which the remembrance of Willoughby could be connected" (*S&S* 319). This action certainly seems empowering, for as Beth Newton argues, "It is necessary and vital to assert oneself against one's own blindness, in a patriarchal society, it is also a much surer and more lasting form of power than pitting oneself against the traditional privileges of men" (Newton 38). However, Marianne jumps from one extreme to the other. While before she thought nothing of society, now she shapes her gaze through the perspectives of those around her. This is evident in the previous description of her appearance, for while not influenced by a male gaze, her progress was told from Elinor's perspective. Marianne also states this shift clearly, telling Elinor, "I see everything – as you can desire me to do" (*S&S* 325). While Elinor's gaze is perceptive, and Marianne seems to experience some improvement from the adopting of her outlook, it also seems to remove some of Marianne's personality. This simultaneous increase in agency and decrease in characteristic sensibility make Marianne's final transformation the most complex of the novel.

This final shift is enacted not by the male gaze, but by Marianne's acceptance of Elinor's societal gaze. This tension between gazes is brought out most clearly in her

marriage to Colonel Brandon. Elinor had always seen “Colonel Brandon’s partiality for Marianne” as “an object of interest” that she favored, and after Marianne’s illness, Mrs. Dashwood also embraces that the Colonel “has loved her... ever since the first moment of seeing her” (*S&S* 51, 314). Colonel Brandon also saw Marianne while she was ill, but his reaction to her appearance was framed entirely by Elinor’s gaze:

His emotion on entering the room, in seeing her altered looks... was such as, in Elinor’s conjecture, must arise from something more than his affection for Marianne, or the consciousness of its being known to others; and she soon discovered, in his melancholy eye and varying complexion as he looked at her sister, the probable recurrence of many past scenes of misery to his mind, brought back by that resemblance between Marianne and Eliza already acknowledged, and now strengthened by the hollow eye, the sickly skin, the posture of reclining weakness; and the warm acknowledgment of peculiar obligation. (*S&S* 317)

While this could on the surface be read as the observations of Colonel Brandon’s gaze on Marianne’s appearance, the repeated emphasis on “Elinor’s conjecture” and her “discover[y]” implies that it is instead Elinor’s gaze painting Marianne as having a “hollow eye” and Colonel Brandon with a “melancholy eye.” Eve Sedgwick writes in her groundbreaking article “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” that “the subjectivity hollowed out” by the novel is “created for Elinor through her completely one-directional visual fixation on her sister’s specularized, desired, envied, and punished autoeroticism” (Sedgwick 833). One could thus conclude that, as Maaja Stewart argues, Marianne lacks agency under this societal gaze, reflected in this “relentless listing of the vulnerable parts of the female body: the hollow eye, the sickly skin, and the posture of reclining weakness” as a signal of Marianne’s lack of agency in this relationship (Stewart). However, this reading is complicated by Austen separating herself from Elinor in this moment, and by contradicting Elinor’s perspective with her mother’s just moments later:

Mrs. Dashwood, not less watchful of what passed than her daughter, but with a mind very differently influenced, and therefore watching to very different effect, saw nothing in the Colonel's behavior but what arose from the most simple and self-evident sensations. (*S&S* 317)

Mrs. Dashwood – who is perhaps more perceptive than Elinor gives her credit for, as she claims “there was always a something... in Willoughby's eyes at times, which I did not like (*S&S* 315) – does not see the same menacing and pacifying relationship between Colonel Brandon and Marianne.²⁵ In allowing readers a rare glimpse into a societal gaze other than Elinor's, Austen complicates the notion of that accepting this role solely oppresses Marianne. Indeed, after this moment, Marianne begins to be “growing visibly stronger every twelve hours,” a narratorial observation on her appearance completely free from a character's gaze (*S&S* 318-9).

Critics have interpreted Marianne's final transformation in many ways. The language of “sacrifice” and “submitting” to the “confederacy against her, and the rhetorical “what could she do?” frame Marianne's marriage as a passive, rather than active, choice (*S&S* 351-2). However, some critics disagree. Susan Greenfield argues:

Though critics have rightly emphasized the repressive and punitive force of such conversion, few have noted its simultaneous benefits. By reducing her thoughts about the man who arguably meant to possess and then discard her, Marianne may gain some proprietorship of mind... So to, her capacity for *reflection* indicates that... Marianne's mind will enjoy the power of ‘reflection on its own operations’; for, as Locke puts it in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, reflection is ‘that notice which the mind takes of its’ self. (Greenfield 97)

²⁵ It is also worth noting that Colonel Brandon himself never frames Marianne as the passive object of his gaze. In fact, his gaze is one of the things Marianne herself first admires about him, for when he heard her playing the pianoforte he was the only member of the audience who properly “paid her only the compliment of attention; and she felt a respect for him on the occasion” (*S&S* 37). He “often watched Marianne” with “earnestness,” and his “eyes, as they were fixed on Marianne, declared that he only noticed what was amiable in it” even as John Dashwood tries to explain her fall from beauty (*S&S* 160, 222). In fact, in Marianne's final return to health he needed only “the improvement in Marianne's looks” to be cheerful (*S&S* 344). Throughout the novel, he is often observing but never transforming Marianne's appearance.

While the act of turning her gaze inwards seems to empower Marianne, the question of her relationship with Colonel Brandon is less clear. Maurer argues that “rather than constituting an artistic or ideological failure, Marianne’s marriage to Colonel Brandon represents instead a painful process of maturation,” which involves recognizing “broader social obligations” and a “developmental transformation of Marianne’s adolescent self” (Maurer 750). Claudia Johnson has even argued that Marianne’s marriage allows her to “withdraw from the world” as the mistress of Delaford, happily nested in her family unit and free of the societal gaze she so detested (*Women, Politics, and the Novel* 69).

I propose that the answer is a complicated combination of these theories. Like Lucy, Marianne is empowered at the end of the novel to choose her situation, untainted by her previous missteps. Austen ends the novel by declaring Marianne as happily settled. However, the fact that she only achieves this happy ending after taking into account the gaze of society – strongly enacted by her mother and sister’s pressure to marry Colonel Brandon – illustrates the vital importance of public image for women in this society. Her power comes at the cost of forfeiting part of her personality and instead prioritizing the feminine ideals of modesty that Elinor models and Marianne’s role as the head of Colonel Brandon’s estate requires. This eventual match succeeds not because Marianne molds herself to Colonel Brandon’s male gaze, but because she focuses on her duty to family and society (closely tied through concepts of domesticity and femininity). However, Marianne does seem to feel a sort of pleasure in enacting this transformation and pleasing her family, even if the pleasure is not directly caused by being an object of Brandon’s gaze. Thus, Marianne ends the novel empowered, but at the cost of molding her previously vibrant personality to fit into society’s role.

III. CONCLUSION

Both Marianne and Lucy ultimately make it in society not through embracing authenticity, but by observing how they appear to those around them and adapting accordingly. In doing so, they are able to transform their role in society, but they must accept the sacrifice of transforming themselves into more popularly appealing versions in the process. In showing Lucy's success by appealing to society in general, while contrasting it with the more genuine Marianne's failure to uphold her power under society's gaze, Austen is revealing that women can only maintain their power and their identity in this novel if they work within existing power structures that inevitably fail to encompass their entire identities. Marianne and Lucy's – and even Elinor's – alternate approaches to presenting themselves to the societal gaze suggest that using sense to negotiate their social role requires a perhaps painful suppression of sensibility.

Chapter 4:

The Matchmaker in *Emma*: The Perceptive Gaze as Transformative

The scopic regime of the marriage market finds a new gazer in *Emma*: the matchmaker. While *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* emphasize the agency women gain from using their gaze to perceive the societal forces operating around them, those heroines transform their place in society rather than transforming the object of their gaze. In *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse uses her perceptive gaze to enact real transformation on those around her. As a matchmaker, Emma enforces her self-removal from the marriage market, and believes this also removes her as a possible object of men's attention. Emma declares she will never marry multiple times, and her reasoning is tied to her refusal to be an object of the male gaze: she could never be "so always first and always right in any man's eyes as I am in my father's" (*E* 73). Living with her father, Emma is entirely independent and in control, as the several remarks on her father's "lack of penetration" and "favouring blindness" reinforce (*E* 164, 165). When the alternative is becoming an "object" of interest in the marriage market ("object" being the word often chosen in the novel to choose women who are being courted by men), it is clear that her choice not to marry is tied to her desire to remain an empowered subject.

Unlike other heroines, Emma is enabled by her class to reject the marriage market and, with it, her feminine status as an object of the male gaze. Austen herself reinforces Emma's exclusion from this scopic market: While Emma frequently provides the reader with extensive descriptions of the other characters in the novel – male and female – Emma's physical characteristics remain vague. The first sentence of the novel introduces her as "Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich," and while others often comment

on how handsome she is, we receive few details of her appearance (*E* 1).²⁶ In contrast, Emma herself is constantly using her own gaze to examine the people around her and make judgments.²⁷ As Maaja Stewart argues in *Domestic Realities and Imperial Fictions*, “‘Seeing’ and ‘penetration’ function as [Austen’s] major metaphors for knowing” (Stewart 153). Of course, Emma’s perception is not always accurate. Emma relies on her class status to empower her gaze but, in doing so, ignores the patriarchal forces operating to blind women in her society. The frequent repetition of the term “penetration” as a metaphor for perception in the novel is indicative of this oppression, given its masculine and sexual connotations.

In her role as matchmaker, Emma believes she can overcome the marginalized role of women in society and adopt the male gaze herself to transform her female objects in appearance and class status. As Stewart argues, “Emma mimics the role of a man by assuming control over the status of women” (Stewart 153). However, while Stewart sees this act as menacing, I align my view with other critics who believe Emma intends for this transformation to be empowering – for both her and her object. As John Greenfield suggests, “Emma’s overriding fantasy... is that she has the male capacity to confer power on the economically or socially threatened women in her community: Harriet Smith, Miss Bates, Mrs. Weston, and Jane Fairfax” (Greenfield 37). It is this fantasy of power that causes Emma’s moments of oversight or blindness, for her female fantasy is not so easily enforced as that of the male gaze in a patriarchal society.

²⁶ The one physical detail we do learn about Emma (from Mrs. Weston) is that she has a “true hazel eye,” a characteristic that both reflects her accurate “true” sight and which becomes important later in the novel, when Frank Churchill requests a wife with a hazel eye.

²⁷ Emma is referred to as a “judge” several times, a word that signals the societal power of her observations and conclusions.

It is important that these are mere moments; in general, Emma is quite as perceptive as she believes herself, and this perception does give her gaze a transformative power over other women. As Mr. Knightley observes, Emma exemplifies the phrase “Myself creating what I saw,” using her perception and what she “saw” to “create” and shape the world around her (*E* 296). In this chapter, I will show how Emma uses the male gaze to transform Harriet’s beauty in an effort to raise her class status and empower her. I will then explore the moments when the power of her gaze fails, and show how these failures are tied to her being framed as the object of a male gaze enforced by patriarchy. Finally, I will show how Emma looks inward at the end of the novel to make her gaze even more influential than before, not necessarily in its transformative power, but in its power to perceive and communicate. Emma’s various successes and failures of her gaze reveal the circumstances in which women can use class power to exert influence in a patriarchal society, and the limits of using the male gaze to empower the subject or object of the gaze.

I. “SHE MEANT TO THROW IN A LITTLE IMPROVEMENT TO THE FIGURE”:

How Emma’s matchmaker role projects a transformative gaze

Emma is most clearly established as a subject of the male gaze with its power of projection in her transformation of Harriet. Stewart first posited this claim:

Emma’s relationship with Harriet begins with Emma’s mimicking the male gaze: she surveys Harriet as unformed, pliable material ready to be molded into the shape the watcher pleases. This initial male gaze will determine the subsequent unequal relationship between the two women. (Stewart 154)

I agree with this portion of Stewart’s argument, for from their first meeting it is clear that Emma considers Harriet primarily as an object of her gaze. Harriet is introduced as “a girl

of seventeen, whom Emma knew very well by sight, and had long felt an interest in, on account of her beauty” (*E* 17). This phrasing establishes Harriet instantly as an object of Emma’s “sight” and “interest,” valued primarily for her beauty. In comparison to the one adjective we receive about Emma’s appearance (“handsome”), we learn extensive details about Harriet immediately. Harriet “was a very pretty girl, and her beauty happened to be of a sort which Emma particularly admired. She was short, plump, and fair, with a fine bloom, blue eyes, light hair, regular features, and a look of great sweetness” (*E* 17). Her beauty is tied to Emma’s admiration, and she is established fully as an object rather than subject of the gaze when we learn about her lack of “penetration” (*E* 20). This status is reinforced by her “soft blue eyes,” a description repeated twice in two pages, because Emma “was so busy admiring those soft blue eyes” (*E* 17, 18). Harriet’s lack of a gaze, represented through her characteristic “soft” eyes, is the quality that Emma most admires, because she is primed as an object of transformation – ready to be matched in marriage.

Emma quickly uses her gaze to begin matchmaking for Harriet, initially by rejecting Robert Martin. Emma takes her first “opportunity of survey, and... soon made her quick eyes sufficiently acquainted” with him to declare her judgment – that he is far too plain for Harriet. Stewart is harsh on Emma’s intentions here, writing, “Emma echoes the entitled male voice that silences what is important to a woman as she attempts to turn Harriet into a reflection of herself” (Stewart 155). While I am obliged to Stewart for her argument that Emma mimics the male gaze, I argue that Stewart misidentifies the transformation Emma is trying to enact through her gaze. Emma does not seek to turn Harriet into a reflection of herself; she aims to empower Harriet by making her fit for a higher class of society.

Emma goes about this by transforming Harriet's physical appearance and behavior, for she correctly identifies beauty as a vital element in the scopic marriage market. Emma's description of Harriet's "fair" appearance itself reflects her class aspirations for Harriet, for "fair" has historical connotations as "the distinguishing attribute of the dominant class" (de Grazia 45). Emma's interactions reinforce her belief that under her guidance, beauty has the power to raise Harriet in society. Mr. Elton himself (whom Emma seeks to match Harriet with) observes, "You have made her graceful and easy. She was a beautiful creature when she came to you; but, in my opinion, the attractions you have added are infinitely superior to what she received from nature" (*E* 34). While Harriet's beauty is natural, the potential that originally attracts Emma, the attractions of this beauty can only be harnessed by adding "graceful" behavior – which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as including a sense of "poise" and "refinement," both ideas intimately tied to class ("Graceful").

The clearest metaphor of the transformative power of Emma's gaze is her matchmaking plot to paint Harriet while being observed by Mr. Elton. Emma begins by refusing Mr. Elton's power to make her or her work an object of his gaze. She tries to begin painting, but "there was no doing anything, with Mr. Elton fidgeting behind her and watching every touch. She gave him credit for stationing himself where he might gaze and gaze again without offence; but really was obliged to put an end to it" (*E* 37). Even though Emma perceives the object of Mr. Elton's gaze to be Harriet rather than herself, she senses that the very presence of a male gaze reduces her own transformative power – "there was no doing anything" while Mr. Elton could "gaze and gaze again."

Once Mr. Elton stops his close observation, Emma regains her transformative power and begins to paint:

She meant to throw in a little improvement to the figure, to give a little more height, and considerably more elegance. She had great confidence of its being in every way a pretty drawing at last, and of its filling its destined place with credit to them both, a standing memorial of the beauty of the one, the skill of the other. (*E* 38)

While Emma acknowledges that her portrait does not accurately portray Harriet as she appears in reality, she does not consider this a failing of the portrait. Instead, she defends her adjustments, considering them reflective of her “skill” imposed on Harriet’s “beauty.” She has transformed Harriet into “elegance,” a type of beauty worthy of the higher classes. Even the act of taking Harriet’s portrait, an action usually reserved for upper class women, is a method of transforming her place in society. By offering the picture as an object to Mr. Elton, she is presenting her transformation of Harriet for his admiration. Subsequently, Mr. Elton “cannot keep [his] eyes from” the portrait, showing its status as an object of his gaze (*E* 38). However, when he declares it accurately reflects Harriet in reality, Emma feels disgust for his gaze and finds that “she could not respect his eye” (*E* 38). By judging the portrait as accurate, Mr. Elton overlooks the significant class transformation Emma has evoked in Harriet, and thus offends her. Despite her triumph in transforming Harriet in Elton’s judgment, Emma still feels disrespect for the male gaze, and seems offended by its application to her object. This suggests that her project of transformation is indeed one of empowerment for both her and Harriet, for the patriarchal male gaze is felt to be oppressive even in this seemingly successful moment.

This motivation to raise Harriet’s class through a physical transformation is revealed in Emma’s conversation with Mr. Knightley. Mr. Knightley senses her

intentions to place Harriet into a higher class, and seeks to warn her of the limits of her transformative power. Emma defends her aspirations:

For she is, in fact, a beautiful girl, and must be thought so by ninety-nine people out of a hundred; and till it appears that men are much more philosophic on the subject of beauty than they are generally supposed, till they do fall in love with well-informed minds instead of handsome faces, a girl, with such loveliness as Harriet, has a certainty of being admired and sought after, of having the power of choosing from among many, consequently a claim to be nice... I am very much mistaken if your sex in general would not think such beauty, and such temper, the highest claims a woman could possess. (*E* 53)

Emma's passionate response relies heavily on her belief that beauty is the primary motivation of men's affection, a belief reinforced by her understanding of the role of the gaze in courtship. Emma's critical tone in these lines illustrates her disrespect for men who only care about beauty, illustrating her disdain for the scopoc marriage market. Nonetheless, following its logic, Emma defends Harriet's claim to a good match by an appeal to the societal gaze, for "ninety-nine people out of a hundred" must agree her to be beautiful. Emma then connects this "loveliness" to being "admired" and courted, which she believes will give Harriet "power" and "a claim" to rise in society. Mr. Knightley contradicts these expectations, warning Emma that she "will puff her up with such ideas of her own beauty, and of what she has a claim to, that, in a little while, nobody within her reach will be good enough for her," but Emma rejects his warning because she believes her gaze more perceptive than his (*E* 53). She thanks Mr. Knightley for his effort to "open my eyes" about Mr. Elton's class standards, but refuses his perspective because he "could not have observed him as she had done, neither with the interest nor (she must be allowed to tell herself, in spite of Mr. Knightley's pretensions) with the skill of such an observer on such a question as herself" (*E* 56). Emma is confident that her

observations are accurate because of the skill of her gaze, which she feels reinforced by her previous matchmaking success.

However, Emma's confidence in her own observations and in her ability to remove herself from being an object the male gaze causes her to overlook Mr. Elton's desire for her. Mr. Elton's riddle, which Emma interprets as a clear sign of his courtship of Harriet, is a clear example of a failure of her gaze. Emma believes she understands the riddle as soon as she "cast her eye over it," but believes it cannot be about her because she does not consider herself an object of the male gaze (*E* 61). Emma concludes the riddle is about Harriet because of its description of her "soft eye," which makes her think "Harriet exactly. Soft is the very word for her eye – of all epithets, the justest that could be given" (*E* 61). I have already discussed the significance of Harriet's eyes to Emma's attraction to her, and thus it is natural that Emma assumes the same quality to attract Mr. Elton. Furthermore, Emma knows her own gaze is not soft, for she considers her gaze very powerful. This confidence in her own gaze causes her to deny even quite obvious declarations to the contrary. Emma is enraged by John Knightly "imagining [her] to be Mr. Elton's object" and is "not very well pleased with her brother for imagining her blind and ignorant" (*E* 96). Emma ties together the idea of being an object of the gaze with the removal of her own power to gaze, of being "blind." Emma rejects this threat to her power, both by John Knightley and by Mr. Elton himself. When Mr. Elton is too forward with her, she rebukes him with her gaze, for she is too much offended to lecture him verbally so she "could only give him a look, but it was such a look as she thought must restore him to his senses" (*E* 108). However, no such restoration takes place, showing that while Emma's gaze is powerful with other women (due to her status as the highest

class woman in Highbury), it still cannot threaten the patriarchal male gaze and its objectifying power.

II. "HAVING THE ARROGANCE TO RAISE HIS EYES TO HER:"

How Emma's moments of blindness are caused by the objectification of the gaze

The power of Emma's gaze fails when her exclusion from the marriage market is challenged: when she is unknowingly Mr. Elton's object, or when she is considered the object of Frank Churchill. In the former example, Emma fails to realize she is an object of Mr. Elton, and her failure in perception leads her to revert to class superiority to regain confidence in her gaze. With Frank Churchill, on the other hand, Emma is hyper-aware that she is an object of the gaze, yet still does not realize the blinding influence his presence has on her gaze. While these two examples are distinct, they both exemplify a moment in which the male gaze blocks Emma's ability to perceive the world around her – and, as a result, reduces her ability to manipulate it.

Mr. Elton's proposal is the first moment that Emma realizes that she cannot avoid being an object of the marriage market, and that her power of transformation is not as total as she thought. In his proposal, Mr. Elton says he is sure Emma had "seen and understood" him, which reveals to Emma her "most complete error" in perception (*E* 113). However, Emma does not accept that her gaze itself lacks power: she tells Mr. Elton that his "pursuit of [Harriet] (pursuit it appeared) gave me great pleasure," (*E* 113). Emma believes her observation of events to be accurate to how they "appeared," and that Mr. Elton's contrary behavior could not have been detected. While she momentarily considers that "she had taken up the idea, she supposed, and made everything bend to it,"

she soon revalues her powers of observation. When she thinks back to the riddle, her most clear evidence that Mr. Elton was referring to Harriet and not her, she thinks of “How clearly they had seemed to point at Harriet! To be sure, the charade, with its ‘ready wit’ – but then, the ‘soft eyes’ – in fact it suited neither; it was a jumble without taste or truth” (*E* 115). Instead of devaluing her own gaze in reaction to her mistake, Emma devalues Mr. Elton’s, asserting that he had objectively appeared to be courting Harriet, and that his descriptions had not been accurate to reality.

Emma is able to maintain her confidence in her gaze, and her disdain for Mr. Elton’s, because of her class status. Mr. Elton’s assertion of his power to gaze upon Emma causes her to obsess about her class as reinforcement of her position of power, of her status as a subject rather than an object of the gaze. She wonders at Mr. Elton “having the arrogance to raise his eyes to her... that he should talk of encouragement, should consider her as aware of his views... should suppose himself her equal in connection or mind! – look down upon her friend, so well understanding the gradations of rank below him, and be so blind to what rose above” (*E* 117). Emma here ties her offense at Mr. Elton’s courtship explicitly to both her class and the insult of being considered an object of the gaze. For Mr. Elton to “raise his eyes to her,” to gaze at her and be “blind” to her class superiority while “look[ing] down upon her friend,” is the highest insult. For Emma, the idea of being an object of the gaze is a direct threat to her class status, her source of power. She considers herself Elton’s superior, focusing on class rather than gender, and observes that “the very want of such equality... might prevent his perception of it” (*E* 117). In other words, Mr. Elton’s lower class status prevents his gaze from being accurate, from perceiving her indifference. While one would traditionally make the same

argument in respect to Emma's gender rather than Mr. Elton's class, Emma further flips the gendered expectations of the gaze, and states that courtship itself has a blinding effect on men – not women. She realizes that “if she had so misinterpreted his feelings, she had little right to wonder that he, with self-interest to blind him, should have mistaken hers” (*E* 117). While Emma acknowledges her own blindness here, she is not willing to accept that her female status as an object of the gaze was an obstacle, because she still does not believe herself to be an object. Instead, she believes that Mr. Elton attempting to gaze upon her had blinded him, not her, because he had “self-interest” involved. Though Emma remains confident in her own gaze despite Mr. Elton's advances, she will soon be blinded by the same self-interest of courtship.

Frank Churchill's introduction to town positions Emma for the first time as a self-aware object of the gaze, though she does not consider the implications of “self-interest” on her own observations. Emma looks forward to gazing upon Frank, considering his arrival as a “treasure” to distract from the drama with Mr. Elton, for “we do not often look upon fine young men, well-bred and agreeable... one object of curiosity” (*E* 128). Emma looks forward to Frank's arrival because he will provide a new object for her gaze. However, she is simultaneously imagining herself as the object of his (and society's) gaze. Emma had “a sort of pleasure in the idea of their being coupled in their friends' imaginations,” imagining a universal and approving gaze on them before he even arrives. Emma positions herself as an object of his gaze, in effect imagining others playing matchmaker for them. When they finally do meet, Emma “had no doubt of what Mr. Weston was often thinking about. His quick eye she detected again and again glancing towards them with a happy expression” (*E* 164). Though she still does not intend to

marry, Emma recognizes that others are presuming her to be courted by Frank, and since Frank is her proper class level, she does not dislike the assumption. She considers herself an object of the societal gaze, “fancying what the observations of all those might be, who were now seeing them together for the first time,” for Emma “was his object, and everybody must perceive it” (*E* 181, 188). Emma enjoys observing others observing them, projecting the role of matchmaker on society while confident that she herself will never actually be matched. After all, Emma takes pride in the fact that they “were a couple worth looking at” (*E* 197). The dynamics of Emma enjoying being an object of the gaze are complex, but the most vital element of her enjoyment is the fact that she never wavers in her confidence that she will never marry, that she will never truly become Frank’s object. With this confidence in mind, Emma can enjoy the kind of hypothetical matchmaking and universal attention that comes with the gaze without suspecting that her power is threatened.

While Emma does not resist – and in fact creates – her status as Frank’s object, this shift in position still has a blinding effect on her own observations. Frank reinforces her false observations of the world, telling her she “could really judge” when he knows her perceptions are misguided and reinforcing her belief in her “penetrating eyes” (*E* 172, 315). Both regarding Mr. Dixon, and his own desires and courtship, Frank withholds vital information that Emma does not perceive because she is an object of his gaze. This is especially clear in the misperceptions Emma develops about Jane Fairfax, Frank’s secret fiancé. Before Frank’s arrival, Emma is disposed to like Jane when judging by her own gaze. During their first interaction, Emma sat “looking at Jane Fairfax... determining that she would dislike her no longer” (*E* 141). However, Frank’s influence shifts her

observations, even before he arrives. Emma's determination to like Jane is short-lived once she asks her questions about Frank that she refuses to answer. She asks, "Was he handsome?" to which Jane will only respond, "She believed he was reckoned a very fine young man" (*E* 143). Jane refuses to indulge Emma's desire to visualize Frank, and since Emma has already imagined herself as being considered his object, this omission negatively colors her opinion of Jane. Despite this predisposition, however, Jane still has the potential to become an object of Emma's attention as Harriet did, for "she is a sort of elegant creature that one cannot keep one's eyes from. I am always watching her to admire" (*E* 145). These qualities of elegance and admiration echo exactly Emma's words about Harriet, and shows that her judgment is not yet absolute.

However, once Frank arrives, his blinding presence cements Emma's misinterpretation of Jane's behavior. While Emma was predisposed against Jane before, once Frank arrives he directs her in her disapproval. Emma asks Frank "how did you think Miss Fairfax looking?" and his response (a lengthy criticism later revealed to be an obvious lie) is "ill, very ill... a most deplorable want of complexion" (*E* 170). His declaration directly contradicts Emma's observations, and Emma "would not agree to this, and began a warm defence of Miss Fairfax's complexion" (*E* 170). However, Frank continues in his convincing criticism of Jane's appearance, and concludes that he "cannot separate Miss Fairfax and her complexion," falsely indicating that his harsh criticism signals his dislike for her person (*E* 170). In addition to manipulating Emma's perception of Jane's beauty, Frank also physically blocks Emma's gaze upon his and Jane's relationship. When Emma observes Frank "looking intently across the room at Miss Fairfax, who was sitting exactly opposite," Frank pretends his focus is due to her strange

hairdo, exclaiming “I cannot keep my eyes from her. I never saw any thing so outré!” (*E* 190). He then claims he will go to ask her about the hairdo in person, and demands Emma watch their interaction to “see how she takes it; - whether she colours” (*E* 190). However, despite demanding Emma’s powers of observation, Frank then blocks Emma from being able to view them, for “he had improvidently placed himself exactly between them, exactly in front of Miss Fairfax, she could absolutely distinguish nothing” (190). Frank encourages Emma’s faith in her gaze, while simultaneously undermining her ability to perceive accurately – or at all. George Butte analyzes this scene:

Frank proposes such an invasion [of Jane] to Emma, yet stands in front of Emma’s gaze, denying the knowledge he has promised... Frank’s position across the room between two gazes exposes the paradoxical nature of power here: he can both screen and expose, frustrate and protect, and do one and all for Jane and Emma simultaneously. (Butte 62)

Without Frank’s influence, it is possible – and even likely, as Frank himself admits at the end of the novel – that Emma would have perceived his true affections. To prevent her gaze from perceiving accurately, Frank establishes Emma as the object of his gaze, and intentionally “blinded” her (as Mr. Knightley observes) from actions that contradict the assumptions he established (*E* 300).²⁸

²⁸ Some critics believe that Mr. Knightley’s realization of Jane and Frank’s relationship establishes his gaze as more powerful than Emma’s. However, this assumption is inaccurate. Mr. Knightley first picks up on their relationship when “*She* was not present” (*E* 296, italics original), implying that if Emma was present she would too have perceived the behavior. Furthermore, Mr. Knightley pays attention to Frank’s behavior because of Emma – “he had seen a look, more than a single look, at Miss Fairfax, which, from the admirer of Miss Woodhouse, seemed somewhat out of place” (*E* 296). Mr. Knightley first resists his observations because her wants to “escape any of Emma’s errors of imagination,” which while stated in dismissive language, actually ties his observations here as Emma’s natural role (“*Myself creating what I saw*”), not his (*E* 296). Furthermore, while Mr. Knightley does briefly mention his beliefs to Emma, he does not explain them when Emma does not immediately accept them as truth. Instead, though Emma “would have prolonged the conversation, wanting to hear the particulars of his suspicions, every look described,” he does not give Emma the opportunity to use her gaze and observe through him, and so she stays oblivious (*E* 303). Mr. Knightley’s and Emma’s gazes are actually shown to have equal “penetration” by the end of the novel (*E* 116).

Even once Emma no longer considers herself truly being courted by Frank, her status as the object of his attention still exerts a blinding influence. At Box Hill especially, Frank reinforces Emma's belief in the power of her gaze. He behaves as if to "be agreeable in her eyes, seemed all that he cared for," positioning his courtship as making him an object of her gaze, the object of "her eyes" (*E* 318). He then reinforces the transformative power of her gaze, asking for her to choose a bride for him and transform her in the same manner she did Harriet. He demands that she "Adopt her; educate her" and, as Emma concludes, "make her like myself" (*E* 323). Here Frank is simultaneously requesting Emma use her gaze to play matchmaker and transform someone into an object for him, while subtly maintaining Emma herself as the object of his gaze. Frank requests that her object "must... have hazel eyes," while Emma has the only hazel eyes in the novel (*E* 323). His request for her to use her gaze makes Emma think of Harriet, for "hazel eyes excepted," Emma has already transformed her exactly as he describes (*E* 323). However, by establishing Emma as his object, he blinds her to the real dynamics.

Emma misunderstands both Mr. Elton's and Frank's desires because each of them posits her as the object of their gazes, which weakens her ability to act as the subject of her own gaze. With Mr. Elton she refuses to perceive reality, while with Frank she is prevented from doing so. Though Emma reacts to them in different ways – first refusing to believe herself an object of the gaze, then intentionally framing herself to be so – both examples result in an inability to accurately perceive the world. As a result of this lack of perception, Emma's transformative power is challenged: Harriet cannot be maintained on Mr. Elton's level, and Jane does not become the governess jilted in love that Emma

imagines. These distinct examples are both moments in which Emma's ability to transform via masculine projection is prevented by a lack of perception.

III. "HIS EYES RECEIVED THE TRUTH FROM HERS":

How Emma's gaze reasserts power by turning her gaze inwards

A series of revelations at the end of the novel force Emma to turn her gaze inward. By reassessing her perspective in this way, Emma becomes aware of the previous flaws in her gaze and learns how to accurately perceive her own position in society. Both her mistreatment of Miss Bates at Box Hill, Harriet's revelation of her feelings for Mr. Knightley, and Jane and Frank's engagement lead her to reassess her previous interpretation of the world. Some critics have attributed Emma's final transformation fully to Mr. Knightley's words after Box Hill, but I align my interpretation more closely with that of Butte:

There is an evasive undercurrent in Emma's effort, yes, that seeks Mr. Knightley's approval, rather than the more painful knowledge of her errors. But her gesture is predominantly one of self-clarification... for Emma to understand better the intricate relations of her fantasies to her perceptions... for Emma to know herself more fully in this way is a morally and epistemologically difficult act, and a remarkable achievement. (Butte 65)

Butte's argument is reinforced if we consider Mr. Knightley and Emma's first interaction after the Box Hill incident. When they are briefly reunited, "it seemed as if there were an instantaneous impression in her favour, as if his eyes received the truth from hers, and all that had passed of good in her feelings were at once caught and honored" (*E* 333). This is not the language of an unequal relationship in which Mr. Knightley shaped Emma's gaze; rather, this phrasing reinforces the power of Emma's gaze. Mr. Knightley's "eyes received the truth from hers," not the other way around. Emma's power to transmit

emotions to Mr. Knightley strengthens as more revelations cause her to turn her gaze inwards. Self-examination both strengthens Emma's perception and establishes her and Mr. Knightley as equal objects and subjects of each other's gaze.²⁹

Emma's gaze becomes more confident after Harriet's revelation, for this moment (even more so than Box Hill) instigates Emma's investigation of her own gaze. Harriet shares her feelings for Mr. Knightley after claiming that Emma "can see into everybody's heart," which Emma previously would have agreed with but now declares "I begin to doubt my having any such talent" (*E* 351). After this moment of revelation and doubt, "Emma's eyes were instantly withdrawn; and she sat silently meditation... a few minutes were sufficient for making her acquainted with her own heart... She saw it all with a clearness which had never blessed her before" (*E* 353). Emma's eyes being "withdrawn" for "meditation" signals her turning her gaze inward, and her powerful gaze understands her own emotions in just a few minutes. This new "clearness" of vision allows her to see her previous "blindness," the "blunders, the blindness of her own head and heart!" (*E* 353, 357). After again mediating on her previous "blindness," a third repetition in less than ten pages which shows her as much more critical of her own gaze than Mr. Knightley was, she concludes that the best course forward is to place more faith in her gaze, not less (*E* 360). Emma decides that "she should see them henceforth with the

²⁹ In fact, while so many of the courtships in the novel feature women described as the "object" of affections, Mr. Knightley does not seem to view Emma as his object in any sense. In one previous discussion with Mrs. Weston, he seems unpleasantly surprised that she "would rather talk of [Emma's] person than her mind, would you? Very well; I shall not attempt to deny Emma's being pretty" (*E* 31). However, it is Mrs. Weston, not Mr. Knightley, who goes on at length about her beauty. Though Mr. Knightley admits that he does "love to look at her," he most admires that she does not seem "personally vain. Considering how very handsome she is, she appears to be little occupied with it" (*E* 31). In other words, though Mr. Knightley finds her attractive, he is most impressed by her lack of attention to her beauty – a lack of attention that signals that she does not consider herself an object of the gaze. While Harriet is Mr. Elton's "object," and Emma is Frank's "object," Emma and Mr. Knightley's relationship is never established with those unequal power dynamics.

closest observance: and wretchedly as she had hitherto misunderstood even those she was watching, she did not know how to admit that she could be blinded here... The power of observation would soon be given" (*E* 360-1). Emma is still confident in the "power" of her gaze, and her ability to assess a situation, even more so now that she is aware of her previous misconceptions.

In fact, Emma instigates her own happy ending by asserting her confidence in her gaze to Mr. Knightley, correcting his misconception about her feelings towards Frank. Though at first she refers to her own "blindness" due to Frank twice in the proposal scene (*E* 368, 369), she then asserts that Frank used her as "merely a blind to conceal his real situation with another. – It was his object to blind all about him; and no one, I am sure, could be more effectually blinded than myself – except that I was *not* blinded – that it was my good fortune – that, in short, I was somehow or other safe from him" (*E* 369). Now, the "blind" and the "object" are not Emma, but rather something Frank affected on all who surrounded him. While she was especially targeted, in the end she asserts that she was "not blinded," that she had seen through his apparent affections. She was "safe from him" because, quite literally, of her "good fortune." Because of her class-enabled decision not to marry (a decision which she reaffirmed previously when considering her feelings for Frank), she was ultimately able to maintain her own gaze rather than becoming purely an object of his. This assertion of her independent gaze is what instigates Mr. Knightley's proposal and causes Emma's happy ending.³⁰

³⁰ In the proposal scene, Emma controls the interaction of their gazes, carefully resisting becoming an object of his gaze. At first, Emma can tell Mr. Knightley is "often looking at her, and trying for a fuller view of her face than it suited her to give," and so she shields her face (*E* 368). While Emma has one moment in which "the expression of his eyes overpowered her" during the proposal, she quickly turns her gaze inwards once more and reestablishes her power. Emma then expresses her confidence in her gaze. In addition, while Mr. Knightley proposes, it is rhetorically referred to as "her proposal," and Mr. Knightley says "Emma, I accept your offer" (*E* 374, 372).

While Stewart and other critics have asserted that “Emma explicitly fixes her lover’s gaze upon herself in the last sequence of the text” and by doing so, “ceases in her quest to penetrate others’ lives,” I disagree with this reductive reading of Emma’s disempowerment. Emma certainly welcomes Mr. Knightley’s gaze in the final scenes, but she always gazes back.³¹ Her curiosity to “penetrate” with her eyes is as strong as ever – and in fact, her penetration is even more powerful for she has learned to take into account others’ perspectives as well. This does affect her gaze – she reflects on “how often had her eyes fallen on the same shrubs in the lawn, and observed the same beautiful effect of the western sun! But never in such a state of spirits, never in anything like it” – but not in a negative way (*E* 376). Instead, Emma has simply broadened her gaze through “the many, very many, points of view in which she was now beginning to consider” (*E* 391). When Emma interacts with Jane once more, her perceptions are accurate now that she has overcome Frank’s blinding, and she “plainly saw” that Jane wanted to talk to her, finding it “very evident though it could not often proceed beyond a look” (*E* 397, 398). All these instances of her clear-sightedness points to Emma’s growth, for as Butte argues:

It would be unfair to Austen’s comedy to suggest that fiction’s new process of self-defining produces in Emma only a way to measure self-evasion or blindness. It also produces a complex measure of degrees of success at self-knowledge. Whatever one thinks of Emma’s moral growth, and critics have varied widely on

³¹ Their courtship advances most in scenes in which they communicate with their eyes, reinforcing their equal power dynamic as mutual subjects and objects of each other’s gazes. At the ball, Emma thinks Mr. Knightley’s “tall, firm, upright figure... was such as Emma felt must draw everybody’s eyes... Whenever she caught his eye, she forced him to smile, but in general he was looking grave... He seemed often observing her” (*E* 280). Here Emma is seen gazing at Mr. Knightley, but he gazes back. She has the power to make him smile, and later, to communicate with him through the gaze alone. When she catches the “happier sight” of Mr. Knightley asking Harriet to dance, “though too distant for speech, her countenance said much, as soon as she could catch his eye again” (*E* 282). Emma’s eyes are given the power of communication here, for “her eyes invited him irresistibly to come to her and be thanked” (*E* 284). However, this power is not the sort that reduces Mr. Knightley to an object, for he too “looked with smiling penetration” (*E* 284). This visual communication launches their courtship on equal footing, with neither one in command and neither being transformed by the other.

the subject, she manifestly changes to some degree, and demonstrably comes to perceive herself more exactly as imagined by others. (Butte 61)

Through turning her gaze inwards and developing “self-knowledge,” Emma’s powers of perception have improved, and she certainly does not cease to use these powers of perception because of her relationship with Mr. Knightley. In fact, as a result of “perceiving” herself more accurately, Emma “manifestly changes,” implying an active self-transformation. This focus on a panoptic gaze (“as imagined by others”) may seem disempowering, but it is a necessary attention for women to gain influence in a patriarchal society where the best way to manipulate others is to understand them.

One could point to Emma’s final shock of the novel – learning that Harriet will marry Mr. Martin – as proof of her failure to maintain Harriet’s transformation. However, I propose instead that Harriet’s return to her proper class is actually Emma’s final transformation: After all, once Harriet reveals to Emma her feelings for Mr. Knightley, Emma reacts much as she did after Mr. Elton’s proposal: by reverting to class hierarchy. She laments the “disparity” and “debasement” their connection would cause Mr. Knightley, and is disgusted by “How Harriet could ever have had the presumption to raise her thoughts to Mr. Knightley!” (*E* 358, 359). (While Mr. Elton raised his eyes, Harriet raised her thoughts, a linguistic signal of the weakness of Harriet’s gaze.) In fact, Emma herself even wishes she had not “prevented her marrying the unexceptionable young man who would have made her happy and respectable in the line of life to which she ought to belong” (*E* 358-9). Harriet’s final decision to marry Mr. Martin is not a failure of Emma’s transformation, but rather Emma’s final and most lasting transformation: to place Harriet back in the class where she now perceives that she belongs. Emma no longer underestimates the patriarchal marriage market; instead, she

has learned its terms and uses this knowledge to transform Harriet in a way that would make her most “happy” while still being considered “respectable” by its rules. Emma is not objectified by this knowledge of societal norms; instead it makes her gaze even stronger. When Mr. Knightley informs her of Harriet’s engagement, Emma’s “eyes, in eager gaze, said, ‘No this is impossible!’ but her lips were closed... She was still looking at him with the most speaking amazement” (*E* 410). Emma’s “gaze” is now given the power of speech, a clear indication of her power. In this equal partnership with Mr. Knightley, Emma’s gaze does not have to be the isolating reinforcement of superiority; it can become a unifying signal of equality and the powerful joining of perspectives instead.

IV. CONCLUSION

Emma’s evocation of the male gaze as matchmaker is a remarkable instance of female power in the patriarchal marriage market of Austen’s novels. Her class gives her the power to exempt herself from the marriage market, and to use her gaze to transform other women in an effort at empowerment. However, Emma underestimates the patriarchal power of this market, and is blinded in instances in which she finds herself the object of a male gaze. Nonetheless, Emma is able to learn from these errors in judgment by turning her gaze inwards and considering multiple perspectives. This refocusing of her gaze allows Emma to better perceive her role in society, which allows her to understand how to interact with the male gaze without being blinded by it. Thus, her interactions with Mr. Knightley are described by the power to communicate through the gaze with him as an equal, without being objectified. By making her gaze more perceptive and

understanding her – and Harriet’s – place in a patriarchal society, Emma is able to enact more subtle yet enduring transformation.

Like Austen’s previous works, *Emma* suggests that for a woman to have a lasting transformative power on the society around her, she must first understand it and perceive her role before beginning to create change. While Marianne and Catherine used their increased perception to change their own role in society, Emma continues to use her gaze to influence those around her – most notably Harriet, but also in communication with Mr. Knightley. This suggests that women can use their gaze not just to alter their own prospects, but also to create new possibilities for other women. However, this lasting transformation is enacted not through an individual gaze, but through a dialogue with other perspectives and the norms of a patriarchal society. Emma’s powerful gaze certainly can be problematic, especially given her reliance on class power and ultimate rejection of Harriet back to the lower class. Whether or not she is successful in actually empowering other women perhaps could not be determined unless one knew more about her backstory matchmaking in making Ms. Taylor into Mrs. Weston. Nonetheless, Emma stands out for her high aspirations and remarkable confidence, revealing a much more brazen and assertive use of the female gaze than Austen’s other heroines. Perhaps this is why Austen herself asserted Emma was “a heroine whom no one but myself will much like” (Austen-Leigh 157).

Chapter 5:

Transformative Pleasure in *Pride and Prejudice*

The drama of *Pride and Prejudice* originates not in action, but in observation. The plot and events of the novel are secondary to the interaction of the characters through dialogue and, more subtly but more importantly, through the gaze. The importance of differing and evolving perceptions of other characters is emphasized by the original title of the novel, *First Impressions*. Courtship is enacted not through overt actions but through covert changes in perspective and observations of appearance. Throughout the novel, objective descriptions of beauty are rare and brief, while much time is spent commenting on how one's appearance is observed by various characters. As E. M. Halliday argues:

When it comes to selectivity, the filters through which the narrator of *Pride and Prejudice* habitually views the action are much more discriminating than those of any photographer, and they positively cut out much that is the stock in trade of the average novelist. What color is Elizabeth's hair? What did she wear at Netherfield ball? ... But the answers to these and a hundred similar questions it is the narrator's privilege to withhold; we must take what [she] chooses to give us. (Halliday 71)

As a result, we hear about appearances almost exclusively through the gaze of other characters. Austen's narratorial camera forces us to focus not on facts of beauty but on characters' contrasting and changing perspectives.

While both Elizabeth and Darcy change their opinion of the other's appearance, no real transformation in beauty takes place; the gaze does not enact a transformative effect on its object as one would expect using Mulvey's theory of the gaze. Instead, it is the gazer who is changed by observing the other. *Pride and Prejudice* ties together the transformations in beauty of my earlier chapters with the increasing focus on perception

in the latter, for in this novel the transformation enacted by the gaze is one of perception. However, Elizabeth and Darcy are unique in that it is not just the female but also the male gazer who must shift their perspective. It is only once each accurately perceives the other that a physical transformation takes place. As Alison Sulloway argues, “except for *Pride and Prejudice*, where Elizabeth Bennet and Darcy both play Pygmalion to one another’s Galatea and then shift roles, the novels describe only the growing maturity of the heroines” (Sulloway 322). While in *Emma* her growing maturity also leads to the development of a mutual gaze with Mr. Knightley, in *Pride and Prejudice* both Elizabeth and Darcy must learn how to accurately perceive the other. This suggests that when the gaze is mutual and pleasurable, a transformation can take place that is not imposed by the gazer but is, rather, empowering for both members. To understand this shift, I will begin by exploring how Darcy and Elizabeth each change their perspective by gazing upon the other, and then explore how their reciprocal and active gazes ultimately cause a mutual transformation in beauty through pleasure.

I. “NOT HANDSOME ENOUGH TO TEMPT ME”:

How Darcy’s gaze is transformed by Elizabeth’s resistance as object

Throughout the first half of the novel, Austen focuses on Darcy’s changing interpretation of Elizabeth’s beauty. However, the narrator is resistant to the power of Darcy’s gaze, for Austen repeatedly contrasts his opinion with others. As Stephanie Eddleman argues, beauty’s “significance is to be found in the role of beholder... A picture of Elizabeth Bennet emerges through Darcy’s growing awareness of her” (Eddleman 17). Eddleman’s observation that Austen presents beauty in subjective terms

is important, because it implies that the gaze could not affect an objective, factual beauty, rather just one's perception of it. However, I disagree that we learn about Elizabeth's appearance solely through Darcy's gaze. Austen as narrator undermines the power of Darcy's gaze to transform Elizabeth by contrasting his gaze with others, such as Mr. Bingley. While Darcy initially dismisses Elizabeth as unattractive, Mr. Bingley interjects that she is "very pretty," signaling to the reader that Darcy's gaze is not necessarily accurate (*P&P* 8). By pairing these two opinions, the narrator refuses to let Darcy's perspective transform that of the reader, and does not allow Darcy's gaze to be our only source of knowledge.

While the narrator resists Darcy's perspective from transforming the reader's, Elizabeth herself actively resists the power of Darcy's gaze to influence her. Instead, she challenges his gaze with her own. When Elizabeth first notices Darcy observing her, she notes that "he has a very satirical eye, and if I do not begin by being impertinent myself, I shall soon grow afraid of him" (*P&P* 19). Elizabeth recognizes the ability of Darcy's gaze to transform her and make her "afraid."³² However, even her observation of his gaze as "satirical" implies that she does not recognize his perception of its object to be accurate, for satire implies a kind of mocking exaggeration or irony, rather than truth. Finally, Elizabeth refuses to be passive under his gaze; she determines to be "impertinent," defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "not appertaining or belonging to" or "incongruous," suggesting that Elizabeth refuses to "belong to" or be formed by Darcy's gaze ("Impertinent"). Elizabeth continues to maintain her resistance to

³² This fear is probably also linked to Elizabeth's assumption that Darcy's gaze is critical. Elizabeth "could not help observing... how frequently Mr. Darcy's eyes were fixed on her. She hardly knew how to suppose that she could be an object of admiration to so great a man; and yet that he should look at her because he disliked her, was still more strange. She could only imagine, however, that at last she drew his notice because there was something more wrong and reprehensible... than in any other person present" (*P&P* 43).

Darcy's gaze when the action of the novel moves from Longbourn to Rosings. While Elizabeth is playing piano at Rosings, Darcy positions himself "so as to command a full view of the fair performer's countenance. Elizabeth saw what he was doing, and... turned to him with an arch smile, and said: 'You mean to frighten me, Mr. Darcy?'" (*P&P* 150). Instead of being passive under his gaze, Elizabeth controls her experience of it, illustrated by her "arch smile." She even mocks the fear one may traditionally feel under the male gaze, telling Darcy he cannot "intimidate" or "frighten" her with his gaze, even if he has a "full view" (*P&P* 150). When Darcy responds by describing her, Elizabeth "laughed heartily at this picture of herself," showing that his judgment of her is not internalized. Instead, she views it as a "picture," an external representation of her beauty through his gaze that does not affect her own body.³³

Darcy is aware of Elizabeth's resistance as the object of his gaze, and as a result initially fears looking at her. His initial rejection of Elizabeth's beauty is instigated by this fear of her gaze. Darcy "looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said: 'She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me'" (*P&P* 8). Darcy's "look" has no judgment attached to it until it catches Elizabeth's "eye," signaling that she gazes back. Once Elizabeth challenges his gaze, he "withdrew" his gaze and delivers his rejection of her beauty. Darcy's rejection of Elizabeth's gaze and rejection of her beauty go hand in hand, implying that he is initially threatened by her resistant gaze, though I will argue it is eventually the quality of hers that instigates his

³³The inaccuracy of artistic representations of others' beauty has already been established in Elizabeth and Darcy's interactions. During the Netherfield Ball, Darcy requests that Elizabeth does not "sketch my character at the present moment, as there is reason to fear that the performance would reflect no credit on either." Elizabeth responds, "But if I do not take your likeness now, I may never have another opportunity" (*P&P* 81). By discussing an opinion of the other person in terms of a "sketch" and "likeness," it is clear that the gaze is creating an image separate from the object of the gaze, rather than evoking a transformation in beauty. Thus, as Darcy reflects, these representations are likely "no credit" to the real person.

desire. This transition fits Newman's theory that the powerful "woman's gaze as an object of male perception is simultaneously feared and desired" (Newman 1038). As Darcy continues to gaze upon Elizabeth, she becomes "an object of some interest in [his] eyes," illustrating that her resistance begins to challenge his perception of her (*P&P* 18). At Netherfield, Elizabeth "attracted him more than he liked" so "he adhered most conscientiously to his book, and would not even look at her" (*P&P* 50-51). This is one of many times that Darcy tries to avoid looking at Elizabeth to avoid being influenced by her gaze, showing his initial fear.

However, Elizabeth's resistance to his gaze becomes what attracts him the most. This resistance is symbolized through a focus on Elizabeth's eyes, the feature that receives the most comment in the novel both through Darcy's praise and the narrator's attention to her gaze. Douglas Murray notes that "in Volume I, Austen mentions Elizabeth's eyes with almost predictable frequency, every ten pages or so. Elizabeth's abilities to attract more than a cursory gaze and to return others' gazes indicate her resistance and independence of mind amid powerful forces of conformity" (Murray 45). While Murray focuses his analysis of the gaze on the dynamics between Elizabeth and Lady Catherine, his observation sheds light on Elizabeth and Darcy's interactions. Elizabeth's eyes are representative of her ability to both attract Darcy's gaze and resist his gaze, despite the "powerful forces of conformity" inherent in the male gaze. Thus, it is key that Darcy's transformation in his opinion of Elizabeth's beauty is enacted by Elizabeth's eyes. While Darcy "had at first scarcely allowed her to be pretty," the verb "allowed" emphasizes his ability to control his own gaze, in which he can "allow" what

he wants to perceive. However, he is not successful in maintaining his assessment when challenged by Elizabeth's own gaze:

He had looked at her without admiration at the ball; and when they next met, he looked at her only to criticise. But no sooner had he made it clear to himself and his friends that she hardly had a good feature in her face, than he began to find it was rendered uncommonly intelligent by the beautiful expression of her dark eyes. To this discovery succeeded some others equally mortifying. Though he had detected with a critical eye more than one failure of perfect symmetry in her form, he was forced to acknowledge her figure to be light and pleasing. (*P&P* 18)

Darcy begins by controlling his own gaze, looking “without admiration” and “only to criticise” as he chooses. Furthermore, he asserts his gaze to “himself and his friends,” showing him using his gaze to alter others' opinions. However, Austen undermines the accuracy of Darcy's gaze, for he must make “it clear” to himself that she is not attractive, rather than it being inherently true. His gaze ultimately cannot withstand Elizabeth's resistance as object via the “expression of her dark eyes.” Darcy tries to regain control over his gaze, applying a “critical eye,” but while he can note her physical flaws, he cannot regain his previous perspective of disdain. Instead, he is “forced” to find Elizabeth pretty and change his gaze, illustrating Elizabeth's power as object of his gaze.

This shift in perception is complete when Darcy begins to feel pleasure as an object of Elizabeth's gaze. He meditates “on the very great pleasure which a pair of fine eyes in the face of a pretty woman can bestow,” once again phrasing Elizabeth's eyes as responsible for his pleasure in her beauty (*P&P* 22). Margaret Anne Doody argues that the syntax of this sentence empowers Elizabeth. Doody writes, “Elizabeth's eyes are energized and active, benevolently *bestowing* something... This device lends a sense of physical immediacy and of activity to the whole, thus centering our reading, even when Elizabeth isn't there, on the animated and animating qualities of the heroine herself”

(Doody). Going beyond Doody's sentence-level analysis, I propose that Elizabeth's gaze is transforming Darcy's perception of her, for even in his language he represents her as the active gazer.³⁴

Darcy admires Elizabeth's refusal to conform to the gaze because he sees it as an example of mutual resistance. At Rosings, after Elizabeth laughs at his description of her, he says that "we neither of us perform to strangers" (*P&P* 151). This suggests that it was Elizabeth's lack of performance, or refusal to conform to his gaze, that increased his desire. Darcy sees this as a point of mutuality between them, that "we neither of us" is willing to conform to another's gaze, diction that groups them together three times in four words. Thus, Darcy is attracted to what he perceives as their equal power in refusing to perform.³⁵ At the end of the novel, when Elizabeth asks how Darcy first began admiring her, she remarks, "My beauty you had early withstood... did you admire me for my impertinence?" Darcy responds, "For the liveliness of your mind, I did" (*P&P* 327).

³⁴ Elizabeth's eyes are directly tied to her active nature. When Elizabeth walks to Netherfield, Ms. Bingley assumes that "'this adventure has rather affected your admiration of her fine eyes.' 'Not at all,' he replied; 'they were brightened by the exercise'" (*P&P* 30). Darcy's increased admiration of Elizabeth's eye after physical activity emphasizes Elizabeth's eyes as representative of her active strength as the object of his gaze. This power is enough to make Darcy overlook even his previous rules of decorum. As Susan Morgan observes, "Certainly, Elizabeth hurrying through the muddy countryside to visit Jane, springing over puddles and jumping over stiles, is not a decorous site. And just as certainly, those muddy petticoats and glowing cheeks contribute a great deal to Mr. Darcy's falling in love" (Morgan 354). Darcy's gaze is transformed by Elizabeth, no longer finding such disregard for propriety unappealing, but rather as what attracts him to Elizabeth. Darcy further reinforces the importance of activity in Elizabeth's "beautiful eyes" when he observes that it would be difficult in a portrait "to catch their expression, but their colour and shape, and the eyelashes, so remarkably fine, might be copied" (*P&P* 44). This description emphasizes both the detail of Darcy's gaze – noting such specifics as eyelashes – as well as what he most admires about Elizabeth – her active "expression."

³⁵ Elizabeth summarizes her understanding of his shift in attraction, stating that "You were disgusted with the women who were always speaking and looking and thinking for *your* approbation alone. I roused, and interested you, because I was so unlike *them*" (*P&P* 327). Darcy was "roused" by her resistance to his gaze because so many other woman conformed to it, "looking" for his approbation alone, as the italics emphasize. This distinction echoes Wollstonecraft's theory that "a pretty woman, as an object of desire, is generally allowed to be so by men of all descriptions; whilst a fine woman, who inspires more sublime emotions by displaying intellectual beauty, may be overlooked or observed with indifference" (Wollstonecraft 51). Applying this theory to Elizabeth's explanation, the women who seek Darcy's "approbation" may perhaps be "pretty" and or an "object of desire" in general, but Darcy's love could only be incited by the more "sublime emotion" of "intellectual beauty," which he at first overlooked.

Darcy here equates his initial admiration of Elizabeth with her “livel[y]” mind, rather than her beauty, another indicator of her active resistance. It is important that “impertinence” is the very word Elizabeth determined to be upon first noticing Darcy’s gaze upon her, signaling that Darcy has incorporated Elizabeth’s perspective. This mutuality illustrates a stark shift in Darcy’s perception from the beginning of the novel.

II. “I COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE WRETCHEDLY BLIND”

How Elizabeth’s gaze becomes more perceptive through observing Darcy

Elizabeth’s shift in how she perceives Darcy is enacted much later in the story, as she gazes upon Pemberley. Since male beauty does not hold the same importance in this society as female appearance, Mr. Darcy’s physical and internal appearance is represented through his home. This connection is evident from the first time Mr. Darcy is subject to public opinion:

Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person, handsome features, noble mien... The gentlemen pronounced him to be a fine figure of a man, the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and he was looked at with great admiration for about half the evening, till his manners gave a disgust which turned the tide of his popularity; for he was discovered to be proud... and not all his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend. (*P&P* 7)

While Elizabeth’s appearance was first analyzed by Darcy alone, Darcy is first introduced by a more general public opinion. Darcy is considered handsome, with “handsome features” agreed upon by both men and women. However, Mr. Darcy’s proud behavior makes his appearance switch rapidly to being declared “unworthy” of comparison with the friend he had just been declared more handsome than. While he does not enact change in a positive way, Darcy’s ability to influence others’ perception of him

through his behavior shows his power as the object of a gaze. Furthermore, the reference to his “large estate in Derbyshire” as having the potential to “save him” from bad opinion enforces from his first introduction that his home will affect how people view him.

When she arrives at Pemberley, Elizabeth is primed to perceive Darcy in a new way because she has read his letter and gained access to his perspective. Before this moment, Elizabeth just considers Mr. Darcy as “one comparatively new to look at” in Rosings, but not as someone who could influence her gaze (*P&P* 146). When he arrives, Elizabeth only notes Mr. Darcy’s appearance to say that he “looked just as he had been used to look in Hertfordshire,” a vague description that gives Elizabeth’s interpretation more power by not giving any concrete details to disprove it (*P&P* 147). However, by the time Elizabeth arrives at Pemberley she and the reader have been made aware of the flaws of her own gaze through Darcy’s letter, through which he has actively resisted her perception of him. This moment when Elizabeth gains a new understanding of Darcy and herself can be clarified by returning to Newton:

The most profound source of what we feel as Elizabeth’s power is her ability in the last third of the novel to turn her critical vision upon herself... It is necessary and vital to assert oneself against one’s own blindness, in a patriarchal society, it is also a much surer and more lasting form of power than pitting oneself against the traditional privileges of men. (Newton 38)

Like Emma must reassess her strategy for gazing once she learns the errors of her perception, Darcy’s letter in effect forces Elizabeth to turn her gaze inward. In examining herself, Elizabeth’s perspective transforms, gaining a deeper awareness of where her own gaze has been inaccurate (specifically with reference to Wickham). As a result she is better prepared to more accurately assess others in the future. It is critical that when

Elizabeth turns her gaze upon Darcy again and his grounds for the first time, she has already examined herself and developed a more critical perspective of her gaze.

Elizabeth's perception alters when she observes Pemberley, adopting an investigative persona much like Catherine of *Northanger Abbey*. Elizabeth gazes extensively at Darcy's property, which critics have long agreed symbolically represents the owner. Elizabeth's "eye was instantly caught by Pemberley House," phrasing that points to the mutuality of their gazes by echoing exactly when Darcy first observes Elizabeth. While Darcy is caught by Elizabeth's eye, here Elizabeth's eye is caught by Darcy's estate. This parallel structure shows that Pemberley holds the same challenge to her previous perception that her eyes expressed to Darcy's. As Eddleman notes and critics have long agreed, "Elizabeth's first view of Pemberley mirrors these early descriptions of Darcy, her growing knowledge of his past, and her comprehension of his improving character... Elizabeth looks at Pemberley, but what she sees is Darcy" (Eddleman 91). The house is "handsome" and "without any artificial appearance" just like Darcy. It is "neither formal nor falsely adorned. Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste... At that moment she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!" (*P&P* 207). The very "moment" of seeing Pemberley is when Elizabeth reconsiders her rejection of Darcy, illustrating a nearly instantaneous shift in perspective. It is worth noting that this change depends on Elizabeth imagining herself "mistress," implying that class-based power is also part of her transformation.

The shift Elizabeth enacts while gazing upon Pemberley affects how she perceives Darcy himself. When a servant asks Elizabeth if she thinks Darcy is handsome,

Elizabeth responds, “Yes, very handsome,” an opinion she had never expressed before (*P&P* 209). Just as Darcy began to enjoy observing Elizabeth, Elizabeth begins to enjoy observing Darcy. When they enter a portrait room, “Elizabeth walked on in quest of [Darcy’s] face,” implying that she now enjoys gazing upon him (*P&P* 212). Elizabeth’s discovery of the portrait is described as “arrest[ing] her,” placing the agency not in her gaze but in the object of her gaze – Darcy’s portrait (*P&P* 212). The resemblance is “striking,” exhibiting its power under Elizabeth’s gaze, and shows “Mr. Darcy, with such a smile over the face, as she remembered to have sometimes seen when he looked at her” (*P&P* 212). As she gazes at the portrait, Elizabeth imagines Darcy gazing at her, a layering that shows she has begun to feel pleasure in being gazed at by Darcy and gazing at him. This pleasure enacts a change in her opinion of him, and “there was certainly in this moment in Elizabeth’s mind a more gentle sensation towards the original than she had ever felt” (*P&P* 212). At this point, Elizabeth invites Darcy’s gaze, and as she “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&P* 212). Elizabeth actively “fixed his eyes” and invites Darcy’s gaze, putting herself in the position of power under his gaze. At the same time, in gazing at Darcy she begins to perceive his previous behavior differently. Critics such as Maaja Stewart have argued that by directing his gaze toward herself, she is “subjecting not only their shared experience but also herself to his interpretation” (Stewart 62). I disagree; Elizabeth previously demonstrated that she is an active object of Darcy’s gaze, who refuses to subject “herself to his interpretation.” Additionally, Stewart is not acknowledging the power of Elizabeth’s pleasure in being the object of Darcy’s gaze. By

inviting his gaze, Elizabeth becomes active, not passive. Finally, while Elizabeth's opinion shifts in this moment, she is the one who has "softened" her past judgment of Darcy, showing she still has agency over her own perspective.

When Elizabeth next gazes on Darcy himself, it is clear her perception has shifted. Elizabeth sees Darcy outside the grounds and "saw an expression of general complaisance... the difference, the change was so great, and struck so forcibly on her mind, that she could hardly restrain her astonishment from being visible" (*P&P* 223). The repetition of "the difference, the change" shows that Elizabeth does not know how to describe this shift, merely that it is "forcibl[e]" and "astonish[ing]." The strength of Austen's diction again reinforces that the change taking place is, in fact, a transformation with extreme effects. These effects are explored when Elizabeth continues to gaze extensively at Darcy's property, rather than the man himself. When thinking of Darcy, Elizabeth "seemed to direct her eyes to such objects as they pointed out, [but] she distinguished no part of the scene. Her thoughts were all fixed on that one spot of Pemberley House, whichever it might be, where Mr. Darcy then was" (*P&P* 214). Even when imagining "where Mr. Darcy then was," Elizabeth's thoughts are still phrased as focused on a "spot of Pemberley House," rather than on Darcy himself. By looking at his grounds while imagining the man, her changing opinion of the man is tied back once again to her pleasure in gazing at his home.

III. "THEIR EYES INSTANTLY MET"

How pleasure enacts Elizabeth and Darcy's physical transformations

Once both Elizabeth and Darcy have changed their perceptions of the other, their reciprocal and pleasurable use of their gazes has a transformative effect. This shift from an oppressive to a powerful gaze can be explained by returning to Lambert's theory that "to enjoy being looked at sexually – when the observer looks with a curious rather than a controlling gaze – is to feel the excitement of being discovered, of being known" (Lambert 20). Applied to Elizabeth and Darcy, this implies that their willingness to change their gaze based on what they see – in other words, a "curiosity" that enables them to shift their perspective – means they no longer need to fear the other's gaze as controlling. As a result, they can feel pleasure in being gazed upon by the other person, because it signals their mutual desire.

This reciprocity is evident as early as when they run into each other at Pemberley following Elizabeth's transformation.³⁶ When Elizabeth sees him, "it was impossible to avoid his sight. Their eyes instantly met, and the cheeks of both were overspread with the deepest blush" (*P&P* 213). While the gaze remains powerful – "impossible to avoid" – there is not one character gazing upon the other. Instead, both Elizabeth's and Darcy's "eyes instantly met." This language of unison continues when "the cheeks of both" begin to "blush." They are both equally physically transformed by the others' gaze, finding a kind of nervous pleasure in the surprise.³⁷

³⁶ Their gazes are also hinted at being equal in several earlier points in the novel, though the characters themselves do not recognize it. One instance is when they dance at the Netherfield Ball, during which Sir William observes Elizabeth's "bright eyes are also upbraiding me" (80). This also implies that both Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth were gazing at Sir William in equivalent manners, though perhaps for different reasons.

³⁷ Some critics have claimed that this moment constitutes a reduction in Elizabeth's agency, for in this moment Elizabeth "scarcely dared lift her eyes to his face" because of the "impropriety of her being there" (*P&P* 213-214). However, I disagree that this hesitancy is a result of a lack of empowerment. Instead, being caught in the act of gazing at and desiring Darcy, Elizabeth feels flustered because Darcy had not invited her gaze upon his home, and she is not sure if he still finds it desirable. This hesitancy continues once Darcy arrives at Longbourn, for while Elizabeth and Darcy both take pleasure in being the object of

Once the couple establishes that they both find pleasure in the other's gaze, this pleasure does create a physical transformation. However, this transformation is not enacted by another's gaze, but instead is one of the rare moments in which the narrator steps in to describe a character's appearance. When Elizabeth believes Darcy's affections upon hearing he was returning to Longbourn, "the new colour which had been driven from her face, returned for half a minute with an additional glow, and a smile of delight added lustre to her eyes" (*P&P* 286). Elizabeth's confidence in Darcy's affections brightens her entire appearance, especially her symbolic eyes; however, Darcy himself is not physically present yet to gaze at her and enact this change. The change is enacted by Elizabeth's preemptive pleasure in imagining herself once again the object of his gaze. Darcy has a similar improvement in appearance during the proposal scene. As previously noted, Elizabeth was not "able to encounter his eye," but if she had "she might have seen how well the expression of heartfelt delight, diffused over his face, became him" (*P&P* 315). Darcy is not the object of Elizabeth's gaze in this moment, but as the object of her affections, his delight causes him to become more handsome than ever. These happy

the other's gaze now, they are both also equally tentative in gazing at the other. Elizabeth seeks out Darcy's gaze as an indicator of his continued attraction, and is disappointed when "she as often found [Darcy] looking at Jane as at herself" (*P&P* 287). When they are forced to be separate, Elizabeth hopes "that his eyes were so often turned towards her side of the room, as to make him play as unsuccessfully as herself" (*P&P* 293). Once again, the language of equality is emphasized, for Elizabeth hopes Darcy will "play as unsuccessfully as herself," implying that both are distracted by gazing at the other an equal amount of time. Elizabeth is also tentative to gaze at Darcy, not "daring to lift up her eyes" before Darcy walks in because she wants to "first see how he behaves" without her influence (*P&P* 286). While she still "occasionally... raised her eyes to his face" and at one point "followed him with her eyes," she generally wants to observe him as subtly as possible, to avoid either of them being influenced by the gaze before they are certain of the other's desire. The most significant moment of hesitancy to look at the other is in the proposal itself, after which Elizabeth was not "able to encounter his eye" (*P&P* 315). While it is Elizabeth who "could not look" here, the phrasing of being unable to "encounter his eye" also suggests that Darcy himself was unable to gaze at her, or direct his eye her way. When Elizabeth later asks Darcy, "Why... did you look as if you did not care about me?" Darcy responds, "Because you... gave me no encouragement." Both Elizabeth and Darcy were avoiding gazing at (and thus encouraging) each other, because they were not sure if the other person still desired the gaze.

ending transformations of beauty present an interesting contradiction to the reader, as the only time in which a transformation is enacted in the object of the gaze rather than the gazer. However, the lack of any gazes between characters in these moments, and the stepping in of the narrator to describe the appearance, suggest that it is internal pleasure, linked to but not directly caused by an external gaze, that holds the power to transform in these moments.

V. CONCLUSION

Elizabeth and Darcy exhibit a curious rather than controlling gaze because of their ability to shift how they perceive each other. This mutual alteration of perception makes their gazes reciprocal and equal, allowing both to feel pleasure in and invite the other's gaze. As a result, while they both undergo a physical transformation after inviting the others' gaze, this transformation is described as a result of individual pleasure rather than an imposed gaze.

Jane Austen famously considered this novel "too light and bright and sparkling," which may be understood by the portrayal of gazing as an empowering rather than oppressive act in the novel (*Letters* 44). However, within the context of her extensive emphasis on the gaze throughout her novels, *Pride and Prejudice* stands out for a different reason. While in her other novels the heroines learn ways to subvert the male gaze or expand the powers of their own perception, Mr. Darcy is unique among heroes who must also relearn how to gaze. While all of Austen's novels can be considered novels of education for women, this novel could too serve as an model for men to unlearn – or at least rethink – the patriarchal underpinnings of their gaze.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to put the works of Jane Austen in conversation with theories of the male gaze in order to better understand the ways transformation, perception, and pleasure interact in the patriarchal scopical marriage markets that Austen considers. While the male gaze is shown to have a transformative power throughout her works, Austen is careful to leave room for resistance for her heroines. I have argued that while men are able to simply act upon the world with their gaze in Austen's novels, while women must first use their gaze to perceive their societal role before successfully having a transformative effect.

Through carefully perceiving the gaze and thus manipulating it, or through finding pleasure in the gaze and thus becoming a desiring, active object, the heroines of Austen's novels are anything but passive as objects or subjects of the gaze. In *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*, the male gaze is exposed as having the power to transform the physical appearance of the heroines. The female gaze, on the other hand, is reliant on perception. Catherine Morland is able to resist being transformed by the male gaze because of her perceptive abilities in *Northanger Abbey*; however, she herself does not attempt to exert a transformational effect through her gaze. *Sense and Sensibility's* Marianne Dashwood does attempt to exert a transformative effect through her gaze, but fails until she takes into account the gaze of society. However, it is not until *Emma* that the ability to resist the male gaze and the ability to successfully transform through the female gaze are connected. Though Emma first believes her resistance to being an object of the gaze enables her to project a transformative gaze herself, she – like Marianne – is ultimately only successful in maintaining a transformative effect once she properly

perceives the limits of her patriarchal society. Finally, *Pride and Prejudice* explores the dynamics of a mutually desiring gaze, and implies that a shift in perception can enact an empowering transformation that challenges the standards of society.

Despite the quantity of criticism that has been written about Austen, very little exists that directly ties her work to theories of the gaze. However, as this reading has shown, the gaze operates in subtle ways throughout Austen's texts. While each novel is distinct in its focus, throughout her works Austen highlights tensions beneath the surface through the operation of the gaze, allowing us to focus on her subtle transformations and visual cues. This reading allows us to better understand the prioritization of female agency and pleasure throughout the novels on a linguistic level. This reveals the centering of her heroines' agency as objects and subjects of the gaze, contrary to previous critics who have understood Austen's happy endings as a reduction of the heroine's identity, ignoring the fact that these women are not just objects but also subjects of desire. While Austen takes seriously the objectifying nature of the male gaze, she also takes seriously the agency of female subjects to maintain their identities and shape their own paths despite the societal and patriarchal forces working against them.

While theories of the male gaze shed new light on Austen, Austen also sheds new light on the role of the woman in a world shaped by male gaze. By building in room for resistance for her heroines, and by taking their desire seriously, Austen has taught generations of readers strategies for survival in the patriarchal marriage market that still shapes our society today. The applicability of Austen's lessons has spawned dozens of self-help books and dating manuals, but perhaps the reason her message is so enduring is not because she teaches how to find love – but because she teaches how to find power.

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