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**‘THE NOVELIST OF HOME’: SILENCE AND THE
THEORISATION OF DOMESTICITY IN JANE AUSTEN’S
FICTION**

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Abstract

This thesis offers a re-examination of the nearly two-centuries-old idea that Jane Austen is ‘the novelist of home’. How, it asks, can we reconcile the seemingly opposing notions of Austen’s famed insular focus on domestic life, with its corresponding restraints upon women, and her clearly non-conservative gender politics?

In depicting the lives of young women, Austen by and large excludes matters which were deemed ‘unfeminine’ or belonging to the public and ‘masculine’ world from her fiction. Topics such as sexuality and politics might then be considered silences in her novels. This apparent refusal to discuss these subjects was not, however, a sign of Austen’s endorsement of the ideal of withdrawn and private female life set out within conservative conduct literature. Instead, I argue, in her isolated focus on domesticity Austen provides forensic studies of the conditions of home life for middle-class women and their psychological impact. Her silences, therefore, are tools used to recreate the state of disconnection in which women exist under the influence of contemporary domestic ideology. In each of her novels, Austen criticises that confinement to, and an education that prepares women for, a life solely in the domestic realm harmfully limits the scope of their knowledge, development and ultimately selfhood.

Offering a theorisation of domesticity that develops over the course of her career, Austen set herself apart from her forerunners and contemporaries in domestic fiction. In adapting the novel according to this enterprise of reconceiving domesticity, Austen moreover reimagines the novel itself.

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Introduction: ‘the novelist of home’

Miss Austen [...] with combined boldness and modesty, struck into a path of her own, of which she remains, to this day, the undisputed mistress. The truth, spirit, ease, and refined humour of her conversations have rarely been equalled. She is, emphatically, the novelist of home.

The Editor of ‘The Standard Novels’, ‘Memoir of Miss Austen’ (1833)¹

If Jane Austen suffered in any way from her circumstances it was in the narrowness of life that was imposed upon her. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone. She never travelled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself. But perhaps it was the nature of Jane Austen not to want what she had not. Her gift and her circumstances matched each other completely. But I doubt whether that was true of Charlotte Brontë, I said, opening *Jane Eyre* and laying it beside *Pride and Prejudice*.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929)²

At the end of Henry Austen’s biographical preface to an 1833 edition of *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), its editor famously makes a case for Jane Austen’s originality that is rooted in her domesticity. Summarising the sentiments expressed in her brother’s biography, the editor declares that Austen is set apart from her contemporaries in being ‘the novelist of home’. But what exactly does it mean to be ‘the novelist of home’? The question is not an easy one to answer on the basis of this commentary alone. In the short paragraph in which it appears, the appellation is preceded by praise for Austen’s dialogue and the editor’s marvelling at the novels’ ‘truth of portraiture’. Admiration for Austen’s ‘exquisite delineation of common life’ similarly dominates Henry Austen’s account.³ It would seem, then, that to be ‘the novelist of home’ is to convey accurately the behaviour of the people within it. The editor’s subsequent

¹ The Editor of ‘The Standard Novels’, ‘Memoir of Miss Austen’ (1833), in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 145-54 (p. 154). This quotation comes from, as Sutherland notes, ‘[a]n editorial paragraph issued from Bentley’s office and [is] not strictly part of Henry Austen’s ‘Memoir’’, p. 154.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 51.

³ Henry Austen, ‘Memoir of Miss Austen’ (1833), in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 145-54 (p. 152).

comments imply other justifications for the title, however. In particular, in discussing her artistic achievement, the editor describes Austen as a ‘mistress’ – a word Austen herself most often used to mean a female head of a household⁴ – and her fictional innovation as ‘a path’. Here, he conflates the language of authorship with that of domesticity in order to create the sense that there is a distinct ‘homeliness’ to Austen as a writer. This description builds on the overall impression of Austen created by her brother. Henry Austen provides scant detail of his sister’s life, but what he shares serves to cultivate an idea of her as withdrawn and willingly homebound. With an aversion to literary professionalism, he claims, ‘she sent her novels into the world’ from the safety of Chawton cottage.⁵ Austen, he strongly implies, was a domestic figure first, and an author second.

But if the editor of the ‘Standard Novels’ identifies Austen as the ‘novelist of home’, he does not entirely pin down his term. This designation has, nevertheless, undoubtedly had its influence. Subsequent readers and critics have since sought to define Austen’s relationship to the domestic in starkly different ways. A century later Virginia Woolf, for instance, was to confirm the notion that Austen and her works might best be understood under the banner of ‘home’. Writing in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) Woolf initially conjectures that Austen may have ‘suffered’ owing to her restricted domestic lifestyle. She decides, however, that the author was likely to have accepted her lot and that ‘[h]er gift and her circumstances matched each other completely’. Like *Sense and Sensibility*’s editor, she asserts that although other female authors might have functioned creatively under similar restraints, Austen was somehow uniquely suited to writing about the domestic sphere she inhabited. For Woolf, she

⁴ For instance, Emma Woodhouse says: ‘I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house as I am of Hartfield’, Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815) (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 82. Early in *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), Austen writes: ‘Mrs. John Dashwood now installed herself mistress of Norland’, Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 10.

⁵ Henry Austen describes in his short biography how ‘on a visit in London’ Austen rebuffed an invitation to join ‘a literary circle’. Despite being informed that ‘the celebrated Madame de Stael would be of the party’, he writes, ‘Miss Austen immediately declined the invitation. To her truly delicate mind such a display would have given pain instead of pleasure’, pp. 149-59, 147.

is ‘the novelist of home’ not only through circumstance, but owing to something essential in her ‘nature’.

The various associations of Austen and home have cast a long shadow over scholarship on her novels and remain palpable in the popular reception of the author in the year of the bicentenary of her death. Over the past two centuries the dual assumptions that Austen relished her homebound existence and only wrote about domestic matters have been at the heart of the consensus surrounding her conservatism. In the last few decades critics have increasingly challenged the Austen-as-conservative argument, frequently by showing that her interests extend beyond that which falls within feminine domesticity. Janine Barchas’ *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (2012), for example, argues that far from being insular in focus, Austen’s novels are richly interwoven with often scandalous references to history and celebrity.⁶ More controversially, Helena Kelly’s recent book *Jane Austen, the Secret Radical* (2016) makes a case for a politically engaged and subversive Austen.⁷ Yet despite these compelling efforts,⁷ scholars have been unable fully to divorce Austen from the home as the primary framework within which to understand her and the fiction. Indeed, in 2017, the association of Austen and the home has never been more culturally entrenched. Historian Lucy Worsley has recently published a book entitled *Jane Austen at Home* (2017), a biographical study that seeks to understand Austen through the lens of the places she inhabited.⁸ From September of this year, Austen will also feature on the ten-pound note, with her portrait appearing in front of the house and grounds of Godmersham Park. Godmersham is used as an image of a particular kind of genteel domesticity with which (apparently) Austen is linked despite the facts that she never lived there and that the grandeur of the estate is at odds with the humble domesticity of Austen’s homes at Steventon or

⁶ Janine Barchas, *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012).

⁷ Helena Kelly, *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical* (London: Icon Books, 2016).

⁸ Lucy Worsley, *Jane Austen at Home: A Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017).

Chawton referenced in Henry Austen's account of the retiring author. Godmersham symbolises the aspirational domesticity readers have come to associate with Austen's novels. Like its fictional counterparts Pemberley or Mansfield Park, it represents the kind of home a worthy heroine might hope to gain through a prosperous marriage. Austen, of course, did not enter into any such marriage, nor was she mistress of such a home.

In a year that celebrates Austen-as-institution, this thesis argues that her indelible association with that most domestic of institutions – home – merits reconsideration. It is not my intention to challenge the homebound nature of the novels or the notion that Austen's primary interest is in domestic life. Rather, I intend to reinterpret her association with the home. It is important to note here that Austen is designated as the 'novelist of home', not the 'novelist of *the* home'. The editor's strange omission of the definite article is telling since it gives an idea of an inescapable belonging that foreshadows the sentiments regarding her innate attachment to the home expressed by Woolf. What is more, it suggests that Austen is herself evocative 'of home' in general; she is in essence 'homely'. By contrast, to have called Austen 'the novelist of *the* home' would imply that she is an informed voice on 'the home' as a subject. This formulation grants her an air of authority that would belie the 'modesty', and innocuous homeliness, that Austen's early proponents wished to depict. It is this obfuscated authority that I seek to recuperate here.

This thesis seeks, then, not only to understand the domestic nature of the fiction – or what it truly means to be 'the novelist of [the] home' – but to reveal Austen as a theorist of domesticity. I will demonstrate that the novels are not confined to the domestic sphere simply owing to custom, or Austen's intrinsic sense of affinity with home life. On the contrary, I argue, her intense focus on the home was a strategic choice in order to offer a critique of domesticity. This choice, it would seem, was one born of experience. Rather than the home being a source of ongoing inspiration for Austen, her surroundings often seemed to work

against her in the creative process. On one occasion in her letters she wrote that she had begun ‘to weigh [her] words and sentences more’ and though she looked ‘for a sentiment, an illustration, or a metaphor in every corner of the room’ was continually distracted by the splashing ‘rain in the Storecloset’. Evidencing the ongoing disturbance of domestic life throughout her career, in commenting on the productivity of women writers seven years later she observed that ‘[c]omposition seems to me Impossible with a head full of Joints of Mutton & doses of rhubarb’.⁹ As Austen was all too aware, the home could be oppressive. In using her novels to theorise domesticity, I argue, Austen reveals the complex ways in which middle-class society works to uphold this oppression. In the process of this interrogation, she exposes how women were often severely hampered by their unavoidable ties to the home.

Austen and the home in context

While the phrase ‘the novelist of home’ first appeared in 1833, it was Austen’s nephew, James Edward Austen-Leigh’s Victorian-era biography that was fully to enshrine her domestic image. In *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) Austen-Leigh goes to great lengths to obscure any ‘unladylike’ authorial labour or ambition in relaying Austen’s life. Dedicating much space to describing her domestic life and activities, when discussing her literary works he details what he refers to as her ‘habits of composition’. Famously, he writes:

[...] she had no separate study to retire to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting-room, subject to all kinds of casual interruptions. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by servants, or visitors, or any persons beyond her own family party. She wrote upon small sheets of paper which could easily be put away, or covered with a piece of blotting paper. There was, between the front door and the offices, a swing door which creaked when it was opened; but she objected to having this little inconvenience remedied, because it gave her notice when anyone was coming.

⁹ Jane Austen, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 169, 321.

To the onlooker, Austen's writing process blended seamlessly with her leisured domestic life, and so too, he implies, should it be understood by her readers.¹⁰ She did not see herself as a professional, he asserts; rather, she 'lived in entire seclusion from the literary world'.

Unimpeded by outside influences, '[w]hatever she produced was a genuine home-made article'. Her cloistered working environment had an impact on her subject matter: she set her work upon a 'narrow stage' as she 'was always very careful not to meddle with matters which she did not thoroughly understand' such as 'politics, law, or medicine', according to Austen-Leigh.¹¹ A brief biography by her niece Caroline Austen similarly sought to emphasise the 'home virtues' of 'dear 'Aunt Jane'',¹² a title that has become emblematic of the image of a modest, domestic Austen these relatives worked hard to cement.

The domestic portraits of Austen and her novel-writing created by her family's biographies both seemed to reflect and help steer the early reception of the author. Austen-Leigh noted that prior to his *Memoir* '[t]o the multitude her works appeared tame and commonplace, poor in colouring, and sadly deficient in incident and interest'.¹³ Early reviewers were indeed reserved in their praise owing to the fact that Austen 'confined herself [...] to a narrow walk'.¹⁴ Though an admirer of her work, in what Brian Southam describes as his 'great appraisal',¹⁵ G. H. Lewes argued in 1859 that Austen's 'place is among great artists, but it is not high among them' largely because 'her dramas are of a homely common quality'.¹⁶ While the homebound nature of her works won her some appreciation with critics praising the appropriate femininity of the author or valuing the truth of portraiture in her

¹⁰ This description by Austen-Leigh, and the significance of Austen's writing spaces in establishing her reputation as leisured and domestic more widely, are discussed in Jennie Batchelor, 'The Romantic Novelist and the Scene of Writing: Making Space for the Material in Women's Literary History' (Unpublished paper, April 2012).

¹¹ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-134 (pp. 81-2, 90, 19, 18).

¹² Caroline Austen, 'My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir' (1867) in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163-82 (p. 182).

¹³ Austen-Leigh, p. 104.

¹⁴ 'Notice of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*', *Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*, 2 (1818), 453-55 (p. 454).

¹⁵ Brian Southam, *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, 2 vols, ed. by B. C. Southam (London: Routledge, 1979), I, p. 148.

¹⁶ G. H. Lewes, 'The Novels of Jane Austen', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 86 (1859), 99-113 (pp. 113, 102).

portrayals, early impressions of her limitedness were only strengthened by new biographical knowledge. In a review of Austen-Leigh's biography Richard Simpson, while on the one hand praising Austen for being 'always a lady', like Lewes summarises:

She never aspired higher than to paint a system of four or five families revolving round a centre of attraction in a country mansion [...]. This was, indeed, the only society she knew. Her name therefore, though great in a history of literature, counts for nothing in the history of men of letters.¹⁷

This view of Austen as limited by the domestic confinement of her fictional worlds, though at times more sympathetically delineated, went on to dominate late-Victorian commentary on her fiction.¹⁸

It is ironic, however, that while perceptions of the homebound nature of Austen's novels generated criticism from the critical establishment, her connection to the home was so central to popular perceptions of Austen that developed apace in the wake of the *Memoir*.¹⁹ Austen's own domestic dwellings are, for instance, at the heart of *Jane Austen: Her Homes & Her Friends* (1902), an admiring work by early 'Janeite' Constance Hill. In seeking to visit the places she inhabited, Hill signalled the belief that Austen's homes are the key to uncovering the true Austen as well as the meaning of her fiction.²⁰ The endurance of such views is evidenced in the continued popularity of Austen tourism, a phenomenon recently looked at with some suspicion by Claudia Johnson.²¹ As Deidre Lynch and Kathryn Sutherland, along with Johnson, have shown, the perception of Austen's connection to ideas of home was deepened further in the interwar period in Britain. 'Austen's home-loving attachment to a green nook was an article of faith with interwar commentators', writes

¹⁷ Richard Simpson, 'Jane Austen', *North British Review*, 52 (1870), 129-52 (pp. 152, 129).

¹⁸ See, Lawrence W. Mazzeno, *Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2011), pp. 21-26.

¹⁹ For detailed discussion see: Claire Harman, *Jane's Fame: How Jane Austen Conquered the World* (London: Canongate, 2009); Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen's Cults and Cultures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012); and Kathryn Sutherland, *Jane Austen's Textual Lives: From Aeschylus to Bollywood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁰ Constance Hill, *Jane Austen: Her Homes and Her Friends* (London and New York: John Lane, 1902). Johnson discusses this work in *Cults and Cultures*, pp. 69-74.

²¹ See, *Cults and Cultures*, pp. 153-79.

Lynch.²² With each ‘hermetically sealed’ novel, as one commentator put it, Austen was seen ‘to make us a new kingdom of refuge from the toils and frets of life’. For readers of this period her novels ‘represent[ed] specific qualities denoting cultural or national survival’;²³ more than simply being novels about home in the personal sense, they came to offer a reassuring symbol of ‘England as home’.²⁴ This attitude was memorialised famously in Rudyard Kipling’s short story ‘The Janeites’ (1924) in which, for a group of World War I soldiers, ‘re-reading the novels is a means of recovering home’.²⁵

While the all-consuming nature of the association between Austen and the home renders her something of a special case, this reception has its roots in a wider connection between women and the domestic in the period. Austen’s career coincided with what has long been cited as the historical moment when, for middle-class women in particular, female ties to the home were culturally reinforced. ‘Separate spheres theory’ as a model for understanding gender relations from the late eighteenth-century onwards was propounded in a number of historical works throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962, trans. 1989) Jürgen Habermas influentially characterised the public sphere of the eighteenth century as an entirely masculine arena.²⁶ Studies of the family such as Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (1977) and later Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall’s *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987) moreover depict the home overall as the private, labour-free domain of the female. While Davidoff and Hall note that the categories of public and private were complex and observe women’s role in

²² Deirdre Lynch, ‘At Home with Jane Austen’, in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, ed. by Deirdre Lynch and William B. Warner (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 159-92 (p. 188).

²³ Sutherland, pp. 48, 16.

²⁴ Lynch, p. 163.

²⁵ Sutherland, p. 51.

²⁶ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

‘family enterprise’, they assert that ‘women [were] conceptually relegated’ to the home from the late eighteenth-century onwards.²⁷

Several scholars have, in recent decades, sought to contest the notion that rigidly separate public and private domains came into being for men and women. Amanda Vickery has for example problematised the timelines used by historians such as Davidoff and Hall. For Vickery, the notion that women ‘were uniquely fashioned for the private realm’ was ‘at least as old as Aristotle’ and therefore nothing new in the eighteenth century.²⁸ The assumption that middle-class women were confined to the private sphere also ignores the views of women at the time who felt that they could go out in ‘publick’. Works like Stone’s, she argues furthermore, presuppose a leisure/labour division between the sexes that ignores the work done by women at home and beyond.²⁹ Likewise dismissive of an over-simplistic separate spheres paradigm, Harriet Guest looks at female authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More and posits that in the period ‘some women [...] define[d] their gendered identities through the nature and degree of their approximation to the public identities of political citizens’.³⁰ In a similar vein, Anne Mellor has made the case that ‘women, both as writers and as educators, philanthropists, and social reformers, participated fully in the discursive public sphere and in the formation of public opinion’.³¹

More recently, Karen Harvey’s work has complicated the view of the femininity of domestic space by arguing for the recognition of men’s close relationship to domesticity in the period. In doing so, she makes the useful (though somewhat overlapping) distinction

²⁷ Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987), revised edn (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 25, 29.

²⁸ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 6.

²⁹ ‘Golden Age’, pp. 412, 406.

³⁰ Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 14.

³¹ Anne K. Mellor, *Mothers of the Nation: Women’s Political Writing in England, 1780-1830* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 3. Mellor outlines these ‘separate spheres’ debates in full in her Introduction.

between ‘home’ and ‘house’. ‘Home’, she states, bears ‘connotations of a private and feminine space opposed to an ‘outside’ and public world’; it is ‘associated with ‘emotional and physical comfort, family intimacy, and personal attachment’’. ‘House’ signifies a masculine space that was both a ‘repository of emotional and psychological meanings’ for men and allowed them to construct an ordered private life consistent with and supportive of a life as a public citizen. Harvey summarises: ‘The house was critical to private and public constructions of self-identity for men as they constructed a family self’.³² Domestic space – or the house/home – was then a politically-loaded zone crucial to the formulation of both male and female identity in the period. Whilst recognising the importance of domesticity to men, it is this notion of ‘home’ that is of most concern in its thesis as a term signifying the ideological importance of the family house to women.

Overall, it is clear from the evidence presented by Vickery, Mellor, Guest, and Harvey that it is far too simplistic to say that there was a ‘hegemonic ‘domestic ideology’ absorbed by all members of the middle-class from the late eighteenth-century onwards.’³³ Nonetheless, as each of these scholars concedes, the gendered categories of a masculine public and feminine privacy were loosely accurate.³⁴ As Vickery details throughout *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England* (1998), in this period women were by and large tied to the domestic sphere in their day-to-day roles as daughters, wives, mothers, and housekeepers and had far fewer social freedoms than men. Moreover, as they each point out, while women may have had some access to public life, they were not

³² Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 12-13, 138.

³³ Mellor, p. 7.

³⁴ Mellor does not argue completely against separate spheres, but rather claims that the gendered categories of public and private are ‘binary, over simplistic’ and need to be readdressed to allow for more nuance, p. 7. Guest similarly argues not against these categories, but for their over-simplicity, stating that from the late eighteenth-century onwards ‘small changes’ occurred to adjust women’s role in relation to the public sphere, p. 15. Vickery also concedes that: ‘The public/private dichotomy may [...] serve as a loose description of a very long-standing difference between the lives of women and men’, ‘Golden Age’, p. 411. Furthermore, while Harvey argues for men’s connection to the ‘house’, she suggests this relationship was ‘centred on the household and its economic and political functions’ and therefore far more public in nature than women’s ties to ‘home’, p. 13.

permitted ‘the full rights of citizenship’ as middle-class men were.³⁵ This era did not, then, explicitly mark the domestication of women, but instead the continuation of a long-existent model of gender relations. Yet even if there was no seismic shift in gender roles in the period, it was certainly a time of fervent debate on the matter in which the dominant voices were those ‘broadcasting of the language of separate spheres’.³⁶ Vickery contends that this ‘rising tide of [...] [conservative] conduct literature’ reinforcing female privacy was, amongst other factors, a response to ‘an unprecedented *expansion* in the opportunities, ambitions and experience of late Georgian and Victorian women’.³⁷ Regardless of the reasons behind the literature promoting domestic ideology, or any dissenting voices, such was the cultural power it wielded that ‘at the turn of the [nineteenth] century’, according to Guest, ‘it masqueraded as a show of consensus’.³⁸

Thus, though convincingly contested by scholars, the model of separate spheres still has a heavy bearing on how we view gender in the period. Given both that she wrote at a moment when middle-class female domestication is widely thought to have occurred, and that she engaged closely with the home in her fiction, these debates are of particular relevance to Austen. It is not my intention in this thesis, however, to uphold the separate spheres paradigm in relation to her fiction. Austen supports the evidence shown by Vickery and others of the non-rigidity of public and private spheres and that women were not absolutely confined to the home. Conservative conduct books, she shows, in moments such as Lydia’s dismissal of James Fordyce’s *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), were neither mindlessly absorbed nor a reflection of reality. What I demonstrate, in light of these scholars’ arguments, is that as an author writing about the home

³⁵ ‘Public life for Georgian gentlemen invariably assumed the taking of office, but there was no formal place for their wives in the machinery of local government’, *Gentleman’s Daughter*, p. 7.

³⁶ Guest notes that there was ‘widespread debate about the nature of domesticity and the public and private roles of women’, p. 14.

³⁷ ‘Golden Age’, pp. 400, 407, 400.

³⁸ Guest, p. 14.

in this period Austen's work inevitably is political. The home as the primary domain for women, these scholars show, was a contested proposition, rather than simply a given. Undoubtedly there were a proliferation of materials, including Fordyce's, trying to make the case that femininity went hand in hand with the domestic. In the wake of the French Revolution, the home and women's role in it was given an added importance by conservative commentators as a symbol of tradition and national stability.³⁹ Equally, numerous works challenged the ideas of Fordyce and others, with pro-revolutionaries such as Wollstonecraft seizing the moment to advocate for an end to female homebound passivity. By taking up the subject of home, therefore, Austen enters an active field of public debate at a pivotal cultural moment. She does so in order to tackle domestic ideology as a system seeking to ingrain further what was historically a limited homebound existence for women. Her novels, I will show, problematise both the treatment of white bourgeois women within this ideology as well as their association more generally with the home.

Criticism and Austen's 'silence'

Austen scholars have traditionally been divided between those that view the author as one of the conservative voices that sought to promote a separate spheres ideology, and those who in contrast view her as subversive, or feminist in her views. Austen's apparent 'silence' on political matters, or subjects which in any way fell outside of the definition of what was appropriately feminine such as sex or the body, has been integral to the conservative case. Her silence has been seen as all the more pronounced given that she wrote during a time of great political turmoil; the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, the abolition of slavery

³⁹ Austen mocks this attitude in *Catharine, or the Bower* (1792) through Mrs Percival. Revealingly, her anxieties about the political state of the nation run in parallel to her fears regarding Catharine's seeming rejection of the teachings of domesticity. Reacting to Catharine's poor behaviour, she declares: 'I plainly see that every thing is going to sixes and sevens and all order will soon be at an end throughout the Kingdom', Jane Austen, *Catharine, or the Bower* (1792) in *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 186-229 (p. 222).

and the rights of women are some of the major contemporary matters with which she seems actively to refuse to engage. Caroline Austen claims to have searched for evidence of ‘Austen’s opinions on the great public events of her time’, but ‘found absolutely nothing!’⁴⁰ Despite such claims, in the second half of the twentieth century there was a shift towards increasing recognition of Austen’s subversiveness.⁴¹ Responding to this shift, Alistair Duckworth sought to consolidate and re-examine Austen’s conservatism on the grounds of her insular concern with domestic life and exclusion of the outside world. In *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (1971) he argues that in the fiction ‘the estate [is] a metonym of an inherited culture endangered by forces from within and from without’ that Austen sought to protect.⁴² Following on from Duckworth, Marilyn Butler’s *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) signalled a turning point in Austen studies. While Butler makes a case for Austen’s silence, noting that the novels ‘do not mention the French Revolution and barely allude to the Napoleonic Wars’, she complicates the conservative argument and the traditional view of her insularity. Though Austen writes in a sanctioned feminine manner, choosing ‘to omit the sensuous’ in addition to overt references to politics, her novels are however actively part of wider contemporary political discourse, Butler contends. She writes: ‘her manner as a novelist is broadly that of the conservative Christian moralist of the 1790s’; in this way she formed part of the anti-Jacobin ‘movement that defines itself by its opposition to revolution’.⁴³

Embracing the idea of a political Austen put forward by Butler, feminist criticism from 1970s onwards has sought to challenge the notion of her conservatism. In order to do so, scholars needed to contend with Austen’s silence on political subjects and commitment to

⁴⁰ Caroline Austen, p. 173.

⁴¹ Mazzeno, p. 77.

⁴² Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1971), p. 71.

⁴³ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 294, 295, 164, 122.

conveying domestic privacy. One strategy has been to suggest that depicting the lives of women at home is itself a political move. Amongst the earliest of the works to make this claim was Julia Prewitt Brown's *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (1979). Brown positions Austen as a forerunner of the feminist movement and suggests that in focusing solely on home life she boldly presents female domesticity as a serious subject in literature.⁴⁴ In *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (1983) Margaret Kirkham, too, seeks to deny that Austen's narrowness of subject makes her a supporter of the gendered status quo. Looking at her novels in the context of eighteenth-century feminist debates, she claims that 'Austen's subject-matter is the central subject-matter of rational, or Enlightenment, feminism'.⁴⁵ More recently Devoney Looser's *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism* (1995) has also sought to remind us that '[d]espite the long-standing tradition of seeing Austen as 'apolitical', because her work 'contain[s] significant commentary on what it means to perform the subject position 'woman' (primarily British white heterosexual 'middle-class' woman) in her day', it is inevitably in tune with feminist politics.⁴⁶

Other attempts to reconcile Austen's subversive attitude with her domestic insularity have effectively placed the author in the category of what Looser has called 'sneaky feminism'. According to this model, critics such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and Mary Poovey regard Austen as 'using traditional romance plots to soften her ironic and perhaps more radical feminist messages'.⁴⁷ Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar argue in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) that Austen's 'cover story' of 'ladylike discretion' and use of 'parodic strategies' allows her to be 'rigorous in her revolt against the conventions she

⁴⁴ Julia Prewitt Brown, *Jane Austen's Novels: Social Change and Literary Form* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

⁴⁵ Margaret Kirkham, *Jane Austen, Feminism and Fiction* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1983; repr. London: The Athlone Press, 1997), p. xxi.

⁴⁶ Devoney Looser, 'Introduction', in *Jane Austen and Discourses of Feminism*, ed. by Devoney Looser (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), pp. 1-18 (p. 9).

⁴⁷ Looser, p. 5.

inherited'.⁴⁸ Less convinced of her rebelliousness, Poovey claims in *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer* (1984) that Austen accepted separate spheres, but sought 'the reformation of propriety in the hope of finding within its codes an acceptable form for a woman's desires'.⁴⁹ Falling largely within the paradigm of covert feminism, Johnson's *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (1988) presents an influential reaction to works such as Butler's. Developing upon Poovey's position in particular, Johnson contends that Austen was no 'radical', but instead 'defended and enlarged a progressive middle ground'. She asserts that Austen's 'apparent 'silence' on matters political is a creditable choice of strength rather than a decorous concession to 'feminine' weakness or ignorance'. In appearing to adopt a conservative stance, she is able to avoid association with the 'desperate tempos' of contemporary polemicists, whilst still being committed to 'uncovering the ideological underpinnings of cultural myths'.⁵⁰

While these critics have been right in seeking to realign Austen's politics post-Butler, none, I would argue, has been able sufficiently to explain the extent of Austen's 'silence' or narrowness in light of her apparently progressive views. In suggesting Austen's domestic focus made her work by default feminist, or else claiming it is a shield behind which to advance subversive ideas, feminist scholars have failed to engage as fully with the subject of the home as the fiction demands. One scholar to have addressed this critical dearth is Nancy Armstrong in the seminal *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987). Armstrong argues that from the mid-eighteenth century onwards 'respectable' fiction alongside conduct literature partook in 'a cultural project' to promote domestic ideology. '[W]riting invaded, revised, and contained the household' in order to distinguish it from the

⁴⁸ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 119-20.

⁴⁹ Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 241.

⁵⁰ Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 166, xxv, 27.

political world and designate it as the woman's sphere. In doing so writers established the home as an arena in which to form the ideals of the emerging middle-class that was overseen by women. Austen's 'self-enclosure' in her fiction, which Armstrong admits is more pronounced than other authors', is thus a political move that empowers middle-class women in their new domestic roles.⁵¹ I agree with Armstrong's assessment of Austen's fiction as presenting unusually self-contained models of home life that engage in depth with domestic ideology and, as such, this thesis owes a debt to *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Yet I argue throughout that Armstrong however draws the wrong conclusions from Austen's strategy of containment. Her wider interpretation of domestic ideology as presenting a path towards female empowerment is a paradigm that is simply not upheld by Austen's novels. As I will show throughout the thesis, her female characters are frequently not empowered figures, nor does Austen show separation from the political sphere to be entirely positive. On the whole, Austen is far more emphatically critical of domestic ideology than Armstrong's analysis allows.

Austen as domestic theorist

This study offers a fresh interpretation of Austen's silence on political or 'unfeminine' matters as a non-conservative strategy. While I position my thesis alongside scholars such as Johnson who have seen Austen's politics as feminist, I also accept that the traditional view of Austen's conservatism based on her insularity is not entirely unfounded. Compared with her contemporaries, such as Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth, who were themselves by no means perceived as radicals, Austen's domestic worlds are, undeniably, strikingly confined.⁵²

⁵¹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 14, 123, 31, 141.

⁵² Heroines in Burney's novels frequently travel widely, though not unproblematically. Juliet, the heroine of *The Wanderer* (1814) goes furthest in travelling from France to England at the start of the novel. Maria Edgeworth, too refused to be tied to concerns of domesticity, writing in a range of genres alongside her domestic novels which include *Belinda* (1801) and *Helen* (1831). Even in these works, she writes about women who are pulled away from and fail to prioritise their domestic lives.

As Austen summarises in a mocking reference to her own novelistic enterprise: ‘3 or 4 Families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on’.⁵³ The deliberate nature of her enclosure has led scholars to the widespread conclusion that Austen was preserving accurate portraits of domestic life for the benefit of posterity. Margaret Drabble writes for instance that ‘Austen [...] portrays her own society so faithfully that she preserves it as a valid object for later historical analysis’.⁵⁴ I wish to reframe this view to show that Austen reflects society – and in particular female domestic life – for what was in fact a present-day examination. The impulse behind Austen’s narrow interests, I argue, is not to preserve the status quo, but is instead an urgent call to interrogate gendered norms.

It is Austen’s rare breaks in her silence that cause the conservative image of the author to unravel and alert us to the central critique within the fiction. Some recent scholars have rejected the Austen-and-silence thesis and built their arguments around these moments of seeming subversion in which subjects such as sex, or politics are mentioned. On the subject of the body, for instance, John Wiltshire’s *Jane Austen and the Body: ‘The Picture of Health’* (1992) argues that far from silent on the matter, the novels can be read entirely through the lens of the characters’ physical health. Looking at moments of innuendo such as the adulterous Maria Bertram being warned against ‘slipping into the Ha-Ha’ in *Mansfield Park* (1814),⁵⁵ Jill Heydt-Stevenson’s *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (2005) emphasises the presence of sexual comedy in the fiction.⁵⁶ Similarly arguing Austen to have been misjudged with accusations of silence, several scholars have also shown her engagement with controversial political topics of the day. Allowing her more agency in public debate than Butler’s work does, Gabrielle D. V.

⁵³ *Letters*, p. 275.

⁵⁴ Margaret Drabble, ‘Introduction’, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (London: Virago Press, 1989), pp. v-vxi (p. xii).

⁵⁵ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 93.

⁵⁶ John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: ‘The Picture of Health’* (1992) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

White has for example recently claimed in *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition* (2006) that several of the novels reveal abolitionist sympathies.⁵⁷ While these scholars note Austen's broad silences, their arguments fail fully to account for their pervasiveness and her far more comprehensive attention overall to domestic privacy than the body or politics.

Austen's breaks in silence on controversial subjects must be understood in the context of the silence itself. In fact, the momentary intrusions that allow the topics studied by these critics to surface are there in order to force us to confront what is otherwise the absence of these matters. Incidents such as Louisa's fall and injury in *Persuasion* (1818), or Fanny's question on the slave trade in *Mansfield Park* (1814), show us abruptly that despite appearances, Austen is interested in the female body and issues of wider political importance. Yet the sudden attention drawn to a Louisa's broken body or Sir Thomas's plantation does not reflect that Austen is engaged actively in debates on the subjects of female physicality or colonialism. When viewed against the backdrop of silence in the narrative these interventions serve to highlight women's disconnection from the body and slave trade respectively. What Austen seeks to convey in her novels, then, is women's enforced cultural silence. Her novels, I will demonstrate, are meditations on home life under the sway of domestic ideology and its ideals of gender, according to which women are severed from interaction with events of the outside world, and even themselves. Rather than upholding boundaries for women through her silences, Austen recreates them in order to expose their harmfulness.

The most damaging results of this state of domestic disconnection are, according to Austen, the limitations placed upon the scope of female selfhood. In prescribing set behaviours, activities and personality traits, works promoting domestic ideology promoted a uniform model of femininity that imposed itself upon the lives of women. Setting out narrow

⁵⁷ Gabrielle D. V. White, *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: 'A Fling at the Slave Trade'* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

fields of permissible knowledge and life experience, these works sought to inhibit women intellectually, offering them in ways of thinking about the world and themselves. In being ideologically associated with the privacy of home women were, moreover, cut off from the right to a status as a public citizen. As the difficulties of *Persuasion*'s Mrs Smith show, for instance, women were excluded from having easy access to paid employment and participation in political affairs, all facets of life which would radically alter the idea of the self. In revealing Austen to have concerns in this area, I am of course showing her to be in dialogue with the feminist discourse of the period. As I will demonstrate throughout the following chapters, the recognition of women's educational disadvantage and a desire for their greater public power are views that bring Austen into dialogue with Wollstonecraft in particular. By viewing Austen's narratives of female identity in these terms, my argument diverges from those who have viewed her fiction as part of the bildungsroman tradition. According to these scholars, Austen's novels chart the progress of a female protagonist's overcoming of personal flaws in order to recognise her true self. Butler notes how heroines often 'begin in intellectual error, brought about in Catherine by immaturity and false lights, but in Elizabeth and Emma by [...] pride and presumption. In these three novels the denouement follows the heroine's discovery of her mistake'.⁵⁸ But what Austen is doing differs subtly, yet crucially, from this long-held perception. What the novels instead detail are quiet struggles against the societal restraints that prevent women from truly knowing themselves. While characters may overcome flaws, this thesis will show, these are not innate

⁵⁸ Butler argues that Austen's plots fall into two categories, those 'built about the Heroine who is Right and the Heroine who is wrong. [...] The Heroines who are Wrong arrive at this state of true understanding only late in the day [...]. The moment of self-discovery and self-abasement, followed by the resolve in future to follow reason, is the climactic moment of the majority of anti-jacobin novels', p. 166. Similarly, Jane Spencer places Austen in the field of didactic fiction, arguing that her novels reflect '[t]he tradition of the reformed heroine'. 'Austen advocated self-knowledge and shows her heroines reaching it through introspection', she writes, Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 177, 175-76.

problems of personality, but rather testament to wider issues that have hampered their psychological development.

To summarise, through use of techniques, among which silence is paramount, Austen recreates domestic conditions for women in order to expose them as limiting the scope of their knowledge, development and selfhood. With her portrayal of enclosed domestic worlds, Austen disrupts conceptions of female middle-class existence in order to offer an alternative and often troubled vision of the reality and repercussions of conventional domesticity. In doing so, I will demonstrate, she positions herself within the world of fiction as a domestic theorist. It has long been recognised in studies of the history of the novel that Austen's major contributions to the form were stylistic. In *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) Ian Watt argues that along with Burney, Austen inherits her subject matter, the 'minute presentation of daily life', from Richardson. Her innovation, he suggests, comes in the form of her 'technical genius' in narration or, as he describes, her use of what would later be known as 'free indirect discourse'.⁵⁹ Feminist critics have also honed in on the importance of this technique in allowing female subjectivity to take centre stage. Kirkham for instance notes 'her achievement in the development of the 'indirect free style' through which she was increasingly able to show the rational mental powers of her individual heroines'.⁶⁰ Unmistakeably Austen is consciously making an active intervention in the genre of the novel with her fiction. Along with her narrative style, Austen shows this intervention through references to her 'injured body' of fellow novelists such as Edgeworth and Burney and an overt rumination on the status of the novel in chapter five of *Northanger Abbey* (1818).⁶¹ But,

⁵⁹ He writes that within the narration 'there is usually one character whose consciousness is tacitly accorded a privileged status [...] but the identification [with one major character] is always qualified by the other role of the narrator acting as a dispassionate analyst', Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957; repr. London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. 296-97. In his book on the subject, Roy Pascal also lists her amongst first to use this technique, Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth-century European Novel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 45-60.

⁶⁰ Kirkham, p. xxvii.

⁶¹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 36-37.

in celebrating Austen's originality, what has been largely overlooked by scholars is her subject matter. My thesis will show that Austen's treatment of the home is a crucial aspect of the ground-breaking nature of her work. Not only does she theorise domesticity, but in adapting the form according to this unique enterprise, Austen, in effect, theorises the novel itself.

In Chapter 1 I begin by assessing Austen's portrayal of women's leisure. So often given as the reason for her novels' unimportance or frivolousness, leisure I will show is a serious subject for Austen rather than just the default substance of genteel home life. By critiquing the manner in which conservative prescriptive literature sought to manage women's time, Austen reconceptualises genteel leisure. But her critique is more complex than a disapproval of conduct literature or the set activities themselves. Instead, through her characters Austen condemns societal use of these activities in the mode of 'female accomplishments' to control and monitor behaviour. In encouraging women always to be active in the pursuit of heightening their appeal on the marriage market, accomplishments are a source of anxiety to women. This anxiety is clear, for example, in Emma Woodhouse's fear that she has practiced the piano insufficiently and sense of competition with Jane Fairfax, or in Mary Bennet's near-obsessive desire to compensate for her lack of beauty through exhibiting her accomplishments. I subsequently look at how following marriage, or when women reach an age at which it is presumed they have failed to marry, this pressure shifts to a need to be constantly useful in the household. The main tragedy of the character of Miss Bates, I suggest, lies in her desperation to be socially useful and yet impotence when it comes to being so. Ultimately, Austen moves towards the suggestion that female talents might have been used for ends of establishing individuality, rather than keeping women within a set mould of active femininity.

Chapter 2 builds on Chapter 1 to examine how the prescribed activities within the home affect women's understanding of the body. An always-controlled level of activity was teamed with a corresponding need for women, according to conduct books, to appear attractive and an inability to exercise freely or robustly within the realms of propriety. Austen's fiction makes the case that these conditions of domestic life work to create a female disconnection from the reality of their body. Rather than a full consciousness of their own physicality, there is amongst characters a prevalent belief in, as it is termed in *Persuasion*, 'a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental'.⁶² Following this logic, characters seem to accept ideas of female delicacy propagated by conservative literature, ignoring the truth of the body. What is, in effect, women's psychic repression of the body is represented throughout the fiction by Austen's famed silence regarding physicality. This silence is broken in moments of injury in which corporeal reality arrives abruptly at the forefront of character consciousness, for instance when Marianne finally falls fatally ill in *Sense and Sensibility*. The real harm however is that in not knowing the body, women do not know a fundamental part of the self. Achieving a full understanding of the self, as female characters so often do towards the end of the novels, therefore requires for Austen a rediscovery of the body.

In Chapter 3 I readdress Austen's use of silence in terms of politics. This chapter looks at the gulf between permissible male and female experience as depicted in the novels and the difficulties this causes on both a personal and political level. On a personal level, female confinement and an often-resulting lack of knowledge causes difficulties in romantic relationships. We see this recurring plot device for example in Mr Bingley's abrupt departure and the subsequent distress of Jane Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. On a wider level, women are excluded from involvement and influence in the political sphere. This broad separation of gendered worlds is neatly summarised at the beginning of *Mansfield Park* when the Bertram

⁶² Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 218.

women remove to the country while Sir Thomas remains in London ‘to attend his duty in Parliament’.⁶³ As with the body, Austen’s silences regarding politics signal and challenge a troubling, culturally-predicated female ignorance. Breaks in this silence on political, ‘masculine’ subjects, again, work sharply to reveal this female disconnection. This kind of revelatory moment happens most famously and overtly with Fanny’s undefined question to her uncle about the slave trade. Examining the novel at length, I will look at how through *Mansfield Park* especially Austen raises the question of the implications of female political exclusion for women’s moral agency. More widely, drawing upon Austen’s interest in the subject of history and history books in the fiction, I make the case that through her use of silence Austen offers an alternative to histories of male activity by documenting female exclusion.

The final two chapters re-examine subjects that have long been at the centre of Austen criticism: houses and marriage. Beginning with houses in Chapter 4, I will look at the lack of description of domestic interiors and exteriors in the novels. It is deeply ironic that Austen should be so known for writing about the home, and yet in this sense, neglect the subject entirely. Despite the strangeness of her omission of domestic detail, the fiction’s limited description has received surprisingly little critical attention thus far.⁶⁴ I argue that for Austen domestic description is a silence no less meaningful than those regarding the body or politics. Her breaks in silence, as with these other subjects, are moments of symbolic significance. Developing Duckworth’s notion of the estate being representative of the status quo, I contend that in line with Austen’s central critique houses are symbolic of domestic ideology. Heroines’ viewing the homes of (potential) lovers, as famously occurs with Elizabeth viewing Pemberley, is most commonly when Austen’s silence on domestic detail is broken.

⁶³ *Mansfield Park*, p. 20.

⁶⁴ As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, Austen is revealingly almost entirely excluded from scholarly works on description and eighteenth-century fiction.

These episodes are significant in foreshadowing women moving from one house to another, or figuratively as I suggest, moving from one set domestic identity to the next. Given the house's symbolic meaning, efforts to rearrange homes or create spaces of their own, as Fanny does for example with the East room, should be read as attempts to establish individuality under the limitations of cultural requirements. Rebellions of identity, in other words, often manifest as spatial resistance in the fiction.

Lastly I will turn to the most obvious Austenian theme of all, marriage, and its role in the novels' endings and domestic resolutions. Though marriage is so widely addressed in criticism of the fiction, conventional interpretations of this subject have yet to be sufficiently revised in recent studies. Critics generally seem still loosely to subscribe to the notion of heroines being 'rewarded' with a husband at the end of each novel as a result of individual progress.⁶⁵ It is my contention that Austen ends in marriage not as a neat resolution to the problems raised in the novel, but to emphasise that matrimony is the point at which the domestic ideal has been fulfilled and women's futures are set. My argument will suggest that Austen is deeply preoccupied with the illusory nature of the domestic ideal women are taught to achieve. Her novels are filled with examples of unhappily married women. Mrs Bennet is perhaps the most famous example of this, though the perpetually ignored Mrs Palmer in *Sense and Sensibility* is arguably the most unsettling. Alongside these marriages, Austen also leaves her central married couples, suggestively, with unresolved issues. Owing to the call of his naval duties, Anne has been left by Wentworth at the close of *Persuasion* and *Mansfield Park* leaves the question of Edmund's attraction to Mary Crawford lingering over his union with Fanny. Young women's absolute conditioning towards the eventuality of marriage as

⁶⁵ This view has long dominated readings of the novels, particularly those featuring what Butler refers to as 'The Heroines who are Wrong', p. 166. Despite her innovative approach to the novels, Johnson for example still refers to 'Elizabeth's reward – Pemberley and Darcy' in *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, p. 142. The ongoing prevalence of this reading in criticism is discussed in the Introduction to Michael Kramp, *Disciplining Love: Austen and the Modern Man* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2007), pp. 4-5.

their ‘happy ending’ in spite of the evident precariousness of the domestic ideal is an acute point of concern for Austen. In highlighting this problem, her novels implicitly criticise the inability of female destiny to unfold beyond the boundaries of domestic ideology.

In making these claims, I argue that Austen’s works amount to a project to theorise domesticity in ways that develop and become more sophisticated over the course of her career. More can be seen, I contend, when looking at the patterns in the fiction – after all, Austen is thought to have been often working on more than one novel at once⁶⁶ – than with a rigid approach that isolates each novel. Correspondingly, I will also move away from the tendency to grant the heroines of the novels near-exclusive critical attention. Avoiding examining the main characters in isolation, I will offer a more balanced treatment of secondary and minor female figures in the novels. Austen’s manner of writing from the point of view most often of the heroine of course suggests that we privilege them in our reading. Nevertheless, her characters are firmly a part of communities and we are required to treat them as such. Though not the focus of the novels, secondary characters are no less well-drawn within these communities than the heroines, and brief glimpses prove them to be equally psychologically rich. The shadowy yet intriguing Jane Fairfax is a prime example of a character who but for a shift in narrative perspective could be a heroine. Austen shows in the fiction that the problems faced by women under the influence of conservative domestic ideology are myriad and so uses an array of women’s lives to showcase them.

In summary, in its original claim for Austen as a theorist of domesticity, my research will bring together aspects of her aesthetic that scholarship has traditionally placed in contention: her insular focus on domestic life and subversive gender politics. I will explain Austen’s social critique in a way that fully accounts for the silence and emphasis on home life that is at

⁶⁶ Sutherland notes an ‘intense period’ ‘in 1811 [when] she had three novels on the go’, p. 124.

the heart of traditional conservative accounts of the fiction. Recognising that Austen's silence is crucial to her radical agenda, I demonstrate how she reimagines the novel as a forum for experimental interrogation of women's life in the home. The novels are hubs of scrutiny, I argue, in which Austen recreates the conditions set out by domestic ideology in order to expose the problematic pattern into which it tries to form female lives. Though building on the more recent endeavours in scholarship to dismantle Austen's still-rife conservative image, my thesis will revisit early assumptions about the author. As her editor stated in 1833, she 'struck into a path of her own' as 'the novelist of home'. Since this assertion there has been a general acceptance both in popular readership and scholarship of Austen's association with the home; the exact nature of this association has however remained as vague as it is inexorable. This thesis seeks finally to uncover Austen's relationship with the home as revealed in the fiction. Rather than writing about domesticity because it came naturally to her, or as an endorsement, Austen sets out to show that restrictive home life is far from natural for women. By revealing the multitude of ways in which female development is inhibited by psychological and physical confines repeatedly in her novels, Austen marks herself firmly as an authority on the home.

Chapter 1

‘Activity run mad!’: Accomplishments and the inconspicuous labour of female leisure

In *his* chamber, Emma was at peace from the dreadful mortifications of unequal Society, and family Discord—from the immediate endurance of Hard-hearted prosperity, low-minded Conceit, and wrong-headed folly, engrafted on an untoward Disposition.—She still suffered from them in the Contemplation of their existence; in memory and in prospect, but for the moment, she ceased to be tortured by their effects.—She was at leisure, she could read and think,—tho’ her situation was hardly such as to make reflection very soothing.¹

Jane Austen, *The Watsons* (composed 1804)²

Jane should therefore make the most of every half hour in which she can command his attention. When she is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chuses.³

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

To understand, thoroughly understand her own heart, was the first endeavour. To that point went every leisure moment which her father's claims on her allowed [...].⁴

Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815)

In the rare moments that they have personal space or mental liberty, Austen suggests that her characters can finally be at leisure. In each of the above quotations, women’s leisure is discussed in the context of characters trying to navigate their future within the limited array of options available to them. We see, in the first example, Emma Watson reflecting upon her situation in which she has been made to return to a family that cannot afford to support her financially and from whom she has become estranged. In the extract from *Pride and*

¹ Jane Austen, *The Watsons* (1804) in *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*, ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 251-92 (p. 290). All subsequent references are to this edition.

² Claudia Johnson notes that while ‘probably written on paper watermarked 1803, [...] scholars believe that it [*The Watsons*] was actually begun in 1804’. Claudia L. Johnson, ‘Introduction’ in *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*, ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. vii-xxxiv (p. xxix).

³ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 23. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815) (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 386. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Prejudice, Charlotte is stressing the urgency of shrewdness for women in the marriage market; until a suitable match has been made in economic terms, she instructs, Jane cannot afford to expend time attending to emotional considerations. Lastly, we learn that for the eponymous Emma self-reflection must, in light of her nursing and other duties towards her father, necessarily be a secondary consideration. With Austen thus isolating brief moments, or future periods of time, in which these women are able to be at leisure, it is clear that it is inaccurate to characterise their general existences as ones of ‘leisure’. Moreover, when they have sufficient peace or solitude to render the term ‘leisure’ appropriate according to Austen, this time must be employed towards serious thought and consideration that they would otherwise be unable to carry out. So rare are such moments of female solitude in Austen’s work, and so often are her women seen to be engaged in social activities, that Austen’s novels have been widely perceived as fictionalised accounts of leisure time. In so far as it signals that the lives of Austen’s principal characters (within the boundaries of her narratives at least) are defined by the absence of paid work, describing their time as leisure is useful. Yet these glimpses of true respite, in which Austen’s women are nonetheless still forced to conduct much of their mental and emotional work, call for the complexity of this leisure to be recognised.

Typically, the concept of eighteenth-century leisure has been defined in terms less complex than Austen’s fiction suggests. For Theodor Adorno, leisure ‘denoted the privilege of an unconstrained, comfortable life-style, hence something [...] far more auspicious’ than the more modern concept of ‘free time’ which is tied to its opposite, work.⁵ This view of leisure as distinct from work is upheld by Austen critics, including Nancy Armstrong, who has sought to demonstrate that a leisured existence was at the heart of the middle-class

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Free Time’, in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. by J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 187-97 (p. 187).

domestic ideal that defined the late eighteenth-century woman.⁶ Historical scholarship on domesticity, in particular Amanda Vickery's *The Gentleman's Daughter* (1998) and Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's *Family Fortunes* (1987), has challenged this analysis. Detailing women's involvement in family enterprise and the frequently strenuous role of the female household manager, these studies prove that women's lives, though ostensibly 'leisured', were by no means devoid of labour. As this chapter will show, by depicting the psychic struggles endured by her female characters, Austen's intention is to reveal that hard work, rather than Adorno's 'true leisure', is at the heart of genteel domesticity. Though my reading of Austen's work shows Adorno's definition of leisure to be reductive, his manner of understanding 'free time' as 'unfreedom' remains useful. According to Adorno, for the modern 'functionally determined' middle-class, employment casts a long shadow over the 'free time' to which it is 'shackled'. In being thus defined in relation to work, free time never means actual freedom and does not fully belong to the individual.⁷ For Austen's women time is not divided so clearly along these lines. However, in falling under the general category of 'leisure', Austen shows how the time enjoyed by her female characters is tied to the work, mapped out in conduct literature, of forwarding the cultural project of femininity.

The deep-seated critical association of Austen with leisure has its origins in the traditional perception of her authorship. James Edward Austen-Leigh's *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) characterised Austen as an author whose works were the products of her leisure. Her creative process was a passive one, he suggests, in which 'fancies' came to the author as she 'stroll[ed] along [...] wood-walks'. Austen-Leigh emphasises his point by couching details of Austen's writing activities within a broader discussion of the Austen women's leisure, commenting even on the author's level of ability in terms of female

⁶ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 75-76.

⁷ Adorno, pp. 187-88.

accomplishments ('not highly accomplished according to the present standard'). 'She wrote for her own amusement', he stresses, and was altogether unperturbed by her early struggles with publishers.⁸ While these ideas established an impression of Austen that was long-held – with Henry James, for instance, later describing the 'unconsciousness' of her artistry⁹ – many scholars have since made a convincing, and now critically assured, case for her professionalism. In 'A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings' (1940), Q. D. Leavis sought to dispel the notion that Austen's novels were somehow 'miracle[s]' born out of leisure by highlighting the author's hard work. Documenting Austen's extensive revisions to her novels, she showed that Austen 'was not an inspired amateur who had scribbled in childhood and then lightly tossed off masterpieces between callers; she was a steady professional writer who had to put in many years of thought and labour to achieve each novel'.¹⁰ Jan Fergus subsequently expanded on Leavis's argument, revealing how thoroughly Austen self-identified as a professional author.¹¹ Austen herself quashes any implication of writing being a mere past time in her famous comment to her nephew that her creations are akin to miniatures painted on a 'little bit (two Inches wide) of Ivory'. Even whilst making this ironic dismissal of her writing she nevertheless goes on to emphasise that her practice involves 'much labour'.¹²

In parallel to her authorship, Austen's intellectualism has been perceived to be bound by the concerns of domestic leisure. As Vivien Jones has noted regarding the reception of Austen's letters, critics have historically taken exception to Austen's attention to the 'Little Matters' of domesticity.¹³ Indeed, due to an apparent lack of depth and meaning in the novels,

⁸ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-134 (pp. 24, 70, 106).

⁹ Henry James, *The Question of Our Speech: The Lesson of Balzac: Two Lectures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1905), p. 63.

¹⁰ Q. D. Leavis, 'A Critical Theory of Jane Austen's Writings' (1941) in *A Selection from Scrutiny*, ed. by F. R. Leavis, 2 vols (London: Cambridge University Press, 1968), II, pp. 1-80 (p. 4).

¹¹ See, Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991).

¹² Jane Austen, *Jane Austen's Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 323.

¹³ Vivien Jones, 'Introduction', in *Selected Letters*, ed. by Jones, pp. ix-xxxv (p. ix).

it was a critical consensus as early as the end of the nineteenth century that there was little left to say on the author. Despite a revival of interest, ‘her lack of knowledge about finance, political power, and money’ continued to be derided into the next century.¹⁴ This supposed narrowness of interests has remained a touchstone for scholars arguing for the author’s conservatism. Even while asserting the centrality of economic concerns to her fiction, Edward Copeland portrays Austen as constrained, both creatively and in terms of her authorship, by an appropriately ‘feminine’ pre-occupation with domesticity. She felt distaste at the fact that her novels must enter into a public literary marketplace in which the antithetical ‘home and hearth’ they depicted could be sold ‘to any stranger with the price of a library ticket’; these fears and a desire to remain distinct from professional literary life, ‘kept the title page of Jane Austen’s novels ‘By a Lady’ all her life’. Like other genteel writers, Copeland claims, Austen’s fiction promoted leisure both for the reader in its subject matter and by helping financially to ‘secure the *author*’s means to a seat in the parlour’.¹⁵ In *Jane Austen and Leisure* (1999), David Selwyn likewise interchangeably references Austen’s own leisured life and the subject of leisure within her writing. He argues that in the novels leisure is defined by constant activity but indicates that work, in the traditional sense, only happens in the narrative periphery. ‘Real work’, it is to be inferred from Selwyn, is antithetical to leisure and, by extension, to Austen as ‘the novelist of leisure’.¹⁶

Alongside Austen’s indelible association with leisure, there has been a critical tendency discuss her work in relation to the conduct literature that sought to prescribe how women should occupy the vast ‘number of idle hours it was assumed [they] had to

¹⁴ Lawrence W. Mazzeno, *Jane Austen: Two Centuries of Criticism* (Suffolk: Camden House, 2011), pp. 24-26, 61.

¹⁵ Edward Copeland, *Women Writing about Money: Women’s Fiction in England 1790-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 191, 212.

¹⁶ David Selwyn, *Jane Austen and Leisure* (London: Hambledon Press, 1999), p. xi. Jennie Batchelor, ‘The Romantic Novelist and the Scene of Writing: Making Space for the Material in Women’s Literary History’ (Unpublished paper, April 2012), p. 13.

fill'.¹⁷ Though Marilyn Butler has done much to challenge Austen's insular reputation, she nevertheless argues that she bears 'the hallmarks of the conservative writer'. She likens her work to 'fictionalized conduct-book[s]', adding that 'Austen's achievement is to naturalize a didactic tradition'.¹⁸ Armstrong similarly implicates Austen in a wider trend of compliance between eighteenth and nineteenth-century domestic fiction and conduct book teachings. As 'the rules [...] laid out in the conduct books could be taken for granted' when she was writing, Armstrong implies, conduct literature exists as the subtext on which Austen's work is founded. She discusses how like 'in the conduct books, the problems to be confronted in the world Austen depicts all have to do with the management of leisure time'. In making this case, she looks in particular at *Emma* (1815) in which the heroine has been '[l]eft with too much leisure time on her hands' and a problematic lack of female desire. Austen, she writes, negotiates resolutions to the problems in her novels by, as conduct literature recommends, 'marrying off the eligible members within that community, which is to fix them to a role within a household'.¹⁹

While prominent scholars have thus contended that Austen develops upon the received wisdom of conduct books, her work has also been read as a critique of this genre. Susan Allen Ford has, for example, recently read *Northanger Abbey* (1818) as a novel that 'evokes instructive texts and calls into question their utility and their truth'.²⁰ In a series of paradigmatic episodes the novels do indeed seem to confront conduct literature directly. James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women* (1765) appears in *Pride and Prejudice* only to be rejected on behalf of the Bennet girls by Lydia who 'gaped as he [Mr Collins] opened the volume, and before he had, with very monotonous solemnity, read three pages, she

¹⁷ Armstrong, p. 75.

¹⁸ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 94, 98, 167.

¹⁹ Armstrong, pp. 63, 135, 151, 135.

²⁰ Susan Allen Ford, 'Ingenious Torments, or Reading Instructive Texts in *Northanger Abbey: The Mirror, The Rambler, and Conduct Books*' *Persuasions On-line* 31 (2010) <<http://www.jasna.org/persuasions/on-line/vol31no1/ford.html>> [accessed 8 December 2013].

interrupted him' (p. 67). Similarly, in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland is moments away from succumbing to her mother's attempt to resign her to domestic confinement by reading an essay from *The Mirror* (1779) when Henry Tilney arrives. However, rather than being moments reflective of a broader criticism of writers like Fordyce, I would suggest that these moments act as paradigmatic demonstrations of Austen's own strategy regarding conduct literature. Significantly, in each instance the actual content of these works is not granted any narrative space. The idea of instructive literature is introduced, it seems, for the very purpose of enacting a scene of dismissal, or, Austen's own authorial refusal to engage directly with these texts.

My contention is that the brief, disrupted interactions with conduct literature modelled in the scenes described above preclude any direct comparison between Austen's and conduct works. Rather than looking at her novels as hampered by extant theories on domestic leisure, or using conduct books as their 'frame of reference',²¹ I argue that Austen embarks upon a fresh examination of leisure. Vickery reminds us that alongside a proliferation of eighteenth-century writing defending the status quo with regards to domesticity, there were also 'many other ideological messages' available in literature.²² I suggest in this light that Austen enters into the enterprise of conduct writers, not as a fellow instructor, but as an alternative voice theorising female domestic leisure.

In outlining Austen's theorisation of leisure, this chapter explores how she illuminates the ways in which prevailing social attitudes to leisure were restrictive and often harmful for women. I begin by focusing on Austen's criticism of accomplishments' dominant place in female leisure. Reading her fiction alongside Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), I will examine Austen's depiction of accomplishments as cultural

²¹ Armstrong, p. 63.

²² Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 6-7.

tools designed to construct and constrain conventional femininity. She exposes the flaws in an ideology that represents accomplishments and therefore femininity as natural to women, as well as in the system that values them according to this perception. By advocating a universal ideal, Austen suggests, these activities fundamentally threaten individuality. Basing each her novels around unique and complex heroines whose thoughts and feelings drive the narrative, individuality is clearly a central concern in the fiction. In being designed to show adherence to a narrow ideal of femininity, accomplishments not only work to erase individual difference, but also serve to promote female competition and rivalry. In being used by women in courtship, accomplishments also offer the illusion of women having control over their sexuality. However in actuality, as we will see, the performance of accomplishments often hazardously limits their agency. Next, this chapter will discuss the pressure to avoid idleness by maintaining a suitable level of activity through accomplishments, or, as the alternative seemed to be, finding ways of being useful to others. Leisure according to this definition can be, somewhat paradoxically, anxiety inducing for women. The complicated dynamics of surveillance that exist within the home heighten this anxiety, with women acting either as overseers of activity, overseers-in-training, or being overseen. Emma Woodhouse in particular embodies a multitude of surveillance roles with difficulty. Finally, I want to assert that Austen does not simply offer a negative condemnation of accomplishments in her fiction. Through manipulation, genuine passion, or their use as a means of subsistence, accomplishments are repurposed for individual instead of cultural benefit. In showing accomplishments being redeployed in these ways, Austen elicits a subtle reimagining of women's leisure as time serving the needs of the individual.

Female accomplishments and the performance of femininity

The pursuit to become accomplished was expected to comprise the majority of genteel young women's leisure time in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Writing from this period from across the ideological spectrum collectively demonstrates this expectation, though attitudes to this prescribed behaviour vary greatly. Amongst other specific accomplishments, conduct-book writer Hester Chapone, in *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, addressed to a Young Lady* (1773), recommends 'music and drawing' as 'it is of great consequence to have the power of filling up agreeably those intervals of time, which too often hang heavily on the hands of a woman'.²³ In *Sermons*, the more conservative Fordyce similarly condemns 'vacancy of thought, and want of occupation, which expose the mind to every snare'. He maintains that such ills should be 'prevented by an early and diligent application to Female Accomplishments', which he 'divide[s] into three classes, Domestic, Elegant and Intellectual'.²⁴ Women, he expects, should be able to move seamlessly between these categories of activity on a day-to-day basis. As a vehement critic of Fordyce, Mary Wollstonecraft reacts in *The Rights of Woman* to a status quo founded on such advice. She laments that 'the little knowledge that they [women] are led to acquire, during the important years of youth, is merely relative to accomplishments'.²⁵ In answer to this perceived paucity of knowledge, Wollstonecraft's work outlines activities that would cultivate women's understanding as well as an alternative system of rational education. There can be no question that Austen, like Wollstonecraft, participates in the debate concerning female education and the appropriateness of accomplishments' dominant role therein;²⁶ the frequent allusions to

²³ Hester Chapone, *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, addressed to a Young Lady*, 2 vols (London: J. Walter, 1773), II, pp. 117, 118.

²⁴ James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), 12th edn, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, jun. and W. Davies, 1800), I, p. 162.

²⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1792), ed. by Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 63-283 (p. 255).

²⁶ This is apparent from early on in her writing career: 'Miss Stanley had been attended by the most capital Masters from the time of her being six years old to the last Spring, which comprehending a period of twelve Years had been dedicated to the acquirement of Accomplishments which were now to be displayed and in a few Years entirely neglected. [...] those Years

boarding schools and seminaries in her work alone alert us to this fact. Austen's views on the state of contemporary women's education is a subject that has nonetheless been well examined by scholars.²⁷ For the purposes of this study, I look at accomplishments in Austen's fiction as dominant components of female leisure that are, moreover, used as a means through which to regulate young women's lives.

Critics have often noted that their disparaging attitude towards accomplishments is a point of agreement between Austen and Wollstonecraft. Although contending overall that these writers hold fundamentally different views regarding the status quo, Jane Spencer indicates that 'like Wollstonecraft [...] [Austen] criticises the reduction of female education to the pursuit of trivial accomplishments'.²⁸ Though their general attitudes to accomplishments may be comparable, it is clear that there are still major lines of divergence between Austen's and Wollstonecraft's viewpoints. While this is by no means unproblematic or straightforward, Austen, as I will explore later in this chapter, credits accomplishments with having certain independent values for her female characters. In *Mansfield Park* (1814), the cover of needlework, one of her few accomplishments, serves on occasion as a kind of psychological refuge for Fanny Price. She, for example, engages in her needlework intently to avoid Henry Crawford whose 'spirits often oppress' her.²⁹ For *Persuasion*'s (1818) Anne Elliot, piano-playing forms her own private enjoyment in different instances: 'She knew that when she played she was giving pleasure only to herself'.³⁰ As with Fanny it also acts as a

which ought to have been spent in the attainment of useful knowledge and Mental Improvement, had all been bestowed in learning Drawing, Italian and Music, more especially the latter, and now she united to these Accomplishments, an Understanding unimproved by reading and a Mind totally devoid either of Taste or Judgement', Jane Austen, *Catharine, or the Bower* (1792) in *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 186-229 (p. 191). All subsequent references are to this edition.

²⁷ See, for example: D.D Devlin, *Jane Austen and Education* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Laura G. Mooneyham, *Romance, Language and Education in Jane Austen's Novels* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); Barbara J. Horwitz, *Jane Austen and the Question of Women's Education* (New York: Lang, 1991); Jan Fergus, *Jane Austen and the Didactic Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1983); and the chapter on Austen in Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

²⁸ Spencer, p. 169.

²⁹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 324. All subsequent references are to this edition.

³⁰ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 44. All subsequent references are to this edition.

kind of social protection: ‘though her eyes would sometimes fill with tears as she sat at the instrument, she was extremely glad to be employed, and desired nothing in return but to be unobserved’ (p. 66). Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, is far more universally critical of what she terms ‘frivolous accomplishments’. Her foremost grievance is with needlework, a major occupation for girls that nevertheless ‘contracts their faculties’ ‘by confining their thoughts to their persons’ and, adding to its evils, encourages enthusiasm for the ‘frifery of dress’.³¹ On the whole, Austen’s opinions on the activities themselves are not quite as vexed or dismissive as Wollstonecraft’s.

Despite these points of disagreement, reading Austen’s novels alongside *The Rights of Woman* significantly illuminates their depiction of female accomplishments. Rather than its particular comments on accomplishments, it is Wollstonecraft’s repeated assertion that for women gender is a construct or a state of mind that is especially revealing. Summarising this idea, Wollstonecraft states that: the ‘desire of being always women, is the very consciousness that degrades the sex’.³² Austen, I argue, similarly views accomplishments as a means through which femininity is showcased: they are tools designed to cater to this ‘desire of being always women’. In practising and performing accomplishments, then, women are dedicating their leisure time to adhering to conventional ideas of womanhood. This notion of the unnaturalness of conventional femininity has been developed more recently in the work of feminist scholars. Going beyond issues of femininity, Judith Butler has famously argued that gender, rather than being innate, is performed through adherence to a set of culturally-determined behavioural norms.³³ Examining Austen’s engagement with ideas of gender performativity, this section will begin to explore the damaging socio-cultural impact of

³¹ Wollstonecraft, pp. 129, 147.

³² Wollstonecraft, p. 174.

³³ For Butler’s theory of gender performativity see, Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

practising female accomplishments. In doing so, I will first elucidate Austen's strategy of emphasising the physicality of accomplishments in order to present them figuratively as components of artifice. I will then go on to show the multitude of issues regarding self-representation that accomplishments, in their role as proponents of artificial femininity, present for women. By exposing and implicitly criticising accomplishments in these ways, Austen, like Wollstonecraft, tackles the 'degrading' feminine ideal itself and more specifically its dominion over women's leisure.

In spite of the ephemeral nature of practising accomplishments, Austen regularly emphasises the physicality of these activities, or renders them object-like in her descriptions. Late eighteenth-century writing abounds with references to accomplishments being 'acquired' by young women, or something they are 'possessed of',³⁴ as opposed to being 'learned'. A sense of accomplishments as something easily attained and having little to do with mental effort is highlighted by Austen in *Persuasion* when she introduces us to 'Henrietta and Louisa [...] who had brought from a school at Exeter all the usual *stock* of accomplishments' (my italics, p. 39). Austen, furthermore, presents us with scenes in her work which show female characters surrounded by their 'stocks'. We meet Henrietta and Louisa amongst the paraphernalia of their new accomplishments: they are 'gradually giving the proper air of confusion [to the house] by a grand piano-forte and a harp, flower-stands and little tables placed in every direction' (p. 38). For the Musgroves, the physicality of their accomplishments takes the form of fashionable relics, representing, as it is implied, their slight abilities in an array of fields.³⁵ In a mirroring episode in *Mansfield Park* we are shown Fanny in the East room in which the 'table between the windows was covered with work-

³⁴ 'The Detection. A Tale', *The Lady's Magazine* XXVII (February, 1796): 51.

³⁵ The superficiality of their accomplishments can be inferred from their comparison to Anne who, we are told, 'played a great deal better than either of the Miss Musgroves' but does not receive the same praise, 'having no voice, no knowledge of the harp, and no fond parents to sit by and fancy themselves delighted' (p. 44).

boxes and netting-boxes [...] and she grew bewildered as to the amount of the debt which all these kind remembrances produced' (p. 142). The Bertrams have financed Fanny's education in needlework and by purchasing her materials funded her continued practice of it. Her accomplishments therefore take the form of humble objects for which she is indebted and represent the means through which she must principally make her repayment.

By emphasising the physicality of female accomplishments Austen makes literal the contemporary idea of accomplishments as ornamental. The term 'ornament' was used interchangeably in literature of the period with accomplishments, clothing adornments and women themselves. In an excerpt from *Rambles Farther* (1796), reprinted in *The Lady's Magazine* (1770-1832), Charlotte Smith – an author who influenced Austen³⁶ – seems to play with these blurred distinctions:

the young person who should give herself entirely to, or value herself immoderately on, the merely ornamental parts of education, would act with as little sense as *she* would do, who, having heard fringe or lace reckoned additions to her clothes, should therefore determine to make the whole of no other materials.³⁷

The insubstantiality of accomplishments as a foundation of female knowledge, or as a basis on which to place one's own value, is suggested in the image of clothing made entirely from delicate, decorative materials. Smith's piece, as its full original title shows, is 'intended for the use of young persons' and has an, albeit comedic, tone of warning and instruction.³⁸ In *Lady Susan* (composed 1794)³⁹ Austen shows a similar disdain towards ornamental accomplishments, expressing this concern through her protagonist with an attitude of ironic detachment. With purposeful outrageousness, Austen portrays Lady Susan wishing her daughter to achieve only the 'superficial' level of the accomplishments that 'are now

³⁶ See, Jacqueline Labbe, 'Narrating Seduction: Charlotte Smith and Jane Austen', in *Charlotte Smith in British Romanticism*, ed. by Jacqueline Labbe (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), pp. 113-28.

³⁷ Charlotte Smith, 'Accomplishments; a Dialogue', *The Lady's Magazine* XVIII (November, 1797): 504.

³⁸ *Rambles Farther: A Continuation of Rural Walks in Dialogues. Intended for the Use of Young Persons.*

³⁹ According to Johnson, 'Introduction', p. xxvii.

necessary to finish a pretty woman'. She wants Frederica, in an inversion of the instruction in *Rambles Farther*, 'to play and sing with some portion of Taste', arguing that, 'a perfect knowledge in all the Languages Arts and Sciences; it is throwing time away; to be mistress of French, Italian, German, Music, Singing, Drawing &c. will gain a woman some applause, but will not add one Lover to her list'.⁴⁰ Lady Susan shows an astute awareness of the role that accomplishments play in adorning and completing the desirable model of femininity, hand-picking the ornaments that might best 'finish' her daughter-as-ornament.

This image of a woman adorned with ornaments implies a hiding or distorting of what is natural, an idea that had cultural precedent in Austen's day in relation to accomplishments. As part of a scathing assessment of contemporary ideals of womanhood, Elizabeth Hamilton writes that '[women's] time is solely employed in learning a few tricks, such as a monkey might very soon acquire:— and these are called accomplishments!'⁴¹ Whilst drawing attention to the simplicity of that which women are often taught, the image of a monkey performing the same activities that for women are called accomplishments also suggests a distortion of nature. This image counters the attempts by writers propagating female accomplishments to cite women's nature in support of them. The reading Fordyce recommends, for example, would be suitable because it complements 'that fine feeling of nature and of sentiment, which may be supposed to result from the delicacy of their [women's] organs'.⁴² In her depictions of them as objects, or ornamental, Austen confronts the tension that exists between nature and culture in discourse concerning accomplishments. Like Hamilton she suggests that accomplishments, and therefore the femininity that they are meant to exhibit, are neither

⁴⁰ Jane Austen, *Lady Susan* (1794) in *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon* ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 189-250 (p. 199). All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Hamilton, 'A Hindoo's Remarks on the Education of Females in England', *The Lady's Magazine* XVII (October, 1796): 453-54.

⁴² Fordyce, I, pp. 225-26.

natural nor innate: they are something altogether separate, external and foreign to women's nature.

Harriet Smith in *Emma* most explicitly embodies this concept of unnatural womanhood associated with accomplishment training. Harriet is of unknown parentage and background and arrives in the novel as seemingly a quite literal product of Mrs Goddard's boarding school, 'where a reasonable quantity of accomplishments were sold at a reasonable price' (p. 22):

Harriet Smith was the natural daughter of somebody. Somebody had placed her, several years back, at Mrs. Goddard's school, and somebody had lately raised her from the condition of scholar to that of parlour-boarder. This was all that was generally known of her history. She had no visible friends but what had been acquired at Highbury, and was now just returned from a long visit in the country to some young ladies who had been at school there with her (p. 23).

Harriet is little more than a void. All that is known of her, including her friends, home and education is shaped by her association with a school dedicated to making girls accomplished. Armstrong claims that Harriet is an ideological space on which 'Austen represents the woman of the conduct books whose value appears to be entirely self-generated'.⁴³ Harriet, she suggests, is a model 'new woman' who is to be valued for her virtuous inner life. Given the harm to which Harriet is exposed over the course of *Emma*, however, it seems unlikely that Austen is presenting her or her manner of preparation for the world as any kind of ideal. Rather, I contend that like Charlotte Smith's dress made entirely of ornaments, Harriet symbolises a woman entirely composed of decorative accomplishments whose inner truth is obscured by the layers of this artifice. The unknowability of Harriet is emblematically shown as Emma is incapable of sketching an accurate portrait of her, instead producing only an unrepresentative display of her own accomplishment. With her identity thus clouded, Harriet

⁴³ Armstrong, p. 144.

refutes the idea that ‘feminine’ talents convey inner womanhood, suggesting instead that they narrow women’s scope for self-representation.

The problems surrounding accomplishments as a means of female self-representation are further compounded by characters’ wealth and status. Accomplishments were designed to give women increased value on the marriage market. When truly ‘possessed of those various and excellent qualities’⁴⁴ that make an accomplished woman, young women might be better placed to, as Wollstonecraft writes, ‘establis[h] themselves—the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage’.⁴⁵ Armstrong argues that conduct books promoted ‘psychological depth’ as a determinant of women’s value in the marriage market over patriarchal concepts of rank and titles.⁴⁶ Yet Austen is sceptical of this apparently simple scheme and demonstrates that women’s value is in fact socially pre-determined by the value of their rank, or, quite literally, in terms of their wealth. As a result of her pre-eminent status in Highbury, Emma is assumed by many to be far more accomplished than she is. This is a misunderstanding that she seems initially not to mind: ‘she was not unwilling to have others deceived, or sorry to know her reputation for accomplishment often higher than it deserved’ (p. 43). But following the arrival of Jane Fairfax her unearned reputation becomes a point of distress: ‘Every body last night said how well you played’ (p. 216), Harriet informs Emma, who is anxiously berating herself in comparison to Jane. Likewise, in *Pride and Prejudice* Lady Catherine, discussing music, informs us that ‘If I had ever learnt, I should have been a great proficient. And so would Anne’ (p. 169). Anne is, as Mr Collins confirms, ‘of a sickly constitution, which has prevented her from making that progress in many accomplishments, which she could not have otherwise failed of’ (p. 66). The De Bourghs’ social superiority so precludes any notion other than their being extremely accomplished, it is implied, that neither Lady

⁴⁴ Fordyce, I, p. 163.

⁴⁵ Wollstonecraft, p. 6.

⁴⁶ Armstrong, pp. 19-20.

Catherine nor her daughter needed ever to exert themselves to the ends of actually acquiring accomplishments. These examples are at odds with conduct literature's promotion of the idea that accomplishments would allow a woman to be valued according to her individual worth. What is often socially of consequence, Austen shows, are the accomplishments one is able, or assumed to be able to afford, rather than any sense of individual proficiency.

It is ironic that it is these socially elite and therefore ostensibly more 'leisured' characters that are presumed to be the most thoroughly accomplished. To achieve a superior level of accomplishment in activities like needlework, playing the piano, or painting beyond the superficial levels of the Musgroves would unquestionably involve extensive hard work. Austen makes allusions to this need for intense application in *Emma* when the heroine, in a fitful moment of desiring amelioration in her skills as a pianist, 'sat down and practised vigorously an hour and a half' (p. 215). In *Pride and Prejudice*, Lady Catherine even seems aware on some level (although perhaps not one she deems applicable to those of her rank) that true accomplishment requires work, chastising Elizabeth because 'she will never play really well, unless she practises [the piano] more' (p. 169). Yet it is these high-status characters, those for whom existence is most characterised by idleness, that seem by default to have claims to 'a great profien[cy]' in accomplishments. By demonstrating this simultaneous awareness of the need for application and assumption that the idlest women are the most skilled, Austen surfaces an unspoken social contradiction in her work. Her depiction of this paradox ridicules the belief that owing to their rank these women are innately instilled with superlative feminine graces and might, by implication, sidestep the work of accomplishments. By exposing this farcical class element of the culture of accomplishments, Austen further discredits the notion that they are natural exhibitions of femininity. By allowing for such distortions, she asserts, accomplishments are deeply flawed as a system of measuring women's worth.

While accomplishments allow for ironic misconceptions of her elite characters, Austen's fiction is also suggestive of more pervasive problems relating to female identity. The culture of acquiring the same set of accomplishments for the same goal of desirable femininity, she demonstrates, can have problematic implications for young women's individuality. Austen draws attention to this issue recurrently through accomplished secondary characters. In *Sanditon* (composed 1817) the Miss Beauforts are 'just such young ladies as may be met with in at least one family out of three, throughout the kingdom; they had tolerable complexions, shewey figures, an upright decided carriage and an assured Look;—they were very accomplished and very Ignorant'.⁴⁷ Creating a similar sense of uniformity, Mary Crawford says of the Miss Owens in *Mansfield Park*: 'one knows, without being told, exactly what they are—all very accomplished and pleasing' (p. 266). With these characters, Austen creates an impression of archetypal accomplished women being perpetually produced in the narrative background. While easily dismissed by readers and other characters as humorous stock types, these women are used to evoke the serious issue of female interchangeability. Through Austen's more foregrounded characters we are granted a closer look at this problem. Harriet was one of a high influx of students at Mrs Goddard's school and the Musgrove girls, we are told, achieved the same set of accomplishments as 'thousands of other young ladies' in Exeter (p. 39). Along with the Miss Bertrams, they have become part of a larger body of satisfactorily accomplished young ladies who must now perform what they have learnt in order to attract a partner. Austen evidences these characters' interchangeability by, for instance, incessantly realigning Harriet with potential love interests and varyingly pairing either Julia or Maria Bertram with Henry Crawford. Jones claims that 'the language of affective individualism [in conduct literature] masks actual power relations

⁴⁷ Jane Austen, *Sanditon* (1817) in *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon* ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 293-346 (p. 341). All subsequent references are to this edition.

by offering women the promise of romantic attachment and personal choice'.⁴⁸ Austen exposes the conduct-book deception signalled by Jones by demonstrating that the accomplished female is one for whom both individuality and agency are threatened.

Accomplishments, rivalry and sexuality

Alongside this sense of female interchangeability, the uniform goal of being accomplished leads to inevitable fractures within Austen's female communities. While accomplishments create universal standards against which women can be compared, conduct literature does, nevertheless, emphasise that women should follow where their talent leads. Fordyce wishes girls to learn music '[w]here there is a real genius for it'.⁴⁹ Chapone likewise stipulates: 'As to music and drawing I would only wish you to follow as genius leads'.⁵⁰ This suggestion of women 'of genius' forming specialisms is potentially misleading for modern readers. As Christine Battersby reveals, these allusions to female genius are far removed from the Romantic-era conception of genius that was exclusively gendered male. Battersby writes of 'a new rhetoric of exclusion [of women] that developed in the eighteenth century, and which gradually grew louder as the nineteenth century progressed'. To be female was 'to fail to count as a genius', in the heightened, creative sense of the word. Conduct literature thus termed women 'geniuses' in line with the earlier eighteenth-century definition in which it meant: 'the special and unique talents that all (or most) individuals possess'.⁵¹ In this way, prescriptive writing collectively 'mapped out a new field of knowledge as specifically female'⁵² within which they might choose their subject of 'genius'. In being presented with a narrow field of feminine knowledge, women were given limited boundaries within which to

⁴⁸ Vivien Jones, *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. by Vivien Jones (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 15.

⁴⁹ Fordyce, I, p. 201.

⁵⁰ Chapone, p. 105.

⁵¹ Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics* (London: The Women's Press, 1989), pp. 2-3.

⁵² Armstrong, p. 60.

excel, setting the stage for female competition. Wollstonecraft contends that women, whose ‘sole ambition [...] centres in beauty’, are ‘very differently situated with respect to each other [than men]—for they are all rivals’.⁵³ For Austen, beauty is not at the root of women’s rivalry and neither is female sexuality which, for Wollstonecraft, beauty tends obliquely to represent. As this section will explore, while in partial agreement with Wollstonecraft’s assessment of the state of female community, Austen shows that rivalry exists most starkly in terms of accomplishments. The subject of female sexuality is nonetheless intimately bound to accomplishments, forming a complex dynamic I will go on to dissect.

A prime example of the potential for rivalry inherent within women’s limited scope of achievement is presented in *Emma*. In the novel, the action is to a large extent dependent on the great chasm that exists between Emma and Jane Fairfax. The similarities in ‘Birth, abilities, and education’ (p. 394), as well as age and level of beauty, create ideal conditions for rivalry between the two women. Although this rivalry is not overt, it runs as a continual thread in Emma’s consciousness to which we are periodically alerted:

She [Emma] knew the limitations of her own powers too well to attempt more than she could perform with credit; she wanted neither taste nor spirit in the little things which are generally acceptable, and could accompany her own voice well. [...] Emma then would resign her place to Miss Fairfax, whose performance, both vocal and instrumental, she never could attempt to conceal from herself, was infinitely superior to her own.

With mixed feelings, she seated herself at a little distance from the numbers round the instrument, to listen (pp. 211-12).

It is possible to assume that this implicit contest is little more than the manifestation of Emma’s egotism, or competitiveness, teamed with Jane’s prime candidacy for being her rival.

⁵³ Wollstonecraft, pp. 276, 275.

As Claudia Johnson notes at the beginning of a chapter on *Emma*, Austen herself seems to point to such conclusions about her protagonist, writing: ‘I am going to take a heroine whom no-one but myself will much like’.⁵⁴ Indeed, as Johnson also indicates, several critics have drawn conclusions about the novel and the character of Emma that are seemingly based on this quotation; Mark Schorer, for example, calls *Emma* a ‘study of self-importance, egotism and malice’.⁵⁵ Yet, the above quotation speaks more of resignation and melancholy than it does of any of these listed traits. As Johnson shows with regards to issues of ‘female authority’,⁵⁶ Austen’s depiction of female rivalry is far more complex than readings like Schorer’s allow.

Austen offers an indictment of the culture of accomplishments, rather than simply Emma’s nature, in the novel. Many of the major problems that feature in *Emma* would not exist if it were not for the subtle competition in accomplishments between Emma and Jane. Harriet, for example, would not have been befriended by and toyed with by Emma, and Jane would most likely not have been tortured by Emma’s relationship with Frank. Emma’s feelings of inadequacy, on which her aversion to Jane is founded, lead her to want to prove herself in the one accomplishment she is more disposed to excel at: conversation. In showcasing her skill through wit and flirtation, Emma, albeit unknowingly, cements and gives new character to her competition with Jane; she becomes, in the latter’s mind at least, a love rival. The severest cost of their contest is, however, the resulting isolation of Jane and Emma. In a moment that encapsulates the gulf between these two characters, Austen tells us that Emma, feeling slight regret that she has gossiped about Jane with Frank, wonders whether she may have ‘transgressed the duty of woman by woman’. We are subsequently

⁵⁴ Austen-Leigh, p. 119.

⁵⁵ Mark Schorer, ‘The Humiliation of Emma Woodhouse’, *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963), pp. 98-111, (p. 110).

⁵⁶ Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 122.

told that with far more certainty Emma ‘did unfeignedly and unequivocally regret the inferiority of her own playing and singing’ (p. 215). In language that gestures towards the wider female community, Austen shows that rivalry in accomplishments is at this moment of more importance to Emma than female kinship. By creating a sense of inevitability about this rivalry Austen suggests however that the heroine is not to blame for her preoccupation. As Emma realises in the end, both she and Jane were primed for friendship; but, in becoming ‘Miss Woodhouse and Miss Fairfax [...] the only young-lady-performers’ of Highbury (p. 213), they were each fixed as the other’s perpetual point of comparison. Ultimately, *Emma* suggests, the grounds of this rivalry are needless and unnatural. While Jane is naturally talented and finds both pleasure and solace in music, Emma has no inclination for accomplishments and would happily cease to practise them – were it not for social pressures.

Sense and Sensibility (1811), too, features a breakdown in female relationships that largely takes place in the field of accomplishments. The Miss Dashwoods are women for whom, in their home-schooling, something more has been added to their accomplishments. As I will return to later in this chapter, Marianne possesses a sense of artistry about her musical abilities and Elinor is, of course, highly rational. They are, it can be safely said, by no means akin to the Miss Beauforts or Miss Owens of Austen’s oeuvre. Their arrival in Devonshire as women with heightened accomplishments sends subtle reverberations throughout the female community and, Austen shows, somewhat inevitably alienates them from other women. As Elinor and Marianne become known to their new social group, it is apparent that ‘[t]hey had too much sense to be desirable companions’ and Lady Middleton, in particular, does ‘not really like them at all’. We learn that ‘[t]heir presence was a restraint’ because ‘Lady Middleton was ashamed of doing nothing before them, and the flattery which Lucy was proud to think of and administer at other times, she feared they would despise her

for offering'. The Miss Dashwoods, 'fond of reading' and quite likely to be 'satirical',⁵⁷ make other women feel uncomfortable. By representing opposing examples of behaviour, they trigger unwelcome reflections in Lucy and Lady Middleton upon their personal means of occupying themselves during leisure.

The Dashwoods' animosity towards the Steeles also has its basis in the tension that exists between women concerning accomplishments. We learn of 'the invariable coldness of her [Marianne's] behaviour' towards them and that Elinor, too, quietly rejects Lucy who in contrast 'missed no opportunity of engaging her in conversation, or of striving to improve their acquaintance'. Indeed, Elinor's internal reflections on Lucy often have an element of Wollstonecraftian vitriol: 'she was ignorant and illiterate, and her deficiency of all mental improvement, her want of information in the most common particulars, could not be concealed from Miss Dashwood' (p. 122). Much as Wollstonecraft at times seems to blame women for their own position of social inferiority,⁵⁸ Elinor, although we are told (somewhat unreliably) that she 'pitie[s] her', resents Lucy on a personal level for ignorance which Austen makes clear is due to a neglected education. Elinor is no doubt forwarded as a preferable model of womanhood as Austen depicts her triumph over Lucy in their romantic rivalry. Yet it is not without sympathy that she portrays the latter's downfall. While Elinor benefited from an enriching education, Lucy was allotted the more conventional female experience that involved engagement in 'frivolous pursuits'. Establishing a sense of her lost potential, we are not merely told of Lucy's lack of knowledge, but that she also 'was naturally clever; her remarks were often just and amusing' (p. 122). Although at plot-level a

⁵⁷ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 231-32. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁵⁸ Although Wollstonecraft does 'not attempt[t] to extenuate their [women's] faults; but to prove them to be the natural consequence of their education and station in society', she sees women as 'so much degraded by mistaken notions of female excellence' that they are often led to, for example, 'play off those contemptible infantine airs that undermine esteem even whilst they excite desire', pp. 283, 75.

surprising twist, from Austen's point of view it is a sad inevitability that Lucy is realigned with the more superficial Robert Ferrars.

Lucy's history with Edward is moreover revealing of the relationship between accomplishments and female sexuality. Lucy, we are told, possesses a quality that was once deemed a charming 'simplicity' but has with the passage of time deteriorated into a socially-debilitating ignorance. Taking either definition of this quality the inference is clear: she has received only a light education in accomplishments, as evidenced through her working on 'a fillagree basket' (p. 153), and not the cultivation of mind we see in the Dashwoods. This perceived simplicity, or, her array of unreflective accomplishments, in the initial stages of her courtship with Edward had a role to complement, or 'give interesting character to', her beauty. Having worked in concord with beauty to attract Edward, Austen suggests, post-attraction and post-engagement Lucy's accomplishments become stale signifiers of her ignorance. The depiction of this partnership echoes Wollstonecraft who views 'corporeal accomplishments' as having a role both similar to and enhancing of beauty. 'Like the charms of a made up face, they [...] strike the senses in a crowd' aiding women in attracting potential partners. Needlework, in *The Rights of Woman*, most literally assists beauty by allowing women to enhance their clothing and attend to 'the physical part of the art of pleasing [that] consists in ornaments'.⁵⁹ Although, as I intend to show, overall Austen's exploration of this subject is more complex, in exploring female attractiveness she acknowledges and examines accomplishments in a Wollstonecraftian manner. For both writers, as far as it concerns the practice of accomplishments, women's leisure is problematically geared towards honing sexual desirability.

⁵⁹ Wollstonecraft, pp. 255, 274.

Of course, not all accomplishments hold the same meaning in terms of female sexuality. As the conduct books seemed to encourage, many women in Austen's fiction choose an accomplishment for which they have the most 'genius'; these particular pairings of women and their specialisms are mutually revelatory. Music and artwork are the most generally conceived to be conducive to sexually alluring displays, as Austen mocks with the two Miss Beauforts. They sit near to the window 'with the hope on Miss Beaufort's side, of praise and celebrity from all who walked within the sound of her Instrument, and on Miss Letitia's, of curiosity and rapture in all who came near her while she sketched' (pp. 341-42). However, in Austen's more close character analyses, she imbues these activities with subtle distinctions. For her novels' societies, music appears to have the most unambiguous relationship to female sexuality. Emma is horrified by what she calls 'the improper and dangerous distinction' (p. 190) of Mr Dixon having preferred Jane Fairfax to play the piano over his then fiancé, Miss Campbell, and subsequently imagines an affair. Musical preference, it seems, is tantamount to sexual preference. In another scene bringing together music and sexual politics, Mary Crawford jealously asks of the Miss Owens, 'Are they musical?' because 'That is the first question [...] which every woman who plays herself is sure to ask about another' (p. 292). Her desire to succeed in the competition in musical accomplishments is particularly evidenced by her decision to learn the harp.⁶⁰ In Austen's fiction, piano-playing, while Marianne and others are exceptions, often implies passivity and a woman at her society's service. The harp in contrast is elegant and enticing, as Selwyn has

⁶⁰ Katie Trumpener has expanded upon the significance of Mary's harp-playing. Austen, she writes, is making a comparison between Mary and 'the harp-playing heroines with a great deal of picturesque and romantic charm, signifying a poetic soul and a reverence for national traditions' seen in novels such as 'Sydney Owenson's *Wild Irish Girl*' (1806). Referencing the scene in which Mary discusses the struggle to have her harp delivered, Trumpener writes: 'As a bardic instrument, the cherished vehicle of Irish, Welsh, and Scottish nationalism, and then as the emblem of a nationalist republicanism, the harp stands for an art that honours the organic relationship between a people, their land, and their culture. In Mary Crawford's hands, it is deployed for purely picturesque effect. Uninterested in the outcome of the harvest, the needs of the farmers, or the state of the countryside, eager to buy convenience at others' cost, Mary plays the harp solely in self-advertisement'. In appropriating the image of the female bard, Mary and her 'London attitudes' represent 'a kind of imperialism', Katie Trumpener, *Bardic Nationalism: the Romantic Novel and the British Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. 18-19.

indicated, drawing attention to ‘the caressing indulged in by the harpist, in which the male listener might be said almost to enjoy a vicarious embrace’.⁶¹ As Miss Beaufort and Mary Crawford are aware, the harp enables women in one respect to appear diligent, passive objects for voyeurs. But, in having more seductive power than the piano, harp-playing grants women a degree of control over their sexuality, allowing them to try to forward personal ambitions.

The powers of attraction associated with painting and drawing are, however, far less unequivocal. On the one hand, in *Sense and Sensibility* artwork, like music, is termed a ‘performance’ and Marianne views Edward as having signed some kind of sexual contract (albeit unsatisfactorily) with Elinor in ‘his frequent attention to her while she draws’, noting that he seemed to view her drawings ‘as a lover’ (p. 19). Similarly, John Dashwood seeks to forward the union of Elinor and Colonel Brandon through forced admiration of her screens. In contrast, Emma seems oblivious to the sexual implications of painting while a man observes, as Mr Elton does, with a degree of eroticism, ‘watching [her] every touch’ (p. 45). Removing herself from the equation entirely, she believes that the act of painting Harriet’s portrait will heighten Mr Elton’s attraction to Harriet rather than enhancing her own attractions. With a voyeuristic advantage, men, it appears, have far more control over and understanding of the sexual significance of observed artwork.

Conversation seems to be a form of accomplishment over which, in this context, women, including Emma, have much more command. Lady Susan perhaps offers the best example of this control. Unabashedly lacking in accomplishments, she informs the reader: ‘If I am vain of anything, it is of my eloquence. Consideration and Esteem as surely follow command of language, as admiration waits on Beauty’ (p. 212). Her conversational skills

⁶¹ Selwyn, p. 126.

work in concert with her beauty to gain her the consideration, esteem and admiration she seeks. Perhaps no less, but differently, subversive, *Northanger Abbey*'s Catherine Morland serves to send up convention in terms of conversation as an accomplishment (as well as literary snobbery). Rather than engaging in 'pretty talking' (p. 206) and making eloquent displays of a mind cultivated by the appropriate kind of literature for women, she exhibits through conversation that she has been engaging in precisely the wrong kind of reading,⁶² and attracts Henry Tilney anyway. Like Lady Susan and Catherine, Elizabeth Bennet's conversation is rebellious. Using conversation to ironize, mock and challenge, rather than to please and allure, she defies the kind of instruction given by Dr Gregory who writes that, '[t]he great art of pleasing in conversation consists in making the company pleased with themselves. You [women] will more readily hear than talk yourselves into their good graces'.⁶³

Overall, *Pride and Prejudice* offers Austen's most extended meditation on accomplishments and particularly their role in relation to sexual attraction. Bingley, we learn, has 'never heard a young lady spoken of for the first time, without being informed that she was very accomplished'; the women he hears of 'all paint tables, cover skreens, and net purses' (pp. 38-39). Being one of society's most eligible bachelors, it is implied, relations of marriageable young women are quick to present them to him as desirable through their accomplishments. In this scene, characters define what an accomplished woman is, using these descriptions as code for what they desire in a partner. While Bingley, easy to please, would be satisfied with the above description, Darcy 'comprehend[s] a great deal in [his] idea

⁶² Reading is, of course, an important accomplishment in both eighteenth-century commentary and Austen's novels. However it is not within the scope of this project to tackle reading with due attention. For works discussing Jane Austen and reading, see, for example, Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Adela Pinch, 'Lost in a Book: Jane Austen's *Persuasion*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 32 (1993), 97-117.

⁶³ John Gregory, *A Father's Legacy to His Daughters* (1761), 6th edn (Dublin: John Colles, 1774), pp. 15-16.

of an accomplished woman' (p. 39). Eager to situate Darcy's ideal beyond the reach of Elizabeth, Miss Bingley creates one on his behalf:

A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions, or the word will be but half deserved.

Darcy both underscores and undercuts Miss Bingley by adding the caveat that 'to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading' (p. 39). The intellectual substance of a woman, as we see in Darcy's courtship of Elizabeth, is a cornerstone of what he finds desirable. Significantly, the only named woman in this scene to meet all of the above criteria is Darcy's sister, who according to Miss Bingley is 'extremely accomplished for her age'. By implication, the only woman in fact good enough for Darcy, is a Darcy. He makes his own, essentially nonsensical, comparison of her to Elizabeth, to whom he is attracted: 'She is now about Miss Elizabeth Bennet's height, or rather taller' (p. 38). Here, Darcy seems to literally imagine Elizabeth in his sister's mould, upholding the notion that Georgiana in theory, if not in actuality, represents his ideal woman. His comparison suggests the conflict between the ideal of femininity he should desire and his actual desire for Elizabeth.

While accomplishments cannot replace physical desirability, Austen shows, they are nonetheless irrevocably associated with and suggestive of female sexuality. What is at stake, then, when women are not aware of this connection, or do not possess any accomplishments? In many cases, it seems that women's level of accomplishment matches their awareness of and control over their sexuality. Mary Bennet, studiously accomplished, naively endeavours to take control of her sexual destiny, aggressively asserting her attractions for all to see. Austen writes that: 'Mary, who having, in consequence of being the only plain one in the family, worked hard for knowledge and accomplishments, was always impatient for display' (p. 25).

Emma, by contrast, has a more casual relationship with her accomplishments and only a loose appreciation of their sexual meaning. ‘Emma’s lack of diligence’, Armstrong writes, ‘proves a virtue, a refusal to be written by culture’.⁶⁴ Equally however it amounts to a detrimental lack of understanding of the culture of accomplishments and sexuality, leaving her prone to misinterpretations. Lady Susan deems Frederica ‘charmingly artless in her display’, but cynically asserts that ‘Artlessness will never do in Love matters, and that girl is born a simpleton who has it either by nature or affectation’ (p. 217). The resistant and completely unaccomplished Catherine Morland perhaps best represents this artlessness. Whilst she is keen to have her new-found bloom recognised, she does not possess the means to try to regulate her desirability. Men are therefore able to interpret Catherine’s sexuality as they choose. This lack of sexual agency is figuratively shown in Thorpe’s virtual abduction of her, in which Catherine is powerless to escape and join the true object of her desire.

Unlike women who are vulnerable in their ‘artlessness’, from a position of keen awareness Fanny Price desires not to perform or exhibit, engaging in needlework as a kind of sexual refuge. Rozsika Parker describes the image of a woman at needlework as partly at odds with Fanny’s intentions:

Eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched – the position signifies repression and subjugation, yet the embroiderer’s silence, her concentration also suggests a self-containment, a kind of autonomy.

The silent embroiderer has, however, become a part of a stereotype of femininity in which the self-containment of the woman sewing is interpreted as seductiveness [...] in terms of the stereotype it is a sexual ploy. If a woman sits silently sewing she is silently asking for the silence to be broken.⁶⁵

Despite needlework being a private, introspective occupation for Fanny, she falls victims to these multiple interpretations when Crawford, like Parker describes, views her activity in a

⁶⁴ Armstrong, p. 149.

⁶⁵ Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) (London: Women’s Press, 1996), p. 11.

sexual light. He is attracted by ‘her colour beautifully heightened as she leant over the work’ (p. 273) and henceforward persistently seeks to break her ‘silence’. In interpreting Fanny’s needlework in this way, Crawford shows how pervasively culture viewed the inherence of sexuality in accomplishments. By rendering her artlessness artful, he robs Fanny of the ability to define her own sexuality.

Crawford’s act of watching Fanny as she sews acts as a violation of the contemporary rhetoric of women being active agents, able to bestow their accomplishments on a partner. Writers in *The Lady’s Magazine* present images of such women, including one who ‘meditat[es] on whom she should bestow her invaluable accomplishments’,⁶⁶ and another who upon marrying is said to have ‘disposed of her accomplishments to the present bishop’.⁶⁷ The moments in Austen’s fiction in which men observe or join women in executing their accomplishments serve as prefatory, symbolic acts of this marital disposing/bestowing. As Fanny does not offer Crawford any accomplishments to watch freely, or share in, he has to steal from her private occupations. He does this literally in one scene by taking the book she is reading and transforming its use, example-like, into one of performance. There are characters who far more willingly offer up their accomplishments. As previously discussed, a sense of detachment is established early on with regards to the accomplishments the Miss Bertrams, Musgroves and Beauforts bring from school. With apparently little investment in their accomplishments, performances are liberally made by these characters for arrays of different suitors. In contrast, Elinor and Marianne invest effort and place value in their accomplishments and they share them with men who they are near-certain they will marry. Writing of Marianne and Willoughby, Selwyn refers to their ‘intimate intertwining of [...] vocal lines’ which he perceives Austen may have found ‘almost too intimate’.⁶⁸ Rather than

⁶⁶ ‘The Detection. A Tale’, p. 52.

⁶⁷ ‘Singular Character of the Rev. Mr. George Harvest’, *The Lady’s Magazine* XVII (July, 1796): 323.

⁶⁸ Selwyn, p. 143.

any sexual aversion on the part of the author,⁶⁹ the discomfort here lies in the ill-intentioned Willoughby not just observing but manipulating meaningful female performance. Ultimately, Austen does not endorse, but simply recognises, the system whereby women use accomplishments to have some control over their sexuality. What she shows in these instances of ‘bestowing’ is that accomplishments, essentially, are not *for* women. In not being ‘theirs’, accomplishments, as a domain for the coded articulation of female sexuality, are vulnerable to male manipulation. They act as culturally-designed offerings for men that, problematically, as Mary Bennet and others show, women often invest their leisure in assiduously labouring to procure.

Anxiety, surveillance and (f)utility

Austen’s overall critique of accomplishments, like their purpose in leisure, is twofold. On the one hand, as I have argued, Austen demonstrates that accomplishments serve to conjure the illusion of desirable femininity. On the other, she shows, they are quite simply activity for activity’s sake. Armstrong, while not placing particular emphasis on accomplishments, has painted a portrait of women’s domestic life in this era as defined by a precariously balanced level of constant activity. To be too leisured was, for a middle-class woman, to be akin to abhorrent aristocratic indolence; to be too laboured was, however, to be comparable to the ‘morally bankrupt’, unfeminine working class. Conduct books addressed the ‘moral continuum’ between labour and leisure, Armstrong writes, by ‘creat[ing] a new category of labor’ specifically-formed for the feminine ideal.⁷⁰ Selwyn, too, qualifies our conception of the term ‘leisure’ when applied to Austen’s era and social class, explaining that it implies an undercurrent of relentless activity. In attributing Austen’s interest in women’s leisure

⁶⁹ Research by Jill Heydt-Stevenson, which features prominently in Chapter 2, convincingly dispels the notion of Austen’s aversion to sex, arguing to the contrary that her fiction is rife with sexual humour. See, Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

⁷⁰ Armstrong, pp. 78, 75, 79.

activities to using them as ‘an indication of character’,⁷¹ he nevertheless fails to show what Austen really means when references to Emma’s ‘recourse to her work-basket’ (p. 441), for example, abruptly intrude upon the narrative. In this particular moment, Emma, though in the midst of an emotionally-taxing conversation and, according to Mr Knightley and Mrs Weston, resistant to serious application, is working. She is engaged in what has aptly been termed ‘conspicuous leisure’: the need to show oneself as constantly busy, whilst remaining within the boundaries of what might be outwardly perceived as leisure.⁷² Reading Austen’s novels, it appears true then that, as Armstrong suggests, the conduct books’ ‘domestic woman’ in some respect ‘became a function of each individual’s psychic life’.⁷³ However, this figure, to the extent that it symbolises the correct level of activity in the home, is one that induces anxiety.

Vickery, creating a paradigm that offers insight into women’s domestic activity in Austen, has shed light on the fact that the genteel housekeeper ‘used art to conceal her industry’ in the home. Her work seeks to rectify posterity’s treatment of the ‘established institution’ of ‘female management’ in the Georgian household. Little recognition has so far been granted, Vickery asserts, to the labours masked beneath women’s projected image of tranquil domesticity.⁷⁴ While Emma Woodhouse and Anne Elliot’s busyness in the novels reveals their knowledge of the social expectation for them to be appropriately active, like the household managers Vickery investigates, they seem to put work into making these occupations appear unlaboured. Emma’s furious practising in order to improve her subsequent musical displays is, for instance, intentionally in private. Both of these heroines also refuse to acknowledge the difficulties of their nursing duties. Emma shows only patience

⁷¹ Selwyn, pp. xi-xii.

⁷² Leona Toker, ‘Conspicuous Leisure and Invidious Sexuality in Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*’, *Connotations*, 11 (2001/2002), 222-40, p. 226.

⁷³ Armstrong, p. 258.

⁷⁴ Vickery, p. 131.

with her unreasonable, dependent father and Anne calmly forebears the pain of her nephew's clambering over her whilst she tends to his brother. Austen, I argue, is interested in the psychic costs of needing to be constantly occupied in leisure to a defined and precarious degree, whilst masking the labour that goes into doing so in the name of feminine refinement.

Austen examines this anxiety of leisure within an overarching survey of the lifecycle of female domestic activity. This lifecycle is marked by stages in which accomplishments seem to shift in their social signification. I begin by looking at accomplishments in their earliest state as points of anxiety to the young, marriageable women who must practise them. Proving that female leisure is at the service of culture and not women's own, accomplishments subsequently transition into being either implements of social utility or discarded altogether in later life. Turning to the subject of utility, I look at how the need to prove oneself to be useful was, in the eighteenth century, a masculine discourse that Austen pointedly appropriates in a feminine context. Austenian female utility describes, in one respect, the repurposing of accomplishments for broader social ends once these activities have failed to attract a husband and so fulfil their initial purpose; we see this with Anne Elliot's servile piano-playing, for example. Yet, in its more general sense, utility is a representative term for women's need to remain active that in its vagueness is equally, if not more, anxiety-inducing than the rigorously-defined system of accomplishments. As I go on to show, the anxiety felt by women tasked with being accomplished or useful is rendered more acute by the principles of surveillance deployed in the household. Young women in particular, it is suggested, are observed closely to ensure they are suitably employed. Lastly, this section will explore the issue of throwing away accomplishments on the event of marriage. By reminding us that it is women who, in theory, have most successfully used their accomplishments that ultimately abandon them, Austen underscores the futility of much of women's leisure.

Designed as the principal means of occupying young women, accomplishments become barometers for the correct level of domestic activity. Women's degree of accomplishment signifies, therefore, their position on the 'moral continuum' between labour and leisure. Mary Bennet and Jane Fairfax are amongst those who demonstrate problematic over-exertion. Mary is not a naturally talented performer; a great deal of work has gone into earning her proficiency in music. This effort is evidenced in performances that appear self-aware and laboured to onlookers. As the narrator describes, she 'had neither genius nor taste; and though vanity had given her application, it had given her likewise a pedantic air and conceited manner' (p. 25). Her displays advertise the unfeminine labour of her leisure and undermine accomplishments' status as natural expressions of femininity. Conversely, while Jane Fairfax also practises extensively, she enhances what appears to society to be her natural gifts. With her ease of portraying a heightened skillset, she appears to represent the ideal level of female domestic activity. This is the case until the episode in which – perhaps foreshadowing her seemingly likely future as a working woman – she is overworked by her admiring audience. Having performed for too long, her singing begins to seem laboured and the horrified Mr Knightley, who is also a critic of Emma's domestic activity, puts a stop to proceedings. He exclaims, 'Miss Bates, are you mad, to let your niece sing herself hoarse in this manner? Go, and interfere. They have no mercy on her' (p. 213). In becoming hoarse, she shows signs of physical strain suggestive of the bodily wear that might be experienced by someone who manually labours. Momentarily shattering her alluring feminine image, in its increasing coarseness her voice aurally evokes the unfeminine figure of the working-class woman.

More often in Austen's work, however, there is a concern that young women have been insufficiently rather than overly active. The anxiety of Catherine Morland's situation, dangerously teetering on indolence, is reflected in her mother. Mrs Morland chastises: 'My

dear Catherine, I am afraid you are growing quite a fine lady [...] there is a time for everything—a time for balls and plays, and a time for work’ (p. 224). Catherine is so opposed to domestic activity that she rejects even the foundational activity of needlework (here termed ‘work’ by Austen),⁷⁵ with which even the supposedly unaccomplished women in Austen’s fiction fill their time. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennet girls collectively represent a range of positions along the barometer of activity: Lydia (dangerously inactive) and Mary (shamefully over-exerted) are the two opposing extremes. Elizabeth, satisfactorily accomplished in music, but not to a degree in which she excels, falls just short of the middling ideal. Lady Catherine alerts us to her shortcomings, suggesting that she practise and offering the means to do so using: ‘the pianoforte in Mrs. Jenkinson’s room. She would be in nobody’s way, you know, in that part of the house’ (p. 169). Notably, she suggests private practice in a separate part of house to where Elizabeth might again perform. Elizabeth should strive to improve her public performances, Lady Catherine implies, whilst maintaining a distinction between these attractive displays and the labour necessary for their successful execution. Instead of worrying about concealing the work that would go into improving her abilities, Elizabeth is content with her accomplishment level as it is. While Catherine avoids anxiety by avoiding accomplishments, Elizabeth is shrewdly aware of this system. Darcy observes that she is unwilling to ‘perform to strangers’ (p. 171). This statement is true in the sense that for Elizabeth, performance is not an exercise in putting forward the skills that she knows and declares are imperfect for public judgment. In pre-empting her audience’s reaction, she negates society’s ability to condemn the insufficiency of her application during leisure.

⁷⁵ Parker explains that ‘[t]raditionally, women have called embroidery ‘work’. Although to some extent an appropriate term, it tends to confirm the stereotypical notion that patience and perseverance go into embroidery – but little else. Moreover, the term was engendered by an ideology of femininity as service and selflessness and the insistence that women work for others, not for themselves’, p. 6.

Emma has been likened to Elizabeth as one whose amount of leisure is not reflected in her level of accomplishment,⁷⁶ but Emma's handling of this inconsistency is very different to Elizabeth's cool acceptance of her own deficiency. In the scene discussed above, Emma, in a reverse move to Elizabeth, punishingly practises the piano in private in order to be able to repair the public image of her leisure. For Emma, this activity is not about enhancing her ability to allure through accomplishments, it is a sign of her concern for meeting others' expectations of how she should be occupying her time. Emma has 'very little intention of ever marrying' (p. 82), a statement that her friends dismiss, believing it to mean 'nothing at all' (p. 39). Outwardly assumed to be on the marriage market, her leisure must remain targeted towards honing accomplishments or she faces criticism from those closest to her for not 'submit[ting] to anything requiring industry and patience' in this field (p. 36). Privately viewing herself as permanently single, Emma is caught between two definitions of female leisure and struggles to contend with both. Whilst dealing with external expectations and the accompanying anxiety of accomplishments, she additionally faces her own adoption of a spinster-like concern with being useful.

Through Emma and others, Austen renders social utility, a cornerstone of the eighteenth-century ideal of masculinity, a predominantly feminine discourse in her fiction. Advice literature for young men in this period insisted that they should steer themselves towards a life of public utility. J. Aikin's *Letters from a Father to His Son* (1800) places the 'essence' of male virtue 'in utility'; he writes that 'the true meaning of life is not time, but utility and enjoyment'.⁷⁷ This utility was intended to benefit wider society and bore close relation to men's right to citizenship. As Karen Harvey explains, male 'identity was tied increasingly closely to ideas of political citizenship, the public good of society, and public-

⁷⁶ Selwyn, p. 139.

⁷⁷ J. Aikin, *Letters from a Father to His Son, On Various Topics Relative to Literature and the Conduct of Life*, 2 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1800), II, pp. 236, 165.

spirited contributions of the household to the national economy'.⁷⁸ With her male characters Austen marks her recognition of utility as a concern that was generally conceived to be masculine. *Mansfield Park*'s Edmund is described as having 'strong good sense and uprightness of mind, bid most fairly for utility, honour, and happiness' (p. 21), whereas Crawford feels ashamed of his lifestyle in comparison to the 'glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion' exhibited by William Price (p. 219). Edward Ferrars fails so entirely in being useful that he is tellingly portrayed as emasculated, possessing archetypal feminine qualities, such as a fondness for home and a disinclination for the ambitious and public life his family wish for him. Alongside these examples, Austen reveals a prevailing interest in the concept of usefulness in relation to women. Lady Catherine, for instance, instructing Mr Collins on the sort of wife to seek, advises that: 'for your own [sake], let her be an active, useful sort of person' (p. 103). Against the backdrop of utility as public and masculine, Austen re-establishes this discourse in a feminine, domestic framework. She makes utility the motivating force driving the active leisure of characters who for one reason or another eschew a preoccupation with ornamental accomplishments.

The desire of being useful to others is, unrelentingly, the impetus of Anne Elliot and Fanny Price's leisure time. In *Mansfield Park*, the term 'useful' and its variants recur in relation to Fanny and later her sister, Susan, almost to a parodic degree. Fanny feels a 'longing to be useful' (p. 401), is fretful when she is 'unable to [...] even fancy herself useful' (p. 416), and is to be superseded at Mansfield Park by Susan who is selected on the basis of her 'inclination for usefulness' (p. 438). This obsession with utility signals both Fanny's ambiguous, tenuous position of servility in the household and her anxiety to remain constructively active in light of her avoidance of accomplishments. As far as it relates to

⁷⁸ Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 23. See also, Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

utility, Anne's narrative arc mirrors Fanny's. Due to a perceived loss of beauty and so value Anne too is subordinated in her family circle. To Lady Russell, Anne's situation 'borders on hopelessness' (p. 28) and Sir Walter has no 'hope [...] of ever reading her name in any other page of his favourite work' (pp. 7-8), the Baronetage, in which Elliot marriages are documented. Anne's accomplishments are therefore put to the use of the young ladies who are marriageable. She has 'quite given up dancing' and, apparently 'never tired of playing' the piano (p. 67), frequently facilitates the displays of others. In an inversion of accomplishments' primary purpose being to promote one's own desirability, she assists other women in showcasing their attractions. Her usefulness also extends to the more quotidian needs of others, acting in a supporting role to Mary in her responsibilities as mother, wife and housekeeper. When Charles is injured, Anne is 'of the first utility to the child' in his recovery (p. 55). John Wiltshire suggests that nursing in *Persuasion* is 'linked not only with femaleness, but with social marginality'.⁷⁹ Anne is certainly marginalised by nursing, but I would carry this point further. Because she is simply filling in for feminine deficiencies and never asserting her presence, Anne's utility renders her, like Fanny, almost invisible for the majority of the novel. This elision of self is antithetical to the notion of utility which, in its masculine guise, allows men to assert themselves as public citizens.

In contrast to these two heroines, Emma strives to have agency in and asks for societal recognition of her attempts at utility. Seeking to bypass the obligation to partake in '[w]oman's usual occupations of eye and hand and mind' (p. 83), Emma sets herself the challenge of finding ways to be useful to other women. Her leisure, like that of Fanny and Anne, is at the service of other women's leisure, with Harriet being chosen 'as [the] one to whom she could be useful' (p. 27). By giving her 'a little polish' (p. 37) in her displays,

⁷⁹ John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: 'The Picture of Health'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 166.

Emma tries to give Harriet a better chance on the marriage market and helps her to exhibit that her time has been well spent. This seemingly altruistic behaviour is, nonetheless, at the service of Emma's grander scheme of activity for her own leisure: matchmaking. Rather than being reactive to the needs of others, Emma challenges the lack of agency implicit in female utility, carving out the grounds on which she chooses to be useful. More subversive still, she demands public recognition of her utility, seeking appreciation for her efforts with Harriet as well as previous matchmaking success. This desire throughout to foreground her facilitative role in courtship is self-assertive in a way that is almost akin to masculine utility. Yet it also signals her anxiety in not having social approval for her alternative activity. To Emma, matchmaking and the refinement of Harriet are her 'work' (p. 43); in forwarding the Westons' marriage she describes that she, for instance, 'promoted Mr. Weston's visits [...] gave many little encouragements, and smoothed many little matters'. Troublingly, the novel's key figure of patriarchal authority, Mr Knightley, belittles her enterprise; believing it not be 'worthy employment for a young lady's mind', he reduces her schemes to nothing more than 'a lucky guess' made on an 'idle day' (p. 14). Emma's anxiety of utility is, thus, particularly acute. Not only must she endeavour to remain busy in a useful sense, but she has to contend with the burden of knowing that her leisure is fundamentally rebellious.

The anxiety young women evidence in terms of their desire to be accomplished, useful, or both, is made more intense by the dynamics of surveillance at work in Austen's fictional households. Scholars of domesticity have identified that women's roles in relation to surveillance were manifold and complex. 'Supervision', Armstrong writes, 'presumably made all the difference between amusements that led to corruption and forms of leisure that occupied a woman constructively'.⁸⁰ In accordance with this claim, young women feature heavily in Austen's work as objects of supervision. Austen also depicts the counterpart figure

⁸⁰ Armstrong, p. 100.

of the domestic overseer, a model of womanhood that figures in the research of Davidoff and Hall, Armstrong and Vickery. Overall, they convey a portrait of the female surveyor as empowered, yet under strain, acting as a manager of both household morality and economy. A third, more subtle suggestion in these studies is the idea of the young woman, who, observed in her conduct, in turn observes her overseer in order to learn the methods of surveillance. Vickery, for example, cites one of the reasons for girls being taught needlework as so that when in charge of the household they ‘could command it in others’.⁸¹ Emma seems to embody the totality of these surveillance roles. Whilst still observed from a distance by Mr Knightley, she also ‘prematurely takes on the role of domestic supervisor’.⁸² Having had no real pattern of supervision from which to learn (Mrs Weston always behaved ‘less as a governess than a friend’ (p. 7)), Emma attempts to survey her social circle without really ‘seeing’ and in being thus preoccupied is unaware of how she, herself, is being perceived.

Compared with other novels of the period, Austen’s work shows little interest in the traditional surveillance relationship between a young girl and mentor figure. As Spencer has argued, Austen seems consciously to move on from the prominent featuring of this relationship that we see in the novels of Frances Burney, for example.⁸³ Burney depicts heroines who are dogged by mentors throughout their narrative journeys, from the eponymous Evelina and her duty to produce reports for her guardian, Villars, to *The Wanderer’s* (1814) Juliet and her ineffectual lover-mentor, Harleigh. Austen instead presents unheeded, occasional overseers of heroines in the form of characters such as Lady Catherine, Mr Knightley and Mrs Morland. These guardians have not been armed with the same persistence or controlling drive as those in Burney’s fiction. In fact, such is Austen’s disregard for overbearing mentorship that much of the plot, and the title of *Persuasion*, is

⁸¹ Vickery, p. 150.

⁸² Armstrong, p. 140.

⁸³ Spencer, pp. 168-69.

founded on the past folly of heroine guidance. Mrs Norris is perhaps the exception in terms of her manner of observation. To Mrs Norris, Fanny's leisure is neither delicate nor precarious; she does not mind her labouring and becoming 'tired and fagged' (p. 247) to an unfeminine degree. Her overseeing of Fanny and the anxiety she projects pertain, however, to the position of servitude she tries to instil, rather than to Fanny as an important female representative of the household. The main purpose of Austen's overseers is to remind us that, though not overtly, Austen's heroines are indeed being observed. Sporadic speeches from mentor-figures on the subject of appropriate female conduct, moreover, alert us to the current of anxiety that underpins the leisure of the women that are overseen.

Austen's most extended interest on the subject of surveillance is in heroines as domestic surveyors-in-training. Fanny and Anne, who are each furnished with examples of how not to oversee, absorb their surroundings from the vantage point of their removed domestic positions. The results of Anne's quiet surveillance are unveiled in her ability to adapt appropriately in situations to support, unseen, the 'seen' activities of others, such as the Musgroves' courtship rituals and Mary's mothering. Her knowledge and appropriateness as a domestic overseer is additionally shown in her ignored 'scheme of retrenchment' (p. 13) for the Elliot family. In her intensive observation, Fanny, the 'quietly seeing spectator of others' activities',⁸⁴ is in effect the rival overseer at Mansfield Park to Mrs Norris. Deeply uncomfortable with display and being observed herself, Fanny opts for the unseen activity of usefully watching over others, counteracting Mrs Norris' efforts that are both conspicuous and unhelpful. Fanny makes subtle reports of her surveillance to Edmund who has schooled her in this activity. In losing Edmund's attention to the attractions of Mary Crawford, she loses her entire audience and the validation she sought for her views on that which she

⁸⁴ Nina Auerbach, 'Jane Austen's Dangerous Charm', in *Mansfield Park and Persuasion: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. by Judy Simons (Hampshire: Palgrave, 1997), pp. 49-66 (p. 53).

observed as well as the productiveness of her leisure. Austen's female surveyors are, thus, disempowered, socially-marginalised figures that do not accord with the image of the empowered authoritarian of leisure Armstrong, in particular, suggests.

Although Anne and Fanny are side-lined through utility, it is also true that as a result of their abilities in surveillance they are eventually recognised by both wider society and the objects of their love. Edmund and Wentworth come to value them for their embodiment of the 'peculiar combination of invisibility and vigilance personified in the [ideal] domestic woman'.⁸⁵ Their marital unions serve to reflect that, as Vickery asserts, '[t]he desire for a prudent household manager had long been a real consideration in male courtship decisions'.⁸⁶ Yet it is only once the women to whom Fanny and Anne have played supportive roles – Mary Crawford and Louisa – are removed as obstacles, along with their accompanying alluring accomplishments, that Edmund and Wentworth consider them to be marriage-worthy. Anne and Fanny may be seen to triumph in the end by having strived to be useful, achieving the romantic notice of and marrying the men they desire, but this is not until they have endured long periods of pain and anxiety. In both having been the means of burying and later surfacing Austen's heroines, utility is shown by the end of *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* to be at best a double-edged pursuit.

Although not subjected to social scrutiny to the same extent as younger women, Austen's older female characters, too, show a preoccupation with utility and maintaining the correct level of activity at home. Lady Bertram, officially the female head of her household and ostensibly its chief surveyor, is constantly, albeit not strenuously, at work. 'She was a woman who spent her days in sitting [...] doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty', Austen informs us (p. 20). The anxiety-combating purpose of this incessant

⁸⁵ Armstrong, pp. 80-81.

⁸⁶ Vickery, p. 160.

work is evident when, upon Sir Thomas' return from Antigua, she produces her 'great deal of carpet work', seemingly in order pre-emptively to disarm any accusations of indolence.

Owing to his frequent absences both in town and the Caribbean, Lady Bertram's husband and effective surveyor apparently requires tangible evidence that her 'time ha[s] been irreproachably spent' (p. 167). With its unattractive results and being of no use to anyone, her needlework symbolises endless activity for activity's sake. While she is passively 'indulgent' to her children, we are told that Lady Bertram would require 'greater leisure for the service' of their education (p. 20). By implication, carpet work and 'many yards of fringe' (p. 167) serve as physical accounts of time spent in appropriate feminine occupation that, in the intangibility of their output, being more proactive in motherhood could not suffice to replace.

If even the securely-positioned Lady Bertram faces an anxiety of activity, then, Austen shows us, the situation of spinsters with regards to their occupation is near-excruciating. Owing to her status, Miss Bates is more precariously socially situated than the married Mrs Bennet, or widowed Mrs Jennings and Mrs Norris, for instance, who have acquired the relevant social freedoms to be able to partake in matchmaking and household management. Although 'her middle of life was devoted to the care of a failing mother, and the endeavour to make a small income go as far as possible' (p. 22), Miss Bates does not possess any particular means to be conspicuously and publicly useful. Her anxiety on these grounds and non-specific desire to be of use often erupt in an over-communication of information. This nervous garrulity relates most often to her correspondence with her niece, Jane. She reads Jane's letters aloud to visitors and for her mother who, apparently, 'can never hear [...] [them] often enough' (p. 147). Eve Tavor Bannet explains that through this practice "[t]he discourse of the absent' was 'made present' through the voice of a person

reading the letter aloud'.⁸⁷ Through her orations, then, Miss Bates acts as Jane's mouthpiece, promoting her interests and keeping her alive as a member of the community. Repeating her words so often in her performances of the letters, Miss Bates comes to live vicariously through the absent Jane. This 'formidable [...] image' of being 'an old maid at last' (p. 82) is what Emma reacts to, and seeks to disassociate herself from, by both socially deriding Miss Bates and forging her own scheme for ongoing utility.

In *Sanditon*, Austen develops upon the theme of spinsterhood and its associated problems of leisure time. The Miss Parkers are comparable to Miss Bates in possessing a rage to be useful that is similarly misunderstood by their social circle. The novel's heroine, Charlotte, is astonished by what she terms their 'Unaccountable Officiousness!—Activity run mad!' (p. 332). Her reaction reflects the extremities of their behaviour as Austen brings the issue of female domestic employment into much darker territory. The Miss Parkers live to 'be very busy for the Good of others' (p. 334) and they are seen in the plot to make tenuous plans aimed towards being useful for people they do not even know. Without this occupation or the hope of any other they turn to the business of 'self-doctoring' (p. 315). They diagnose 'Disorders and [find] Recoveries [...] very much out of the common way' (p. 334). Their treatments at their most unsettling involve one sister, in what amounts to an act of self-abuse, unnecessarily 'ha[ving] three Teeth drawn' resulting in her 'Nerves [...] [being] a good deal deranged' (p. 314). As well as providing her most troubling depiction of women's struggle to fill their time usefully, in *Sanditon* Austen is also the most openly critical about the reasons behind the strange behaviour she depicts. The bodily fixations of the Miss Parkers are, the narrator informs us, 'more like the amusement of eager Minds in want of employment than of actual afflictions and relief' (p. 334). The sisters are sharp and capable, becoming involved in

⁸⁷ Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 46.

areas as diverse as health and housing in the short narrative space in which they feature. Their pointless self-destructiveness is Austen's response to a system in which such women are excluded from so much activity and yet expected to avoid indolence. This position is rendered more difficult for spinsters by the lack of a defined scheme of permissible pursuits and little real scope for their situation ever to be changed.

As the examples I have looked at collectively reveal, in invoking the masculine discourse of utility Austen seeks to expose the comparable futility of women's leisure. The hollow pursuits of Miss Bates and The Miss Parkers show that women, in endeavouring to be useful, are active only to show that their time obeys the correct definition of leisure. Austen uses the term 'useful' ironically, situating her female characters' pursuits against a backdrop of male activity that more traditionally abides by this term. We see men's constructive acts of utility in events as varied as Mr Elton going to the framers, Colonel Brandon securing a living for Edward and even Mr Bennet profitably introduces himself to Mr Bingley. While Mr Parker has the fortunes of the entire town of Sanditon to occupy him, his sisters oscillate between occupation with their bodies and the smaller concerns of others. Moreover, in striving for personal utility: Emma damages others' regard for her; Anne and Fanny allow for the enjoyment of others at their own expense; and Miss Bates is an avoided object of ridicule. Men's usefulness, whether in the sense of actual employment or general acts of public utility, is personally enhancing, affording them status and cementing their role as independent citizens. Conversely, women's utility comes in the form of acts of social obligation that reassert their state of dependence.⁸⁸ Their desiring to be useful whilst having no access to the masculine social rewards of utility is, Austen observes, a harmful combination.

⁸⁸ McCormack asserts that in the Georgian era the key to citizenship was a specifically masculine 'independence' which 'denote[d] freedom from obligation (or 'dependency')'. By contrast 'dependence', and the obligation with which this was associated, was a decidedly feminine characteristic, pp. 2, 13.

The ultimate futility of female leisure is perhaps most pointedly shown, not in contrast to male pursuits, but in the references to discarded female accomplishments throughout Austen's work. Having been an often anxiety-inducing means of monitoring their activity throughout their youth, accomplishments are abandoned by the women who have successfully deployed them in securing a husband. Austen marks an interest in the afterlife of married women's accomplishments with Mrs Elton who says that she is 'doatingly fond of music' and yet never performs as 'married women [...] are but too apt to give up music' (p. 257). Lady Middleton, echoing this example, 'celebrated [...] [marriage] by giving up music, although by her mother's account, she had played extremely well, and by her own was very fond of it' (pp. 36-37). Austen also momentarily draws our attention to the forgotten skills of Mrs Palmer whose 'landscape in coloured silks of her performance' hangs above Mrs Jennings' mantelpiece (p. 153). This product of her accomplishment is an uncomfortable reminder of the role these skills once played in enhancing her beauty and attracting the passive-aggressive Mr Palmer. These acknowledgements of the inevitable abandonment of accomplishments set a precedent that is foreboding for several of Austen's women. For Marianne and Jane Fairfax in particular, the discarding of accomplishments would equate, not to futile years of youthful anxiety, but to wasted craft, passion and means of self-expression.

Different deployments of accomplishments and the re-imagination of leisure

As well as drawing attention to the problematic nature of the cultural implementation of accomplishments, Austen uses them to suggest ways in which women might reconceive the purpose of their leisure. While sympathetic to her views, Austen's treatment of accomplishments refuses to follow the pattern Wollstonecraft sets in direct opposition to conduct literature. Austen's move, in other words, is not to criticise the types of activity commonly prescribed for women in order to make way for a new system of female education.

On the contrary, what is striking about Austen's assessment of leisure is that she does not condemn individual activities themselves, but rather uses them as a means to critique the ideology of femininity for which they are culturally in service. Accomplishments, Austen shows, take either the form of being practised in youth in order to display an alluring model of womanhood or are otherwise used in performances of utility by the 'unmarriageable'. According to this contemporary deployment, these activities are instruments of subordination, rendering women servile to male desire, or else beings locked in a state of social futility. The unsettling scope of this homogenising model of female powerlessness is suggested by the implied existence of a vast network of women in Austen's world beyond her immediate attention to heroines' lives. Nonetheless, with central characters such as the eldest Dashwood sisters, Jane Fairfax and *Persuasion's* Mrs Smith, Austen investigates how accomplishments might provide a source of power and offer the potential for self-definition. Providing examples of the appropriation of accomplishments as a form of advantageous social cover, means of channelling artistic ability, or used in paid work, Austen promotes redefining and reclaiming these activities and by extension female leisure.

Austen's fiction is distinctive in its deployment of accomplishments as a cover for female division rather than unity. Scenes of collaborative needlework traditionally present in women's fiction are noticeably absent in her work. Instead, Austen shows us Catherine rejecting Mrs Morland's attempt to involve her in shared needlework and Fanny is bullied and given mundane, facilitative tasks in her work with Lady Bertram and Mrs Norris to mark her difference. An antithetical message is given in Jane Barker's *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies* (1723) in which the author uses the building of a patchwork screen as a multi-layered metaphor for women's creative freedom. Barker suggests women 'as differently mix'd as the Patches in their Work' regardless of class, religion, politics, and even time, might be united and able to use patchwork as an expressive medium. With patchwork, women are freed from

the drudgery and uniformity of other forms of needlework, there being ‘no Harm done’ by accidents such as smudging which only enhance their artistic input.⁸⁹ Burney later complicates this image of ease and solidarity in *The Wanderer*, being interested like Austen in female rivalry. At the milliner’s shop the novel shows the sexual rivalry between the women who, exposed and observed in their needlework, vie for the attentions of the officers to whom they are ‘natural prey’.⁹⁰ Nonetheless these episodes take place outside the realms of gentility within which Austen’s fiction is primarily set. When needlework is left solely to the genteel Gabriella and Juliet in *The Wanderer* it is a harmonious exercise that further seals their friendship. For Juliet, ‘No privation was hard, no toil was severe, no application was tedious, while the friend of her heart was by her side’.⁹¹ In *Sense and Sensibility*, when Elinor’s joins Lucy to complete the project of Annamaria’s filigree basket, Austen holds a distortive mirror up to this notion of sewing and female unity. Dupliciously, Elinor uses the supposed camaraderie in shared accomplishments to mask her intention to discover the truth of Lucy’s romance with Edward. Allowing Elinor to manipulate this activity, Austen contradicts the expectations of contemporary readers with regards to accomplishments and female community.

Austen’s narrator makes an ironic acknowledgment of the decided break with convention in this episode. Austen writes: ‘the two fair rivals were thus seated side by side at the same table, and with the utmost harmony engaged in forwarding the same work’ (p. 139). Whilst evoking the tradition of female solidarity through joint needlework, this quotation signals for the knowing reader the actual disharmony between the two women and the discomfort of their necessarily close proximity. This description also acknowledges the outward appearance of the pair and the peaceful amicability they wish to project to onlookers.

⁸⁹ Jane Barker, *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies; or, Love and Virtue Recommended* (London: E. Curll and T. Payne, 1723), pp. v, viii.

⁹⁰ Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 428.

⁹¹ *The Wanderer*, p. 402.

Lucy and Elinor are indeed ‘forwarding the same work’, but not simply in producing the basket. Together, they also work to create a veneer beneath which they can communicate in confidence. In contrast to Burney and Barker, it is not shared work but the desire for a mutually beneficial conversation that motivates these characters to form, as it has been aptly termed, a ‘competitive alliance’.⁹² Austen’s work, I have shown, demonstrates that designedly femininity is the illusory product of practising accomplishments. Here, her characters seem to exploit this illusion for personal benefit. In achieving this wider feminine goal, what brings these two characters together is temporarily of more importance than that which divides them. While Elinor and Lucy hide behind an image of diligent utility, Anne Elliot and Fanny are seen less premeditatedly to use accomplishments as social cover. Anne hides in plain sight, cloaking her turbulent emotions with a piano performance to which no one pays close attention, while Fanny regularly seeks to hide her distress behind the appearance of concentrating on domestic work. The need for these concealments once more shows that women’s leisure is never truly their own. Nevertheless, in allowing women to make use of a psychic detachment from their accomplishments, Austen considers how even with its constraints domesticity might afford time and space for women’s emotional needs.

This instance of detached application is, however, by no means representative of *Sense and Sensibility*’s attitude to accomplishments on the whole. The Dashwood girls, we learn in a rare glimpse of assertiveness from Mrs Dashwood, have not been raised in the art of attracting men. Expressing the exact opposite of the sentiments of *Pride and Prejudice*’s central matriarch, Mrs Bennet, she insists that ‘Mr. Willoughby will [not] be incommoded by the attempts of either of *my* daughters towards what you call *catching him*. It is not an employment to which they have been brought up’ (p. 46). Despite being raised with a

⁹² Sarah Annes Brown, *Devoted Sisters: Representations of the Sister Relationship in Nineteenth-century British and American Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 62.

message that contradicts the traditional purpose of accomplishments the Miss Dashwoods are still highly accomplished. Following her mother's ethos, Elinor, who it is implied spends much time drawing, does not hone her skills in order 'to prepare [...] to excite love'. Her accomplishments are not, as Wollstonecraft puts it, 'without a bottom'.⁹³ Able to supply the household management skills and general prudence that her mother lacks, Elinor disproves Wollstonecraft's fear that rationality and accomplishments might be mutually exclusive concepts, disdaining women such as the Steeles who appear to prove otherwise.⁹⁴

But it is her sister, Marianne, who in showing that they might be used to channel women's artistry and individuality more strongly makes the case for accomplishments' value. Seeking to level the ground in terms of talent and gender, she demands male reciprocity in accomplishments and argues that men must perform equally well to be considered attractive. Marianne laments 'how spiritless, how tame was Edward's manner in reading to us last night!'.⁹⁵ Along with impressive accomplishments, she also makes it clear that she demands artistic appreciation from men if they are to be permitted to observe skilled female performance, bemoaning that Edward does not admire Elinor's drawings 'as a connoisseur' (p. 19). The Dashwood accomplishments have not been designed only to satisfy desiring male gaze. Marianne, committed to conveying truth at all times – it being 'impossible for her to say what she did not feel' (p. 118) – necessarily conveys aspects of her innermost self through her accomplishments. Asserting that when observing accomplishments men must 'understand their worth' (p. 19), Marianne therefore asks that men are both able to appreciate the artistic merit of female work and the individual value of the woman behind it. Society sadly falls short of her expectations, with Willoughby able to feign the depth of understanding she craves and Edward unable to appreciate Elinor's abilities beyond their

⁹³ Wollstonecraft, pp. 196, 255.

⁹⁴ Wollstonecraft argues that 'the understanding is neglected, whilst accomplishments are acquired', p. 127.

⁹⁵ This wish to be excited by male performance signals an interesting reversal of gendered roles with regards to accomplishments and bears radical implications in terms of female sexuality that I will return to in the next chapter.

being an excuse to admire her physically. She confronts this societal failing when she protests how Elinor's screens are treated by Fanny and Mrs Ferrars.

‘This is admiration of a very particular kind! – what is Miss Morton to us? – who knows, or who cares, for her? – it is Elinor of whom *we* think and speak.’

And so saying, she took the screens out of her sister-in-law's hands, to admire them herself as they ought to be admired (p. 222).

Marianne seeks to correct the manner in which the others were looking at the screens, demonstrating studying the artwork with the individual in mind as opposed to a crude and impersonal weighing in skills or, by proxy, marriageability. In her own passionate reading and musicianship, Marianne advocates the ability to achieve self-definition through accomplishments, rather than definition relative to other women or the feminine ideal. Accomplishments, for her, are something truly innate, rather than parading to be innate femininity manifest.

Whilst not facing the economic need to work, Marianne embodies the frustrations of women limited and confined to amateurism by the designation of their talents as accomplishments.⁹⁶ Upholding Armstrong's suggestion that ‘the figure of the prostitute could be freely invoked to describe any woman who dared to labour for money’,⁹⁷ Copeland contends that in line with her sensibilities as a genteel author Austen recoils from the notion of female work.⁹⁸ Research by scholars including Jennie Batchelor, Vickery and to a lesser extent Davidoff and Hall has challenged the ‘assumption of labour's antithetical relation to domesticity’ that underpins Copeland's claim.⁹⁹ Austen's views on work are, accordingly, less class-bound and more nuanced than he allows. The respectable models of employment

⁹⁶ Irrespective of particular talents in areas such as art or music, women's skills were resolutely ‘contained within an amateur framework’, Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (1987), revised edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 290.

⁹⁷ Armstrong, p. 79.

⁹⁸ Copeland, pp. 161-62.

⁹⁹ Jennie Batchelor, *Womens Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 13.

that were available to women, such as teaching, often made them wholly dependent.¹⁰⁰ In *Emma*, Jane Fairfax faces a future in which she will be entirely reliant on women like Mrs Elton who seeks to achieve social ascendance through recommending her high-quality talents. This dependence echoes that of Juliet upon Miss Arbe, who finds music students for her in *The Wanderer*.¹⁰¹ In terms of portraying the use of accomplishments in work, Austen does not go as far as Burney, remaining more fixedly within a domestic setting. Nevertheless, while her employment does not come to fruition, Jane Fairfax's status is as a reluctant would-be governess for the majority of *Emma*. *The Wanderer* seems to enact and articulate many of the fears *Emma* obliquely refers to in relation to work. Juliet resents that the means of earning subsistence from the 'soul-soothing art' of 'Music [...] her favourite study' must be the incongruously 'dull and dry labour of teaching'.¹⁰² Like Juliet, Jane would have to teach young girls accomplishments regardless of their inclinations or natural abilities. In selling her 'human intellect' (p. 279), she would only be able to perpetuate female amateurism and pass on skills she has devotedly refined to become, most likely, others' disposable tools of courtship.

In her final completed novel, *Persuasion*, however, Austen suggests that accomplishments, if deployed as a means of subsistence, might be liberating for leisured-class women. Expressing a distaste for teaching in *The Watsons* – with a heroine who 'can think of nothing worse' (p. 255) – as well as *Emma*, Austen shows that she is dubious about the options available for women who must rely on their accomplishments for a living. Emma Watson and Jane Fairfax, in taking on this work, would be implicated in entrenching the system of accomplishments that I have shown throughout this chapter Austen condemns. Mrs

¹⁰⁰ Clara in *Sanditon* is ostensibly saved from having to work in being offered a position as a companion and yet, like Fanny, also arguably in a companion role (see Copeland, p. 168), she finds herself a preyed-upon object of male desire, not having the protection of really belonging to the genteel family with which she is associated.

¹⁰¹ Johnson has noted that Jane's 'history' would not be out of place next to Burney's novel, p. 134.

¹⁰² *The Wanderer*, p. 275.

Smith is a damaged product of this system; through her, Austen explores work outside of instructing in accomplishments in a contrastingly positive light. Having been educated in accomplishments alongside Anne, Mrs Smith later used them according to convention for women of her class and attracted the wrong kind of man, leading to her eventual ruin.

Significantly, Mrs Smith is then taught knitting from the working-class perspective of Nurse Rooke whose skills have always been deployed for personal profit and independent subsistence. She is in effect retrained in accomplishments so that they can transform from being used superficially to being personally beneficial.

Her instructor is portrayed in many ways as the antidote to the problems faced by women of the leisured class. A ‘shrewd, intelligent, sensible woman’ (p. 146), Nurse Rooke is part of a supportive female community and is powerful in her knowledge. She acts as a useful point of comparison to *Persuasion*’s other nurse, Anne. Nurse Rooke is respected, valued and of course paid, whilst within the context of genteel domesticity Anne is ignored and marginalised. *The Rights of Woman* makes the case that work is crucial to female independence, arguing that: ‘were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would [...] [be able] to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence’.¹⁰³

Wollstonecraft does not seem hopeful in this regard, reflecting on how poorly equipped society is to support this eventuality in *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798).¹⁰⁴ As Matthew McCormack indicates, the notion of achieving independence through work was viewed by society resolutely as a masculine privilege.¹⁰⁵ Austen, with her portrayal of Mrs Smith, revitalised though ‘hours of occupation and enjoyment’ (p. 145), is nevertheless somewhat more optimistic. Now a member of a mutually-beneficial female micro-

¹⁰³ Wollstonecraft, p. 158.

¹⁰⁴ For analysis of Wollstonecraft’s attitudes to female labour, see Batchelor, *Women’s Work*.

¹⁰⁵ ‘[M]iddle-class men [...] asserted that true masculine honour consisted in achieving independence *through work*’, McCormack, p. 17.

community, we see Mrs Smith successfully move away from a self-conception as ‘leisured’ to repurpose her time towards being productive and ensuring her own survival.

This chapter has sought to refocus the debate around Austen and leisure. Instead of depicting the leisured lives of her characters because this was an appropriate fictional domain, Austen concentrates on this subject in order to reveal that, in light of the pressure placed on women to aspire to the feminine ideal, leisure was frequently physically and mentally hard work. The rewards of this labour were minimal, if at all existent, her fiction reveals. Young women who practise accomplishments engage in activities that cast them unwillingly into a state of competition with one another, inhibit their sexual agency and narrow the scope for the assertion of individuality. The alternative enterprise of utility results in characters that are truly useful, like Fanny and Anne, being treated as non-entities and others, such as Miss Bates, a social burden; these attitudes are painfully registered by these characters. The fear of indolence ensured not only adherence to these essentially fruitless leisure pursuits, but by demanding intensive application that real respite, so crucial for women ‘[t]o understand, thoroughly understand [their] own heart[s]’ (p. 386), was difficult to find. In being rigorously culturally determined, genteel leisure seems to refuse without difficulty to bend to needs of the individual. As Adorno showed in his discussion of worker’s ‘free time’, Austen demonstrates that women’s time designedly does not belong to them.

Like Adorno, Austen also seems to suggest that ‘imagination’ might be the key to the reclamation of leisure time.¹⁰⁶ Several of Austen’s central characters thus try to subvert the conventional framework of leisure. Elizabeth and Catherine controversially evade accomplishments, Emma creates an alternative scheme of utility and Marianne, at the opposite end of the spectrum, conceives of herself as an artist. Yet the suggestion for the

¹⁰⁶ Adorno, pp. 192-93.

redefinition of leisure that is most fully realised in the fiction comes, contrary to popular understanding of Austen, in the form of paid employment. Women like Mrs Smith have not been prepared from their youth for the possibility of having to use their skills for remunerative ends. In a mock re-enactment of the pre-narrative scenes of education in which she first met Anne, Mrs Smith must therefore relearn, in order to be able to reapply, her formerly decorative accomplishments. The 'mere Mrs. Smith, an every day Mrs. Smith' (p. 148), as Sir Walter's words suggest, is an everywoman. Her situation exposes and acts as a corrective to the problems caused by women being set within an inflexible mould of accomplishment, as exemplified by her counterpart everywoman, Harriet Smith. With her inappropriate array of accomplishments, Harriet is prepared only to display and then dispose of her skills when, with her future uncertain for much of the novel, she should be ready to use them as a lifeline. Restricting female abilities under the guise of this being natural, the contemporary ideology of leisure fundamentally disadvantages women. Austen depicts this status quo not to endorse it, but to expose its shortcomings, contradictions and, as the case of Mrs Smith pointedly evidences, the potential danger for women posed by its limitations. Ultimately, Austen does not dispute the work of leisure but rather that it should be for such unproductive, and often destructive, ends.

Chapter 2

‘[N]ot quite of the human flesh’: The domestication of the female body

‘My illness has made me think – It has given me leisure for calmness and for serious recollection. Long before I was enough recovered to talk, I was perfectly able to reflect.’

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)¹

And now that we understand them [the passions] all, we have much less reason to fear them than we had before. For we see that they are all in their nature good, and that we have nothing to avoid but misuses or excesses of them, for which the remedies I have explained could suffice if everyone had enough interest in putting them into practice. [...] I have included among these remedies the forethought and skill by which we can correct our constitutional deficiencies, in applying ourselves to separate within us the movements of the blood and spirits from the thoughts to which they are usually joined [...].

René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649)²

Whereas dominant critical accounts have frequently viewed Austen’s novels as moralistic tales in which characters are taught lessons that lead to their self-discovery,³ my emphasis here is on how the fiction shows women are too busy contending with the work of leisure to know themselves. Thus, in the example above, we observe Marianne (as Emma Watson, Emma Woodhouse and Jane Bennet did in the epigraphs to the last chapter) having had to wait for a period of sufficient tranquillity to understand herself. In Marianne’s case, this time is afforded through illness, a state in which, as John Wiltshire points out, she would become hyper-aware of the body’s functions, its presence and its frailty.⁴ Descartes, whose theories were enduringly influential in the eighteenth century, claimed that an in-depth understanding

¹ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 322. All subsequent references are to this edition.

² René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* (1649), trans. by Steven H. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1989), pp. 132-33.

³ See, for instance Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 166 and Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 177, 175-76.

⁴ John Wiltshire, *Jane Austen and the Body: ‘The Picture of Health’* (1992) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 8.

of the body and recognition that it is distinct from, and yet works in a close and complex manner with, the mind is crucial to self-knowledge. His *The Passions of the Soul* (1649) acts as a guide to achieving self-control by recognising that, as the site of the passions, the body can have power over the rational mind. Marianne has lived a life that defiantly privileges the body; she plays music, not for the service of others, but because its sensations are pleasurable, and her actions are often dictated by an erotic desire for Willoughby. Struck by illness, she reportedly regrets and subsequently alters her behaviour, telling Elinor that in the future: ‘my feelings shall be governed and my temper shall be improved’ (p. 323). Reading Descartes, one can infer that sickness or injury, as occasions when ‘the machine of the body’ is broken,⁵ and unable to be repaired by wilful thought, are episodes in which the distinction between mind and body would be profoundly evident. In her physically incapacitated state, Marianne would be abruptly awakened to the body-as-machine, as opposed to a site of romantic impulses. With the dominion of the body thus interrupted, she seemingly undergoes a Cartesian readjustment, renegotiating the influence of the passions in the mind. In the end, she submits to reason, burying her feelings for Willoughby and making the pragmatic connection with Colonel Brandon after a silent, shrewd assessment of her lot.

While Descartes’ advice for bodily and therefore self-control is principally aimed at men,⁶ in Austen’s period social anxiety towards the body was particularly intense regarding women. As the characterisation of Marianne testifies, it was women who according to the eighteenth-century concept of sensibility were seen as most likely to live unthinkingly in pursuit of their passions. So crucial to the understanding of female character was sensibility that, as Ann van Sant posits, ‘woman and woman of sensibility might have been thought

⁵ Descartes, p. 38.

⁶ Descartes appears only to address men. In his section entitled ‘A general remedy for the passions’ the examples he gives are all male-specific, such as: ‘when someone feels the desire for vengeance and anger is pushing him to run rashly towards his assailants, he should summon up the thought that it’s unwise to lose one’s life when it can be saved without dishonour’, p. 58.

synonymous'.⁷ Sensibility, as with Descartes' passions, had its basis in the body.⁸ Most problematic of all according to contemporary thought was that '[d]elicate sexual impulse' was seen as 'part of sensibility's heightening of responses'.⁹ With its potential to rule behaviour according to dangerous impulses, for both conservative thinkers and radicals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, female physical life was hazardous. In response, conduct literature either ignored or sought in effect to 'hollow out' the body, focusing on dress and appearance but rarely female physicality itself. One of James Fordyce's sermons, for example, is focused 'Modest Apparel', which in Fordyce's argument, appears to stand in place of a discussion of the female body and sexuality. In it, he 'tremble[s] for [women's] situation' and pleads with them to dress modestly for the sake of their 'tender' 'reputation[s]'. In a seemingly literal attempt to sanitise the female body, he comes closest to addressing actual corporeality in recommending 'cleanliness' before turning from 'the shocking idea' of '[a] dirty woman'.¹⁰ For writers, and especially those desiring to improve women, the female body was a burden either to be carefully controlled or avoided entirely.

In line with her supposed sympathy with these largely conservative works, Austen's fiction has been read as conspicuously silent about her characters' physical lives. The idea that Austen's fiction is sanitised, asexual and avoiding the corporeal and the passionate has in fact provided fuel for nearly two centuries' worth of detractors. Writing in 1848 of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Charlotte Brontë strikingly described the novel as '[a]n accurate daguerrotyped portrait of a commonplace face; [...] [with] no glance of a bright vivid physiognomy'. Reading *Emma* (1815) only affirmed Brontë's dislike of Austen; she

⁷ Ann Jessie van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Sense in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 15.

⁸ One of the earliest exponents of this idea was John Locke who argued that the world is understood through 'Sensation' or 'an Impression or Motion, made in some part of the Body', John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding in Four Books* (1690), 6th edn, 2 vols (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1710), I, p. 79.

⁹ Van Sant, p. 107.

¹⁰ James Fordyce, *Sermons to Young Women* (1765), 12th edn, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell, jun. and W. Davies, 1800), I, pp. 33, 32, 52.

complained that any kind of visceral reaction to Austen's work is impossible because 'the Passions are perfectly unknown' to the author.¹¹ In a later famously violent response to Austen's passionlessness, Mark Twain declared that upon reading her work he 'want[s] to dig her up and beat her over the skull with her own shin-bone',¹² 'presumably', as Wiltshire notes, 'to remind [...] Austen of the absoluteness of corporeal reality'.¹³ The notion that Austen novels are 'limited to the cerebral and refined' has likewise dominated modern criticism of her work.¹⁴ Even those self-consciously belonging to the 'subversive school' of Austen studies,¹⁵ such as Claudia Johnson, have primarily focused on characters' intellectual lives in their analyses.

Several works in recent decades have, nevertheless, sought to challenge this myth of Austen's elision of the body. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notorious essay 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl' (1991) condemns the 'timidity and banality' of Austen scholarship as she uncovers the theme of 'autoeroticism' in *Sense and Sensibility*.¹⁶ In *Jane Austen and the Body* (1992), Wiltshire looks at the body's presence in the fiction through its fixation with 'health and illness'.¹⁷ More recently, Juliet McMaster has argued that Austen uses 'the body as an indispensable signifier', while Jill Heydt-Stevenson's *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions* (2005) has examined the radical implications of the sexual comedy in the novels.¹⁸ Following the important change in critical course signalled by this scholarship, this chapter will argue that Austen is deeply interested in the physical lives of her characters. Yet I also accept that the assumption that Austen suppresses the body made by Brontë and others is not entirely

¹¹ Charlotte Brontë, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), II, p. 383.

¹² *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by B. C. Southam, 2 vols (London: Routledge, 1979), II, p. 232.

¹³ Wiltshire, pp. 1-2.

¹⁴ Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 1.

¹⁵ Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 49.

¹⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl', *Critical Enquiry*, 17 (1991), 818-37 (p. 833).

¹⁷ Wiltshire, p. 10.

¹⁸ Juliet McMaster, *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 173.

ungrounded. Her work does, inescapably, lack the somatic qualities and the frequency of physical events found in the works of many of her predecessors, including two of her main influences, Frances Burney and Samuel Richardson. Austen is, moreover, a ‘minimalist’ when it comes to ‘the whole matter of physical appearance’, as McMaster has shown in comparing her descriptive style to Burney’s.¹⁹ While it is, then, necessary to be aware that bodies are represented in her work, to over-emphasise the presence of the corporeal in Austen is also somewhat misleading.

Although women’s bodies are most often absent from the fiction, abrupt references, such as to Mrs Smith’s previously discussed broken body, force us to reassess Austen’s silences. In seeking to interpret her silence, this chapter contends that Austen limits her depictions of corporeality as a strategy to address the cultural repression of the female body. Conservative conduct works, I have suggested, dealt with the cultural anxiety regarding the female body by ignoring certain aspects of the body and only carefully discussing others. Furthermore, they attempted to control female corporeal life in confining middle-class women’s sphere of movement to the domestic and by prescribing approved physical activities (namely accomplishments) with which to fill their leisure. Domestic ideology sought in essence to replace the individual female body, with its problematic desires and capabilities, with a universal sanitised ‘feminine’ body. It is not the case, I contend therefore, that in her silence Austen simply avoids the subject of the body. Rather, in reacting to this treatment of the female body in domestic ideology, she recreates the cultural situation whereby women are effectively led to ignore their own physicality.

The more concerned women are with the strictures of domesticity, such as with the desire to become accomplished or to be useful, as explored in Chapter 1, the more extreme

¹⁹ McMaster, pp. 166-68.

their corporeal disassociation seems to be. As we have seen, Anne Elliot and Emma Woodhouse are preoccupied with domestic utility. With their chosen fields of utility rendering them serviceable to the romantic and so bodily lives of others, they have, I will show, become estranged from themselves physically. Conversely, rebellious characters like Elizabeth Bennet, who variously eschews societal restraints, seem to be more connected to their bodily life. Facing little family pressure to follow a conduct-book education, Elizabeth correspondingly is relatively immune to false notions of the female body, such as its frailty, propagated by domestic ideology. Thus she appears able to embrace her physical life, undertaking extensive exercise at will, such as when she desires to see her sister Jane. Tellingly, while usually for female characters the corporeal signifier of a blush denotes their modesty and so appropriate femininity, for Elizabeth, ‘a face glowing’²⁰ is a literal translator of her exertion and vitality.

Though on the surface like Elizabeth embracing her physicality, Marianne too has been led in response to domestic life to ignore her own corporeality. Following her passions for the majority of the novel, she is most often read as representing a critique of the woman of sensibility.²¹ But, given the outmoded nature of this once popular literary mode, Austen I argue seems rather to be assessing the long-term effect of the cult of sensibility on women.²² Austen presents through Marianne is an exaggerated, rebellious privileging of passion in response to the repression of the female body that occurs, in part, owing to a misplaced fear

²⁰ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 33. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²¹ Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 16-17.

²² The subject of sensibility is generally viewed to have been outmoded in literature since the late eighteenth-century, with the hero of Charlotte Smith’s *Marchmont* (1796) even calling the term ‘prostituted’ twenty years prior to the height of Austen’s publishing career, Charlotte Smith, *Marchmont*, 4 vols (London: Sampson Low, 1796), IV, p. 52. Critics have nevertheless also contested a ‘demise narrative’ regarding the cult of sensibility. Christopher Nagle makes a case for a ‘Long Age of Sensibility’ arguing that Austen ‘is a significant early-nineteenth century practitioner of Sensibility’, Christopher C. Nagle, *Sexuality and the Culture of Sensibility in the British Romantic Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 4, 16, 98. Markman Ellis has, furthermore, argued that sensibility continued to be a subject of fierce debate in the wake of the French Revolution in the 1790s, Markman Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 190-92.

of sensibility. It is the cultural suppression of the female body promoted through works such as Fordyce's that is dangerous, Austen shows, not women's fundamentally passion-driven nature. Hence, Marianne is able, as evidenced above, 'to reflect' and to decide to cease her resistance to reason and entire prioritisation of bodily life when this proves necessary.

To argue that Austen simply ignored the body either because of outright prudishness or, as is more common in recent criticism, a privileging of the mind is, then, patently insufficient. McMaster and Wiltshire in particular have read the body as being used as a conveyor of psychological signs in the novels.²³ In suggesting that the body acts as a translator of the mind, these critics imply a 'mind/body' 'dualism',²⁴ in which the latter is in service of the former. Yet what Austen is concerned with is not 'the mind in the body' but, as I have begun to elucidate, the absence of the body in the mind.²⁵ While McMaster and Wiltshire inadvertently reinforce the notion of a mind/body distinction, Heydt-Stevenson maintains that overall Austen's characters have 'a close, even indissoluble, relationship between mind and body'. Women evidence their 'body-consciousness' in moments of 'body/bawdy humour', she claims.²⁶ It is true that Austen wants her characters to have a mind-body connection and celebrates this when it occurs. However in focusing on the comedic Heydt-Stevenson misses the warnings in moments of near-tragedy, such as Marianne's illness, that point to disconnection and a troubled relationship between women's minds and their bodies. What is more, by over-stating the presence of the body in Austen's work, as Heydt-Stevenson and Wiltshire particularly do, these critics miss the work done through silence by Austen in recreating, in order to combat, bodily repression.

²³ According to McMaster, Austen develops an alternative system to read the body to those available such as physiognomy, pp. 59-60. For Wiltshire, character psychology is often visible on the surface of the novels' ailing bodies, p. 13.

²⁴ Wiltshire, p. 76.

²⁵ McMaster, p. 20.

²⁶ Heydt-Stevenson, pp. 2, 204.

This chapter intends to dispel the notion that Austen deals in any form of a false binary of mind/body. Instead, I assert, she emphasises the importance of a unified selfhood for women, of which the body is a crucial part. The first section will position the mind-body problem in Austen in the context of contemporary thought on the female body, with reference to scientific debate and commentators from Wollstonecraft to Hannah More. Building on the last chapter's discussion of leisure, I will then observe how the domestic environment, as a hub of anxiety about the female body and heavily prescriptive in terms of behaviour, works to disconnect women from their bodies. Showing the impact of this disassociation, the chapter will discuss Austen's portrayal of the pathological nature of confinement, first of all through the recurring notion of imagined female illness. Through Mary Musgrove in *Persuasion* (1818) and the Miss Parkers in *Sanditon* (1817), all of whom are obsessed with non-existent ailments, Austen reveals women's often troublingly warped understanding of their physicality. Of course, not all of the fiction's female characters adhere to confinement or limited domestic activity. In looking at rebellion in Austen's novels, I will explore further how characters like Marianne reactively seek to embrace their corporeal life, behaving in an impulsive, sexually transgressive manner that ultimately reveals another way in which domesticity is pathological. Having shown how Austen's women range from completely neglecting to distortedly over-privileging their physical lives, I will demonstrate how their psychic (non-)relationships with the body are sharply exposed in recurring episodes of jeopardy in the outdoors. Truly knowing oneself is frequently perceived to be the triumphant conclusion for Austenian heroines: 'Till this moment, I never knew myself' (p. 202), famously declares Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Lastly, then, this chapter will examine the process of bodily rediscovery that, in finally allowing women to understand themselves not only physically, but emotionally and intellectually, proves to be integral to achieving complete self-knowledge.

The mind-body problem in context

Towards the end of *Persuasion* Austen includes an episode that encapsulates society's problematic attitudes to the female body and, more importantly, women's internalisation of these views. In this scene, Anne and Captain Harville dispute the relative romantic loyalties of men and women. They struggle with the terms on which to define gender difference in their debate, initially using men and women's respective spheres of life experience as its foundation. This approach is soon abandoned owing to Captain Benwick having lived a quiet, 'feminine' lifestyle of late and proving therefore to be an exception to the rule. The conversation turns instead to the question of whether behaviour in romantic relationships is in fact predetermined by an innate difference between the sexes:

'[...] If the change be not from outward circumstances, it must be from within; it must be nature, man's nature, which has done the business for Captain Benwick.'

'No, no, it is not man's nature. I will not allow it to be more man's nature than woman's to be inconstant and forget those they do love, or have loved. I believe the reverse. I believe in a true analogy between our bodily frames and our mental; and that as our bodies are the strongest, so are our feelings; capable of bearing most rough usage, and riding out the heaviest weather.'

'Your feelings may be the strongest,' replied Anne, 'but the same spirit of analogy will authorise me to assert that ours are the most tender [...].'²⁷

While Anne turns the discussion towards nature, it is notably Harville who in an effort to trump her viewpoint introduces the idea of the body. According to his mind-body analogy, human characteristics are determined within a binary framework of male strength and female weakness. So, although Anne is asserting that the feelings of her sex are the strongest, working within the limited bodily framework set by Harville she is only able to express this

²⁷ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 218-19. All subsequent references are to this edition.

strength in terms of female passivity, arguing how susceptible women as ‘tender’ beings are to love.²⁸

The body as symbol or determinant of character was a well-established concept by the time Austen was writing *Persuasion*. Thomas Laqueur outlines that in the eighteenth century ‘[w]omen’s bodies in their corporeal, scientifically accessible concreteness [...] came to bear an enormous new weight of meaning’. Advances in anatomy, led to the discovery of ‘[t]wo sexes [...] as a new foundation for gender’, meaning women were no longer biologically seen as lesser or flawed versions of men. This new model, like its predecessor, was nevertheless used as a tool to uphold female subordination. The womb, while no longer ‘a sort of negative phallus’, became the site of ideal femininity, with some scientists arguing that it ‘naturally dispose[d] women towards domesticity’. Harville seems almost to recreate this ‘cultural sleight of hand’ by which contemporary thinkers ‘[t]ranslat[ed] facts about [...] [the body] into ‘facts’ about sexual difference’ when he introduces the above analogy.²⁹ Much as new knowledge of the reproductive system was used to re-inscribe women’s secondary status, Harville draws on bodily evidence to assert the likelihood of their romantic unfaithfulness. What is more, Anne’s acceptance of Harville’s suggestion of female weakness, and struggle to defend her sex according to this logic, mirrors the manner in which women were oppressed by the notion that they were by biological design socially inferior.

²⁸ This binary approach to mind and body strongly echoes that espoused by Fordyce: ‘the nature and situation of the men are very different. Their constitution of mind, no less than of body, is for the most part hardy and rough. By means of both, by the demands of life, and by the impulse of passion, they are engaged in a vast diversity of pursuits, from which your sex are precluded by decorum, by softness, and by fear’, I, p. 127.

²⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 150, 152, 155, 175. While Laqueur’s main argument cited here, that women’s bodies were used to affirm their secondary status, has not been directly challenged, some of the finer points of his work have been in recent years. For instance, Elaine Hobby maintains that the notion that ‘before the eighteenth century anatomical thinking was dominated by a one-sex model’ is too simple minded’, suggesting that ‘the connection drawn [between male and female reproductive organs] is just an analogy’, Jane Sharp, *The Midwives Book: Or the Whole Art of Midwifry Discovered*, ed. by Elaine Hobby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. xxviii. Karen Harvey also offers a re-evaluation of Laqueur’s claims, stating that ‘the stress on bodily difference existed much earlier than Laqueur allows’, Karen Harvey, *Reading Sex in the Eighteenth Century: Bodies and Gender in English Erotic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 79.

Nonetheless, by making a display of male physical weakness, Austen also challenges the veracity of Harville's binary definition of the body. Alongside the central discussion, Wentworth is both eavesdropping and writing letters when he drops his pen. Hearing Anne assert her belief in the steadfast nature of women's love, Wentworth, ostensibly a member of the more robust sex, is overcome with emotion and loses control physically. Anne on the other hand shows both physical and mental strength, pausing only much later in the conversation to gather herself when her feelings threaten to overcome her: 'She could not immediately have uttered another sentence; her heart was too full, her breath too much oppressed' (p. 221).³⁰ Harville who 'had never been in good health since a severe wound which he received two years before' (p. 88), like Wentworth, also has a compromised body in this scene. With his assertion that he is 'capable of bearing [...] rough usage' when his body attests otherwise, Austen gently mocks, but is also sympathetic to Harville. Rather than being a villainous figure forcing patriarchal views onto Anne, this physical detail shows that he has been similarly duped by a belief in the contemporary ideal of masculinity. Ignoring his own injured body, he adopts an exaggerated model of masculine strength particularly associated with his former military position.³¹

Before Anne and Wentworth's conversation rests on the familiar and ultimately unsatisfying paradigm of female weakness/male strength, a discussion occurs which suggests that if men are the stronger sex, this distinction is not necessarily a natural one. Describing the gulf between male and female day-to-day experience, Anne argues that men are less constant in love because they 'are forced on exertion' and 'have always a profession,

³⁰ Heydt-Stevenson also notes that this moment signals Wentworth's 'loss of [...] physical prowess', p. 204.

³¹ While the focus of this chapter is the issue of female disassociation from the material body, I mean to suggest with this example that Austen also hints at a similar issue for men. For works addressing the topic of masculinity in the fiction see: Michael Kramp, *Disciplining Love: Austen and the Modern Man* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007); Sarah Ailwood, "'What men ought to be': Masculinities in Jane Austen's novels' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Wollongong, 2008); and E. J. Clery, 'Austen and Masculinity', in *A Companion to Jane Austen*, ed. by Claudia L. Johnson and Clara Tuite (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 332-42.

pursuits, business of some sort [...] and continual occupation'. Importantly, the activity described here suggests not only what might make men robust mentally, but also physically. Anne contrasts this male exertion with female inactivity: 'We [women] live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us' (p. 218). If men's activity is conducive to strengthening their bodies, confinement and inactivity is apt to make women's bodies become – or, untested by exertion, make women presume that their bodies are – weak, or 'tender'. Providing ample justification for female physical weakness to have been environmentally rather than innately determined, Austen undercuts Harville's analogy before it even appears in the text. By having Anne echo the premise of Harville's analogy in spite of all of the evidence to the contrary, Austen furthermore indicates a serious problem with her heroine's body perception. When we consider that Anne is portrayed as having a good knowledge of the body in her frequent role as nurse her lack of bodily self-perception is more troubling still. By choosing to place such emphasis on women's narrow life experience in this episode, Austen highlights a root cause of this peculiarly unquestioning acceptance of bodily stereotypes.

The widely-held idea of female physical and mental weakness absorbed by Anne was at the crux of contemporary commentary on women's cultural status. Despite their differing politics, Mary Wollstonecraft and Hannah More often share strikingly similar views regarding the female body.³² Each of these writers considers women's bodily weakness to be a universal fact and, while they discuss corporeality as far as to promote 'recreations [...] such as will promote their [women's] health', choose to focus almost entirely on the mind in their most famous works.³³ To More, a lack of physical strength is symptomatic of women's

³² Harriet Guest discusses the similarities between More and Wollstonecraft's strictures on femininity at length in Chapter 11 of Harriet Guest, *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750-1810* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

³³ Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1799), I, p. 88.

divinely determined subordination to men and it is a primary reason for her faith in existing societal models:

The fin was not more clearly bestowed on the fish that he should swim, nor the wing given to the bird that he should fly, than superior strength of body and a firmer texture of mind given to man, that he might preside in the deep and daring scenes of action [...].³⁴

Although the female body is designedly weaker, according to More, the mind should be cultivated to allow women to enhance their performance of domestic duties. As in *Persuasion*, however, More expresses fears that there might be ‘some analogy between the mental and bodily conformation of women’ to inhibit this improvement.³⁵ Wollstonecraft, whose views on the body are complex (and often self-contradictory) more grudgingly admits that bodily weakness is women’s natural disadvantage. At the start of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she concedes that women’s ‘apparent inferiority with respect to bodily strength, must render them, in some degree, dependent on men’.³⁶ The body is, therefore, for Wollstonecraft most often characterised as the enemy of female progress. Both writers, overall, advocate strengthening the female mind in spite of the body and its seemingly inescapable drawbacks for women.

The physical weakness of the female body was made even more problematic for these writers by women’s presumed propensity for heightened passions. For eighteenth-century feminists, this vulnerability could undermine the entire basis of their arguments for female advancement: the notion that women were capable of thinking rationally. Wollstonecraft’s awareness of this problem results in an apparent condemnation of female sexuality in particular, an attitude Cora Kaplan finds ‘disturbingly peculiar’ in *The Rights of Woman*. To understand fully Wollstonecraft’s attitude towards the female body however, this work must

³⁴ More, *Strictures* II, pp. 23-24.

³⁵ More, I, p. 163.

³⁶ *The Rights of Woman*, p. 276.

be read alongside *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), a novel that, as Kaplan notes, is ‘considerably less punitive about female sexuality’.³⁷ In the novel, the author asserts that while her heroine has ‘an improving mind’, she also possesses an active sensibility. Wollstonecraft’s design is to ‘pourtray passions’ and Maria’s bodily life is central to the novel from its very first page with its description of her ‘bosom bursting with [...] nutriment’.³⁸ Maintaining this centrality of the body alongside reason, the heroine pursues her passions into an affair based on both attraction and intellectual admiration. This freedom of expression of female sexuality later proves to be incompatible with the laws and systems Maria must work within to secure her future. Her powerful rhetoric to defend her actions in court, despite reflecting her high attainment as a woman of reason, is rendered ineffectual in the face of her bodily transgressions. Alongside arguing for women’s improved social rights, *Maria* attempts to find a place for female passion and fails. Wollstonecraft shows herself, and her heroine, to be caught in a double bind: she wants to express passion honestly, but doing so only seems to confirm a female weakness to feeling as suggested by Harville’s analogy. This double bind is symbolically writ large in the novel, for the majority of which the heroine is in an asylum where, while her body is imprisoned, her mind can roam free. Thus, the novel’s various endings, rejecting the prospect of romantic happiness with Darnford and promoting rational motherhood, seem to converge with the pessimistic treatment of the body in *The Rights of Woman*.

³⁷ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Essays on Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 158-59. Mary Poovey similarly notes Wollstonecraft’s denial of female sexuality because she wants ‘to reject the prevalent stereotype of women as all sexuality’, Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) p. 74. These views have more recently been challenged by Lisa Plummer Crafton. She condemns ‘exaggerated critical assumptions about her [Wollstonecraft’s] negation of passion’ and argues that ‘her representation of sexuality is, in fact, integral to and integrated with the avowedly moral aim of all of her political and cultural critiques’, Lisa Plummer Crafton, ‘Inspid Decency’: Modesty and Female Sexuality in Wollstonecraft’, *European Romantic Review*, 11 (2000), 277-299 (p. 278).

³⁸ Mary Wollstonecraft, *Maria* (1798), in *Mary and Maria, Matilda*, ed. by Janet Todd (London: Penguin Books, 1992), pp. 55-148 (pp. 59, 61).

In a novel that bears striking parallels with Wollstonecraft's *Maria*, Mary Hays more determinedly strives to reconcile the feminist emphasis on rationality with women's right to act on their feelings. In *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Hays follows Wollstonecraft in taking as her starting point the idea that the weakness of the female body has been exaggerated by the influence of culture. 'Why have I been rendered feeble and delicate by bodily constraint?', Hays' heroine asks. In spite of her recognition of the problem of the female body, Hays is unwilling to diminish or abandon it as Wollstonecraft does. Like *Maria*, *Emma Courtney*, is a meditation on whether it might be possible for a woman to live according to her desires. Having contended throughout the novel with the question of whether it is 'virtue [...] to combat, or to yield to, my passions',³⁹ Emma, upon realising that union with her desired partner is impossible, enacts the full exercise in self-command outlined by Descartes in *The Passions*.⁴⁰ The heroine undertakes 'the study of physic, anatomy and surgery [...] and, by exercising [her] understanding and humanity, strengthened [her] mind, and stilled the importunate suggestions of a heart too exquisitely sensible'.⁴¹ With this effort, she stifles her 'romantic, high-wrought, frenzied, emotions' and settles for a husband for whom she feels only 'a rational esteem'.⁴² With her 'rational' marriage resulting in adultery, infanticide and suicide in quick succession, in direct contrast to the ending of Wollstonecraft's novel, it is the burying of desire that proves the most dangerous in Hays' work.

Hays pre-empted Austen in recognising that, while the cultivation of women's minds is important, this should not be done at the expense of the body. *Emma Courtney's* oscillation

³⁹ Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 32, 118.

⁴⁰ Hays signals with an early reference that the novel is in dialogue with Cartesian thought: 'I met with some of the writings of Descartes, and was seized with a passion for metaphysical enquiries. I began to think about the nature of the soul—whether it was a composition of the elements, the result of organized matter, or a subtle and ethereal fire', p. 25.

⁴¹ Here, Hays seems to engage with Wollstonecraft's argument that '[w]omen might certainly study the art of healing, and be physicians as well as nurses', *The Rights of Woman*, p. 229.

⁴² Hays, pp. 168-69.

between emphatic privileging, and then abrupt and harmful silencing, of her passions acts as an extreme and experimental protest against cultural repression of the female body,⁴³ as work by Eleanor Ty on Hays has similarly argued.⁴⁴ It serves additionally as a reaction against writers like Wollstonecraft and More who, to different degrees, reject female desire and were complicit with bodily repression. Whilst Emma Courtney clearly anticipates *Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne,⁴⁵ both in her prioritisation of emotions and in her final unsettling marriage, Austen's project differs overall from Hays' in its strategies. Austen, like Hays, wants the silence around the female body and the passions to be lifted. But rather than, as Hays does, break this silence with graphic depictions of the body, she chooses to recreate it with her minimalist presentation. Going beyond that which Hays articulates with her uniquely enlightened heroine, Austen also wishes women to cease to depend on received wisdom about the body, such as that expressed by Harville's analogy and inculcated by domestic and scientific ideologies. As Descartes recommends at the end of *The Passions*, she also wants women to have accurate knowledge of the mind, body and the connection between the two, in order to achieve self-possession. Yet, much as women are left out of Descartes' work, Austen shows that the strictures of domestic life work to prevent this necessary self-assessment. As we will see, with its enclosure, acute anxiety of the body and prescribed activities, domesticity obscures female physicality, replacing the individual female body with the universal 'feminine' body.

⁴³ In the preface to *Emma Courtney* Hays refers to the heroine's 'hazardous experiment' in the novel, p. 4.

⁴⁴ Eleanor Ty states that '[w]hile Hays's avowed intent was to teach through a negative model [...] the unstated but undoubtedly calculated thesis of the work seems to be the fatal repercussions of repression on the eighteenth-century middle-class woman', Eleanor Ty, *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), p. 46. See also, Eleanor Ty, 'Introduction', in *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), ed. by Eleanor Ty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. vii-xxxvii.

⁴⁵ Chris Jones also makes this comparison, p. 17.

Domestic confinement: creating the ‘feminine’ body

In presenting portraits of enclosed domestic life, Austen’s novels detail the conditions that lead to female psychic disconnection from the body. Her fiction reveals a persistent interest in the relative freedom of movement society affords men and women. As Wiltshire reminds us, ‘outdoor life and action [...] is normally the prerogative of males’ in Austen’s novels.⁴⁶ In *Emma*, a novel fixated upon the issue of domestic confinement, she repeatedly draws readers’ attention to this gender-specific prerogative. Early in the novel, Frank Churchill is tantalisingly elusive, leaving the more stationary members of the Highbury community struggling to pinpoint his movements. Shortly after his arrival, Emma learns that, ‘[a] sudden freak seem[ing] to have seized him’, Frank has ‘gone off to London, merely to have his hair cut’.⁴⁷ While this is later revealed as a cover to allow him to purchase Jane’s piano secretly, in this moment this strange behaviour serves, in its sheer excessiveness, to highlight that women are powerless to behave similarly. Even within the insularity of Highbury, Mr Knightley, who is ‘absent from home about five hours where [Emma] is absent one’ (p. 291), is presented as having a ‘great deal of [...] activity, and independence’ (p. 199) teasingly antithetical to the situation of women. Indeed, Emma is wryly ‘amuse[d]’ when she is ‘supposed in danger of wanting leisure’ by John Knightley (pp. 290-91). Participating in the intensive work of leisure, Emma has of course been subtly active through the novel. Nevertheless, she has not been occupied in the overt or public sense of the Knightley brothers. Thus, in an apt summation of how little she has done outside of the home, she says, ‘[t]hese amazing engagements of mine – what have they been? Dining once with the Coles – and having a ball talked of, which never took place’ (p. 291).

⁴⁶ Wiltshire, p. 152.

⁴⁷ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815) (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 192. All subsequent references are to this edition.

This section examines the effects of women's relative confinement within an ideologically-charged domestic environment upon their relationship with the body. Discussing Austen alongside Burney, a writer she is often paired with by critics on the grounds of her gender (and wider) politics, I will show that the enclosure in her fiction is a knowing strategy that cannot simply be dismissed as symptomatic of the author's conservatism. Then, I will turn to uncovering the work done within the confines of the novels' central households to manipulate female understanding of the body. Figures such as Sir Walter and Mr Woodhouse symbolise the ways in which patriarchal ideology is deployed within domestic settings to control women's manner of thinking about their bodies. Female confinement, furthermore, creates the conditions for hyper-observation of women's bodies in terms of their changing levels of attractiveness. The excruciation of this physical scrutiny in terms of both decorum and beauty is a point of concern for Austen. I will lastly return to Austen's attitude to female accomplishments. Seeking to understand the effects of women's physical movements being rigorously prescribed and monitored, this chapter assesses the practice of accomplishments specifically as bodily performances of femininity.

This confinement of women in the novels, with only suggestions of life beyond domesticity, was a strategic aesthetic development on the part of Austen. Before producing her concentrated studies of domesticity in the six completed novels, she is widely viewed by critics to have been practising her art in the juvenilia. According to this view, these works are valuable because in 'them we can glimpse early symptoms of the voice and interests of Austen's maturity'. Margaret Anne Doody, however, disputes this assessment, arguing that the juvenilia should be appreciated separately to the novels. The earliest literary productions are 'impish and formally daring', she writes, and mark a time before Austen's 'genius [...] [was] tamed by young-ladyhood' and her efforts became 'disciplined—or fenced in—by the

necessities of the market-place'.⁴⁸ Austen certainly appears to be less constrained in the earlier works. Parodying sentimental fiction, historical non-fiction and using the epistolary form, the juvenilia evidences experimentation and flexibility in terms of style, form and subject matter. Furthermore, one noticeable quality of the earlier fiction is that, to borrow Doody's phrase, Austen's female characters are far less 'fenced in' than her later heroines. In 'The Beautifull Cassandra' (composed c. 1788), for example, the heroine embarks on a subversive and activity-filled adventure having on her sixteenth birthday 'walked from her Mother's shop to make her Fortune'.⁴⁹ Doody is right that there is a clear shift rather than straightforward continuity between the early and mature fiction. Yet a close examination of the role that confinement plays within the adult fiction shows that Austen's turn to the domestic novel form was a studied artistic decision, rather than a commercial concession.

To interpret Austen as having had 'to become genteel, and act like a lady' when she began writing in order to be published ignores significant distinctions between her fiction and that of other writers who have been viewed as exemplifying this model of authorship.⁵⁰ Burney, an often-cited inspiration in Austen's work, creates heroines that are far more active than those we see in the mature fiction.⁵¹ In fact, journeys are critical and bear strong metaphorical value in Burney's novels. In spite of this marked difference between these authors' works, they are often treated almost interchangeably by scholars believing them to be united in their conservative values.⁵² Somewhat contradictorily, it is also Austen's rigid insularity – and so precisely what I have signalled as showing her obvious departure from Burney – that is frequently cited as a sign of her conservatism. Allowing these conflicting

⁴⁸ Margaret Anne Doody, 'Introduction', in *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. ix-xxxviii (pp. xxiii, xxxv, xxxi).

⁴⁹ Jane Austen, 'The Beautifull Cassandra' (c. 1788), in *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 41-44 (p. 42).

⁵⁰ Doody, p. xxxviii.

⁵¹ Burney is, amongst numerous references, termed Austen's 'sister author' by the narrator in *Northanger Abbey*, Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 106. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁵² See for instance, Armstrong, p. 158 and Jane Spencer, p. 167.

assumptions to negate one another, it is my contention that each of these authors strongly protests female confinement, albeit using opposing strategies.

Burney's critique comes in the form of exposing her heroines increasingly to the wider world beyond the domestic. In her first work, *Evelina* (1778), for instance, the young heroine travels, escorted, from the countryside to London; but, in her last novel, *The Wanderer* (1814), the heroine voyages alone from France to England. Her heroines are shown to need this experience in order to develop psychologically. But, the (frequently sexual) dangers faced by her female characters reveal that women have been so excluded from society that it is unequipped to allow for their independent participation. Austen echoes Burney in momentary glimpses of journeys into this inhospitable wider world, but her narratives are ultimately defined by stasis, not momentum. While Burney demonstrates her concerns by placing young women in public situations for which they have been ill-prepared, Austen's attention remains fixed to middle-class domesticity, choosing to study enclosure's effects on female psychology, and allowing us to witness this process of ill preparation first-hand.

As figureheads of their domestic circles, Sir Walter and Mr Woodhouse define the way in which female inhabitants develop and conceive of their bodies in *Persuasion* and *Emma*. These characters offer microcosmic examples of what Heydt-Stevenson terms 'the insistent way the patriarchal system fixes the female body'.⁵³ Through obsession with health and physical beauty respectively, Mr Woodhouse and Sir Walter both excite a sense of vulnerability about the female body and the need for its preservation. Mr Woodhouse amplifies the inherent risks in any activity that takes women outside their home, telling

⁵³ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 177.

Emma for example that ‘it is never safe to sit out of doors’ (p. 47).⁵⁴ ‘[P]etrified of physical activity and connected with disease both through hypochondria’, Heydt-Stevenson writes, Mr Woodhouse ‘has himself ‘diseased’ Emma by [...] dislodging her from normal physical activity’.⁵⁵ For Emma, her father’s hysterical vision of the female body acts as a means of control and she is, we observe, engaged in a near-symbiotic relationship with him. Johnson posits that it is ‘all too easy’, by contrast, for Anne to ignore her father in *Persuasion*.⁵⁶ But close attention suggests that Sir Walter in fact has an even more harmful influence over Anne than that which is exerted over Emma. In operating within Sir Walter’s sphere of control, Anne internalises his projection of the female body. To him, she is ‘of very inferior value’ due to her ‘haggard’ looks, ‘her bloom ha[ving] vanished’ early. Thus physically imperfect, she becomes in Sir Walter’s eyes a non-entity and he inscribes this perception by largely ignoring her. The controlling effect of this treatment means that Anne, absorbing this idea of her body, will not behave in a way to draw attention to herself and attract suitors that should be Elizabeth’s, who, being ‘very handsome, and very like’ (pp. 7-8) her father is, to him, more deserving.

Not only do these patriarchal figureheads project damaging ideas of the female body but they also, crucially, embody them. The leisured-class lifestyles of Sir Walter and Mr Woodhouse are exaggerated by Austen to the extent that these characters become emblematic of women’s confined bodily situation. In contrast to the more active male characters in these novels such as Wentworth and Mr Knightley, they each lead uniquely immobile lives. Austen describes the utterly immovable Mr Woodhouse as ‘a valetudinarian all his life, without any activity of mind or body’ (p. 9). Despite being a man of great social power, Emma’s father is

⁵⁴ Mr Woodhouse also, on occasion expresses similar fears for men, but the novel quickly alerts us to the ridiculousness of this. When he professes a concern for Frank walking in bad weather conditions, Mr Weston disregards his concern, saying, ‘Frank knows a puddle of water when he sees it, [...] he may get there [...] in a hop, step, and jump’ (p. 183).

⁵⁵ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 177.

⁵⁶ Johnson, p. 146.

a highly-effeminised figure, required to enlist the physical protection of the more ‘masculine’ Mr Knightley at the end of the novel. Similarly, in *Persuasion*, Austen openly invites us to view Sir Walter as effeminised when she, at the very beginning of the novel, informs us that ‘[f]ew women could think more of their personal appearance than’ him (p. 6). As Heydt-Stevenson writes, he ‘invests in ‘women’s’ interests: vanity and physical desirability’.⁵⁷ In truth, the views Mr Woodhouse and Sir Walter hold about the novels’ heroines are misconceived. It is made apparent that Anne is imagined by her father to be unattractive primarily owing to the fact that she looks ‘so totally different’ (p. 7) to him; and Emma, rather than being frail, is declared to be ‘the complete picture of grown-up health’ (p. 38). By having Sir Walter and Mr Woodhouse apply feminine anxieties concerning beauty and fragility not only to their daughters, but to themselves, Austen in each case symbolically locates patriarchy and damaging views about female corporeality within the same body.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the enclosure of domesticity allows the home to become an arena for intensive observation by authoritative figures like Sir Walter and Mr Woodhouse. As Sir Walter exemplifies in particular, alongside ensuring appropriate activity young women were judged also in terms of their physical appearance. A lack of beauty – or loss of ‘bloom’ as frequently occurs in Austen’s fiction⁵⁸ – is, without considerable wealth, likely to be damning to a woman’s worth both on the marriage market and by extension to her family. Hence we see Fanny Price face frequent humiliating physical assessment from Sir Thomas Bertram as he seeks to weigh her increasing value to a potential husband. In *Strictures* More condemns this system whereby women are valued according to their body’s surface:

⁵⁷ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 190.

⁵⁸ In *Persuasion*, for example, Anne’s ‘bloom is described as ‘ha[ving] vanished early’ (p. 7) and in *Sense and Sensibility* it is feared that, for Marianne, ‘illness [has] destroy[ed] the bloom for ever!’ (p. 214).

If, indeed, woman were mere outside form and face only, and if *mind* made up no part of her composition, it would follow that a ball-room was quite as appropriate a place for choosing a wife, as an exhibition room for choosing a picture.

Far more troubled on the whole by women whom she views to be ‘vain of her genius’, she is nevertheless broadly unsympathetic towards the physical scrutiny women endure, ridiculing those who are ‘vain of [their] beauty’.⁵⁹ Though Wollstonecraft, like Austen, is aware of the root causes of female vanity, recognising that women are subjected to confinement and patriarchal valorisation of body over mind, she is also critical of women who hold ‘mistaken notions of beauty’.⁶⁰ Portraying painful scenes in which female characters are scrutinised physically, Austen, like Burney, takes a far more compassionate stance than these contemporaries on the matter of female beauty.

Burney’s novels demonstrate a societal rage to possess or control women on account of their beauty which often erupts in violence. In *Evelina* the heroine is, with mounting danger, accosted by men who believe they are entitled to her because of her ‘conspicuous beauty’. In contrast to *Evelina* who far from enjoys her beauty, her grandmother, Madame Duval, is a woman for whom ‘the labour of the toilette seems the chief business of her life’. The false illusion of beauty she creates through cosmetics and fine clothing so enrages Captain Mirvan that he seeks to destroy it. Her attackers succeed in the rearrangement of her appearance to such an extent that ‘she hardly looked human’.⁶¹ Representing a fearsome model of patriarchy, Captain Mirvan corrects Madame Duval’s subversion of the system that has been put in place for valuing women according to their beauty. In *The Wanderer*, although not quite encountering this same direct brutality, the heroine is the victim of continual mental torment as her acquaintances examine her appearance in order to ascertain

⁵⁹ More, II, pp. 165, 16, 15.

⁶⁰ *The Rights of Woman*, p. 107.

⁶¹ Frances Burney, *Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 9, 157.

her identity. As Juliet is observed by Ireton, Selina and others we are told she, ‘changing colour’, is ‘abashed’, has ‘an air of extreme embarrassment’, and ‘entreat[ies] for pity’.⁶² Describing this onslaught of emotions as the inquiring eyes of the group pore over her body, Burney ensures that the scrutiny faced by Juliet owing to the excitement caused by her looks is palpably torturous.

Although Austen’s scenes of female bodily mortification never quite match this severity, with the quiet endurance of the women under examination, they seem to recall Burney’s novels. Jane Fairfax is not just tied to *The Wanderer*’s Juliet by the theme of work, but also through the social scrutiny to which she is subject as her contemporaries seek to understand her mental state through her body. The fact that she is at once silent and ‘better than handsome’ makes her a point of infuriating interest to others. Her unreadability provokes a vicious rage in Emma in particular reminiscent of Burney’s violence: ‘Wrapt up in a cloak of politeness, she seemed determined to hazard nothing. She was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved’ (p. 158). In Austen’s earlier work, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Catherine Morland’s visit to the ballroom in Bath where she is observed by groups of men similarly recalls the London balls attended by the heroine in *Evelina*. In a mockingly subdued scene that contrasts the excess with which Evelina is admired, Catherine, while no one ‘started with rapturous wonder’ and ‘no whisper of eager inquiry ran around the room’ is ‘looked at [...] with some admiration’ (p. 24). Whilst Austen’s women do not endure the same fanatical admiration or physical attacks as a result of their beauty, these evocations of Burney’s work remind the reader of the potentially sinister undercurrent to the level of physical scrutiny young women often endure.

⁶² Frances Burney, *The Wanderer; or, Female Difficulties* (1814) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 56-58.

Within the context of the household, the body is a vehicle not just for marketable beauty, but also for outward decorum rendered in part visible through the practice of accomplishments.⁶³ In Austen's novels, these activities serve to ease anxiety about the body and reflect that women have been 'correctly' employed. Armstrong shows how conduct books portrayed the ideal domestic woman as in a precarious position in terms of physical activity:

A woman was deficient in female qualities if she, like the aristocratic woman, spent her time in idle amusements [...] such activities always aimed at putting the body on display [...] the conduct books found labouring woman unfit for domestic duties because she, too, located value in the material body'.⁶⁴

As discussed in the previous chapter, the middle-class woman had to be seen to be active, but not to the point of displaying unfeminine exertion. Whether in terms of its physical allure or strength shown in labouring capabilities, the reality of the female body had to be evaded at all costs. '[A]quiring a smattering of accomplishments' solves the need for this unique kind of female disembodiment.⁶⁵ When, in Austen's novels, accomplishments are exhibited, characters are permitted to stare at the performer in a socially-sanctioned manner and judge according to their skill whether or not their body has been sufficiently active in the pursuit of becoming accomplished. Lady Catherine de Bourgh, *Pride and Prejudice*'s defender of propriety, is horrified that the education of the Bennet girls was 'neglected' and that amongst them, '[t]hose who chose to be idle certainly might' (p. 161). A lack of education implies an unregulated female body; as Lydia Bennet proves, this can be socially problematic. Anne de Bourgh's inability to practice or show accomplishments is evidently a concern for her mother. Nonetheless she maintains that 'Anne would have been a delightful performer, had

⁶³ Wiltshire suggests that while, in Austen, 'the body is the only area of true privacy allowed', it also belongs to society, with a 'premium placed upon outward decorum', p. 22.

⁶⁴ Armstrong, pp. 75-76.

⁶⁵ *The Rights of Woman*, p. 74.

her health allowed her to learn' (p. 172). Anne's debilitation, Lady Catherine is quick to remind, ensures her body is not a source of anxiety.

Largely uninterested in accomplishments, Elizabeth Bennet and Catherine Morland are to differing degrees able to avoid the psychic disengagement from the body that they are used to promote. The narrative trajectory of Catherine in *Northanger Abbey* reflects the process through which the female body is redefined as a girl enters society and adulthood. Whereas Catherine maintains her initial 'disposition [that is] not naturally sedentary' (p. 224), showing a disinclination for accomplishments and athleticism, she soon enters a world in which she is judged physically according to an unfamiliar model of femininity. Upon meeting General Tilney, he 'admir[es] the elasticity of her walk, which corresponded exactly with the spirit of her dancing [...]. Catherine, delighted [...] proceeded gaily to Pulteney-street; walking, as she concluded, with great elasticity, though she had never thought of it before' (pp. 98-99). The heroine's evident confusion and adoption of this perception marks the ridiculousness and discomfort in her physical prowess being thus redefined in a sexual manner. When, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth walks from Longbourn to Netherfield and arrives in front of the group gathered there with her 'hair so untidy, so blowsy' and 'her petticoat, six inches deep in mud' she disrupts the visual harmony and decorousness of Netherfield domesticity. Women are required to represent domestic ideology visually and Elizabeth falls short of this expectation. Her untidiness also shows signs of her transgressive activity, horrifying the group with the brazenness with which she evidences the unfeminine strain she has put her body through in walking 'three, or four, or five miles' (p. 36). Yet it is only within the confines of genteel domesticity, where female movements must fall within the definition of leisure, that this exercise becomes defined as a point of admonishment. While Catherine is more vulnerable, Elizabeth's actions in this episode, alongside her general

dismissal of accomplishments, shows her refusal to be coerced, into performance of feminine ideals of the body.

The pathology of confinement: illness, body displacement and sexual rebellion

While Elizabeth in particular is something of an exception, in general women's reactions to the confinement of domestic life in Austen's fiction prove to be pathological in nature. At one extreme, Austen presents us with a series of women who have been led to neglect the physicality of their bodies. Characters such as Mary Musgrove and *Sanditon's* Miss Parkers most directly exhibit a pathology of confinement in that they each appear to suffer from illnesses which have no apparent cause other than their domestic lives. Each of these women, in response to the limitedness of their existences, has developed a preoccupation with the perceived brokenness of their bodies. In *Emma*, under the guidance of her father and facing societal pressure regarding her level of accomplishment, the heroine goes further than these women, I will show, and mentally divorces herself from her body. Looking at the opposite extreme, I will go on to address the women who react against the silence surrounding and restraints placed upon the female body within the home by over-privileging their physical lives. Lydia, Maria Bertram and Marianne all transgress sexually in the novels; this kind of behaviour, according to contemporary concerns surrounding women and sensibility, was treated as pathological by society. While they are to varying degrees ostracised by their social circles, the real potential for harm for these women, Austen shows, comes in the form of the men with whom they transgress. Whether leading women to reject or over-zealously embrace their corporeality, the fiction reveals, the domestic environment has a disruptive influence over women's psychic relationship with their bodies.

Owing to the Miss Parkers' relative freedom to travel and the comedic elements of their characters, the message they communicate regarding domesticity and female attitudes to

the body has largely gone unnoticed.⁶⁶ Although they are among the least homebound of Austen's women, their interests and movements are still tied to the domestic and familial. They travel escorted by one brother to a town occupied by another and their concerns are principally to do with the housing situations of others. Rather than treating them as simply humorous, Austen renders the extent to which they strive for social authority and autonomy and yet are so unproductive troubling. The bold assertion that Diana is 'evidently the chief of the family – principal move and actor' is undercut, for instance, by the narrator's noting that her 'exercise had been too domestic to admit of calculation' (p. 335). Just as their exercise, due to the enclosed space within which it occurs, becomes impossible to track, so too are they incapable of achieving any measurable successes in their attempts to be socially useful. Their efforts, as we have already seen, are tinged with futility. Unable to be applied outwardly, the sisters' intellect turns inward to a destructive fixation upon the body. Amidst the tedium and restraint of their lives, their minds construct broken bodies built of the ailments about which they read. Pointedly, Austen situates the Miss Parkers alongside their indolent brother, Arthur, who is similarly believed to be in ill health. In doing so, she demonstrates that rather than being innately feminine, frailty is an illusion cultivated by confinement. The homebound lifestyle of Arthur is, however, based on choice. What is more, in his enjoyment of food and hints of libidinal urges in his attraction to the novel's heroine he, unlike his sisters, shows a degree of real corporeal awareness. Speaking of his sisters the oldest Mr Parker says: 'I do not believe they know what a day's health is' (p. 312). While they are, in reality, in good physical health, they lack the true knowledge of their bodies to be able to recognise this fact.

It was in her previous novel, *Persuasion*, however, that Austen provided her most representative instance of the false understanding of the body created within the limits of a

⁶⁶ Melissa Sodeman for instance argues that 'Austen satirizes the travel of those she regards as fashionably ill', Melissa Sodeman, 'Domestic Mobility in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 45 (2005), 787-812 (p. 799). Wiltshire claims that the Miss Parkers are there 'to be laughed at' in *Sanditon*, p. 199.

domestic setting. Mary Musgrove in particular symbolises what Johnson has termed a ‘distinctively feminine boredom’ that accompanies the stagnation of domestic life.⁶⁷ Having escaped Kellynch Hall and the tyrannical dismissiveness of Sir Walter she was, with presumably little adventure, promptly re-confined with Charles Musgrove, a man for whom she was a second choice. In this situation, Mary shows no inclination for her duties as a mother and a desire for escape. It is in these conditions of enforced attachment to the home, when her ‘feelings generally make it so’ (p. 53) that she would rather be enjoying the wider world, that her illness symptoms find their origin. Wiltshire finds Mary to be using illness as an attention-seeking ‘sourc[e] of power’ in the novel. ‘The very indefinability of illness is the source of its potency, its infinite usefulness as a vehicle of covert manipulations’, he writes.⁶⁸ While Wiltshire is right to suggest that Mary is otherwise disempowered, her ‘illness’ cannot be dismissed as purely a manipulative ploy. Mary’s ailments are, to her mind, genuine and rather than being indefinable are shown to be directly triggered by a lack of power in terms of her own activity. She is obsessed with her immobility: she complains of Charles’ greater freedom, her lack of carriage and bemoans misconceptions about her walking abilities. In fact Mary cites her illness as having intensified when ‘Charles [went] out shooting’ (p. 36) despite her protests, showcasing his greater liberty. She is, in summary, an ignored body in the home, forced to commit to activities as a mother for which she has no inclination, and has no physical freedom through which she could know her own physical health.

Though Mary is heavily satirised on the surface of *Persuasion*, she acts primarily as a voice of dissent against the effects of enforced female passivity. Her refusal to remain at home and nurse her son may seem a callous rejection of motherly duties that leaves her open to derision from the reader. However Austen subtly transforms Charles and Mary’s dispute

⁶⁷ Johnson, p. 139.

⁶⁸ Wiltshire, pp. 19-20.

on the matter into a wider debate on gender politics. Charles, to whom Austen grants exaggeratedly stereotypical masculine interests, claims his right to leave the house is based on the fact a sick child is clearly ‘quite a female case’; meanwhile Mary, who refers to herself as ‘the poor mother’, is ‘not allowed to stir’. Furthermore, Mary later challenges binary parental roles by arguing that she is not ‘any more use in the sick-room than Charles’ (p. 53). The seemingly comedic elements of Mary’s character, as with those of the Miss Parkers, should not be seen to lessen the impact of these arguments. In a moment of potential humour, Mary, professing her imaginary illness, makes the ironic claim: ‘I am so ill I can hardly speak’ (p. 36). The ridiculousness of her complaint is not simply, as Wiltshire posits, to portray her as a ‘contemptible emblem of the idle gentlewoman’s life’.⁶⁹ Instead, Austen uses such a ludicrous contradiction to demonstrate an entirely distorted conception of her physicality to the extent where she is unable to conceive of either her health or her body’s capabilities. With this bodily misconception she is caught in a state in which she fundamentally misunderstands and so misrepresents herself to, and repels, others. Mary is, therefore, as a tragic parody of the confined female body.

Going beyond the sickly impression of the body mentally conjured by Mary, Diana and Susan, Emma Woodhouse works effectively to deny her own corporeal existence. Heydt-Stevenson argues that the influence of Mr Woodhouse’s hypochondria leads Emma to the point where she is ‘[d]isenfranchised from her body [and] she displaces it on to Harriet and Jane, contriving courtships and fantasising seductions’.⁷⁰ Her father’s monomaniacal fixation with health of course has an impact on Emma in relation to the body. His obsession results in a restraint upon Emma’s movements beyond the home that is perhaps greater than it would have been otherwise; it also sets the tone in *Highbury* for the body being a source of anxiety.

⁶⁹ Wiltshire, p. 197.

⁷⁰ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 177.

This influence however does not seem to translate into Emma's adoption of the dread of illness he projects. I would suggest that Emma does indeed displace her body, but that her own drive towards being 'useful', rather than Mr Woodhouse, is the principal reason for this. The contemporary concern with female activity in relation to the body is uniquely intense for Emma. Alongside adhering to the expectation that she should be undertaking '[w]oman's usual occupations of eye and hand and mind' (p. 83), she contends with her own self-imposed obligation that as a permanently single woman she must find ways of being useful to marriageable women. Her heightened level of anxiety is shown in her obsession with the physicality of her female acquaintances. On meeting Jane Fairfax again, she painstakingly registers her appearance, not neglecting even her 'dark eye-lashes and eye-brows' (p. 157). But it is through her efforts to be of use to Harriet that Emma most starkly shows her willingness to deflect her anxiety onto another body.

Emma's bodily displacement takes a form much more literal than that which Heydt-Stevenson stipulates, with the heroine both trying to mould Harriet in her own image and live her bodily life through her. At a ball, for example, Emma, rather than being concerned with her own dancing seems to be constantly looking outwards towards Harriet. When Harriet is asked to dance, Emma, having been 'seldom more delighted' feels 'all pleasure and gratitude' (p. 307). As Emma only half-jokingly admits, she tries to '[a]dopt her, educate her [...] [a]nd make her like [her]self' (p. 350). Ultimately, with Harriet, Emma tries to rid herself of the troubling burden of her body. The effects of this psychological displacement can be seen in her lack of awareness of her own physicality. Despite being depicted as generally very self-satisfied, Emma is inexplicably 'little occupied' with 'how very handsome she is' (p. 38). Jane Spencer reads Emma's 'habitual unconsciousness of her own beauty' as revealing of her 'better side',⁷¹ more accurately, this represents a great problem in *Emma*. At a social level, in

⁷¹ Spencer, p. 176.

consequence of this unconsciousness, she causes unease by being unable to grasp the concept that men like Mr Elton are attracted to her. At a personal level, she is unaware of her own desire and as she tells us at the end of the novel, her true self.

In focusing on these complex psychological phenomena, Austen's treatment of the effects of domesticity on women's relationships with their bodies differs from her near-contemporaries such as Burney and Hays. For these authors, the pressures of female life that stem from domestic ideology take the form of literal rather than imagined illnesses. Burney's Camilla, beset by intensive observation from Edgar, her unpreparedness for society, and the impossibility of the ideals by which she is expected to live, collapses: 'Weak from inanition, confused from want of sleep, harassed with fatigue, and exhausted by perturbation, she now fell so ill, that she solemnly believed her fatal wish quick approaching'.⁷² The mental onslaught to which she has been subjected over the course of the novel gives way to physical symptoms that take a near deathly toll.⁷³ Burney shows that there is a fundamental incompatibility between the world beyond domesticity and the way in which women are prepared for it in both mental and physical terms. Acknowledging a natural connection between mind and body, she does not go as far as to recognise, like Austen, the possibility of a disjunction between the two. In *Emma Courtney*, Hays, more in keeping with the work of Austen, asserts that it is stasis and lack of event following confinement that leads to illness.

Sad, vacant, inactive—the faculties both of mind and body seemed almost suspended. I became weak, languid, enervated—my disorder was a lethargy of soul. This was gradually succeeded by disease of body:—an inactivity, so contrary to all the habits of my past life, generated morbid humours, and brought on a slow, remitting, fever. [...] A third time it assailed me, at a shorter interval; and, though less violent, was more protracted, and more exhausting.⁷⁴

⁷² Frances Burney, *Camilla; or, A Picture of Youth* (1796) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 862.

⁷³ Detailed readings of this scene in *Camilla* can be found in: Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988) and Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989).

⁷⁴ Hays, pp. 148-49.

While the causes of this instance of breakdown are an inversion of what happens in *Camilla* (1796), Hays relays the same sense of her heroine being helpless to an assault by rapidly on-setting symptoms of illness. Reading these moments alongside one another, we are given the impression that both domesticating a woman used to a degree of liberty and stripping a young woman of the domestic setting for which she has been designed are equally violent acts. Like Burney, Hays conveys mental anguish naturally resulting in physical decline. This experience is recorded in detail by the heroine showing that for her, unlike the majority of Austen's women, the body is ever present in the mind.

Marianne both bears similarity to Hays' heroine and is the one central female character in Austen's novels for whom the restraints of domesticity appear to cause real physical illness. Like Emma Courtney, she faces an increasingly pathological inability to act on her desire due to the restraints of her existence. After Willoughby leaves for London Marianne's frustrations frequently result in her being excused by Elinor as 'unwell'. The discovery of his impending marriage results in a physical breakdown described as: her being 'faint and giddy from a long want of proper rest and food' and having 'an aching head, a weakened stomach, and a general nervous faintness' (p. 175). The generalised and self-imposed nature of her symptoms, however, mean that this illness has more in common with that of Mary or the Miss Parkers, than *Camilla* or Emma Courtney. In comparison to her life-threatening illness later in the novel, Marianne's symptoms here are not medicalised: there is no doctor and she is only offered pacifying treatments for 'a disappointed heart' such as 'lavender drops' (p. 181) and 'Constantia wine' (p. 187) better suited to gout. Marianne's is a self-manufactured illness, albeit of a different character to those previously discussed. While these women have learnt psychically to obscure the body, for Marianne, her problem is an all-consuming fixation with it. Her body, as a desiring body, has been afflicted and she aims to show this. Following on from Hays and Burney, Austen treats domesticity as pathological;

unlike them, her emphasis is not on literal illness, but rather on illness as a metaphor. In treating physical ailment this way, she is able to show complex and various reactions to domestic ideology that range from absorption of, to rebellion against, its ideals of the female body.

In contrast to the women in Austen's fiction who, purposefully or otherwise, avoid the material body, Marianne embraces her physical, and specifically sexual, life in resistance to silence and restraint. With her narrative, Austen seems to be gesturing towards the contemporary association between sensibility, sexuality with which it was closely linked, and female illness. As Van Sant summarises, one definition of sensibility was: 'Excessive delicacy or acuteness of feeling [that] produces an impaired or diseased state'. Yet this association is not invoked to condemn Marianne; in prompting this connection but also redefining illness, Austen rewrites this conventional narrative. Her first illness is after all not strictly real, but one over which Marianne has control. Advocating equality between her bodily needs, she tells us through her behaviour that if her desire cannot be fulfilled neither will her need for food or sleep. In forcing herself into illness in protest against her ignored body, she mobilises the concept at the heart of the cult of sensibility that '[t]he body itself speaks – and language is inadequate'.⁷⁵ This radical attitude is present in her behaviour over the entire course of *Sense and Sensibility*. Where others submit to restraint or decorousness, her concern is always with physical enjoyment. Despite the risk presented by a 'showery sky', Marianne, 'unable longer to bear the confinement' of home ventures outside to enjoy the 'delightful sensations' of a walk early in the novel (p. 43).

Marianne's insistence that women's physical urges do matter and should be acted upon extends to her sexual objectification of men. The narrator, pre-empting the description

⁷⁵ Van Sant, pp. 1, 116.

subsequently given by Marianne announces that Edward Ferrars is ‘not handsome’ (p. 17).

Elaborating on this point, Marianne informs us that

‘[...] Edward is very amiable [...] But yet—he is not the kind of young man—there is something wanting—his figure is not striking; it has none of that grace which I should expect in the man who could seriously attach my sister. [...]’ (p. 19).

According to Heydt- Stevenson, in Austen’s period ‘[t]he hope was that when women looked, they filtered out the pornographic gaze—cleansing the image with their own mercy’.

Marianne’s description, and indeed mercilessness, here suggests otherwise. While she eventually settles on the euphemistic ‘grace’, the dashes that punctuate her first sentence imply omission and that she is thinking of something more. In arguing here for her sister’s and not her own right to a physically desirable partner, Marianne’s defiant privileging of the body proves to extend beyond the directly personal. But, in becoming this political vehicle and solely following her physical impulses she fails to ‘read the conventional signs of male sexual avarice’,⁷⁶ allowing her rebellion to be undermined by the manipulative Willoughby.

Marianne’s trajectory is one that is repeated throughout Austen’s works, establishing a sense of the unavoidable danger women face in unthinkingly prioritising their bodily life over reason. By creating a pattern of rebellious female characters being disappointed by rakish figures Austen issues a stark reminder that even when women try to control their sexual destiny, the arena of sexual relations is unquestionably governed by men. Lydia embodies a protest against the silence surrounding female sexuality in the central household in *Pride and Prejudice*. It is notably she that silences the vocalisation of oppressive domestic ideology in her household by stopping Mr Collins from reading Fordyce’s *Sermons* (1765). When she speaks it tends to be on behalf of her body, whether she wants simply to exercise or have the opportunity to gaze lustfully at the soldiers. Nevertheless, her fixation with her

⁷⁶ Heydt-Stevenson, pp. 76, 60.

physical life leads her to have, like Mary Musgrove, a lack of self-awareness that leaves her open to manipulation by Wickham. Reassured that Mr Bingley is likely to ‘dance with [her] at the next ball’ she says: ‘I am not afraid; for though I *am* the youngest, I’m the tallest’ (p. 10). Though obsessed with her body she, seemingly equating height with sexual maturity, shows that she fundamentally misunderstands it. Before she too is fatally seduced, Maria is likewise an advocate for female bodily liberation. She dreads the return of Sir Thomas from Antigua, for instance, which signals the end of the freedom to use the body in performance of *Lovers’ Vows* (1798) and the renewal of his surveillance of the beauty of Mansfield Park’s young women. The moment in which Maria passes through the locked gate in Mr Rushworth’s grounds can also be read as an example of sexual rebellion.⁷⁷ Austen makes the political import of this scene clear with Maria’s words: ‘that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship’.⁷⁸ In passing through the gate, Maria both figuratively and literally steps beyond the constraints placed upon the body within a domestic setting.

Despite the sparks of resistance offered by Maria and Lydia, their actions resolve little in the novels and their voices are pushed to the background, allowing silence to dominate the household once more with regards to the body. Signalling, in particular, Lydia’s financial hold over the Darcys from afar at *Pride and Prejudice*’s end, Heydt-Stevenson argues that Austen does not wholly condemn these characters and instead ‘laughs both at and with women who break rules governing gender and sexual behaviour’.⁷⁹ While it is true that these characters’ primary role in the novels is not to be punished in aid of moral instruction, the assertion that their effect is primarily comedic is problematic. In completely and blindingly embracing their corporeal life, as I have shown, these women’s relationships with the body prove to be just as pathological as that of Mary or the Miss Parkers. In demonstrating their

⁷⁷ See, Heydt-Stevenson, pp. 5, 148-53.

⁷⁸ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 93. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁷⁹ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 101.

vulnerability to predatory male characters Austen shows that, even when inciting resistance, the domestic interior and the gendered ideology it encodes manage to be harmful in terms of women's relationship to the body.

Accidents outdoors: exposing women's psychic (non-)relationships with the body

In showing the body to be imagined by Marianne, Maria and Lydia as primarily sexual, or irrevocably ailing by the Miss Parkers and Mary, Austen highlights a disjunction between the female mind and body. The author chooses to expose this disconnection in scenes of accident and injury usually occurring in the outdoors. Open spaces serve both a symbolic and literal purpose for Austen. In symbolic terms, when beyond domestic enclosure women are no longer in the space for which the contemporary ideal of the feminine body was designed. Put simply, the female body was supposed to be occupied in leisure activities and these pursuits most commonly took place indoors. In literal terms, in the outdoors women are usually in a less stable, familiar and more unpredictable environment than their home interiors. Owing to these qualities, to negotiate the outdoors successfully requires the ability to react physically to potentially adverse conditions, and so, the mind to meet with the material body. In exposing her characters to outside perils throughout her fiction, and documenting their levels of success in coping with them, Austen tests and reveals her female characters' psychic relationships – or as is often more appropriate, non-relationships – with their bodies.

As I will first of all indicate, characters with non-conventional lifestyles or attitudes tend to function most effectively as they tackle the countryside, with *Persuasion's* Mrs Croft providing the clearest example in this instance. Those who have been slavishly committed to a conduct-book-style education have been taught to perceive the body as little more than a medium for accomplishments and so fail when more is required of them physically. To demonstrate this point, I return to Austen's character that best models of the problems of

female accomplishment training, Harriet. Looking lastly again at Marianne, as well as Louisa Musgrove, I will show how Austen uses outdoor accidents to alert characters who have fixated on their bodily life to the point of distortion to their own physical limitations. Occurring in almost every novel, these female outdoor incidents crystallise and are crucial to unveiling Austen's message regarding domesticity and the body. While it is all too easy to perceive that the corporeal is ignored in the fiction, in these episodes of female jeopardy the body forcibly announces itself and demands that we re-evaluate the surrounding silences in the narratives.

Through Mrs Croft in particular, Austen posits that the inferiority of female physical capability is a direct result of domestic ideology and confinement. For the length of her marriage and so presumably adult life, Mrs Croft has lived an active, naval existence to the point where she now seems incongruous within a domestic setting. When Wentworth protests that for a woman to be comfortable on-board a ship, he would have to find a way to mimic the domestic set up to suit ladies' 'idle refinement', Mrs Croft is 'brought [...] upon him' by this notion. She counters this argument by informing everyone that she 'know[s] nothing superior to the accommodations of a man of war' and needs 'not a comfort or an indulgence about [her], even at Kellynch-hall' (p. 64). Her most convincing challenge to Wentworth comes in a form that quotes, albeit fleetingly, directly from Wollstonecraft's *The Rights of Woman*. She protests that he talks 'as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures' (p. 65). Not only does Mrs Croft ventriloquise Wollstonecraft's concern that, implicit in associating women with trivial domestic comfort is the inhibiting assumption that they are not 'rational creatures', but she also seems to represent the method proposed in *The Rights of Woman* for validating what is otherwise an 'arbitrary' hierarchy of gender.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ *The Rights of Woman*, pp. 73, 282. Mrs Croft's reference and its radical import are also noted by Johnson in her Introduction to *Women, Politics, and the Novel*, p. 27.

Wollstonecraft writes that women should be allowed to ‘take the same exercise’ and have the same experiences as men and only then will it be revealed ‘how far the natural superiority of man extends’.⁸¹ The results of Austen’s take on this experiment in *Persuasion* are revealed by placing Mrs Croft in physical danger alongside her husband.

Mrs Croft’s ability to steer the carriage to avoid a fall, and remain unfazed when accidents do occur, is testament to her awareness of her body and its strength. When their carriage is being steered poorly by her husband, Mrs Croft takes control ‘by coolly giving the reins a better direction herself’ (p. 85). Far from this being an averted near-disaster, Wentworth implies that the overturning of the carriage is a semiregular event that his sister even enjoys: ‘I wonder whereabouts they will upset to-day. Oh! it does not happen very often, I assure you—but my sister makes nothing of it—she would as lieve be tossed out as not’ (p. 78). Stefanie Markovits contends that falls, both moral and literal, are a necessary step towards education and eventual happiness in Austen’s novels. She writes that in *Persuasion* alone ‘Mrs. Smith, [...] Lady Russell, Mrs. Croft, and even Nurse Rooke [...] it is implied, have demonstrated elasticity in their ability to bounce back from a fall’.⁸² But in conflating these characters’ experiences and more generally the types of fall, Markovits misses their individual significances. Mrs Croft’s success in evading a fall in the novel is importantly a triumph concerning the body. Unlike the novel’s other women, Mrs Croft’s body is readily adaptable; having not been physically defined by, or confined to, the domestic space she can function in any setting. As she proves by correcting Admiral Croft’s steering, if women are not instilled with a false idea of their bodies, they can be equally, if not more, physically capable than men. While numerous women in the fiction are, as we will see, thwarted by brief moments of exertion, Mrs Croft survives her extreme lifestyle with

⁸¹ *The Rights of Woman*, p. 158.

⁸² Stefanie Markovits, ‘Jane Austen and the Happy Fall’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 47 (2007), 779-97 (pp. 790-91).

‘excellent health’ (p. 66) which notably she, having a sound understanding of her physicality, can tell us about.

With Austen’s younger women, the level of emphasis placed upon accomplishments in their formative years appears to bear direct correlation to the health of their relationship with the body. Elizabeth and Catherine, as I have shown, resist the psychic conditioning promoted through the practice of accomplishments. As such, scenes in open country are, as with Mrs Croft, used to show their successful negotiation of non-domestic spaces. With an ironic detachment from the world of accomplishment and feminine ideology Elizabeth is aware of her own fitness. The novel exhibits this athleticism in her famous walk to Netherfield, the potential for disaster in which occurs to all characters besides Elizabeth. Rewarding her practical attitude towards the body, she arrives free from injury. Austen celebrates her ease and exuberance as she ‘jump[s] over stiles and spring[s] over puddles’ (p. 33) on the way rendering the subsequent controversy Elizabeth meets with tonally ridiculous. While we do not learn much of Elizabeth’s childhood, we are made aware that Catherine’s education was primarily physical: she ‘greatly preferred cricket’ along with ‘base ball, riding on horseback, and running about the country [...] to books’ or activities such as ‘nursing a dormouse, feeding a canary-bird’ intended to inculcate femininity. Domestic ideology, it seems, comes somewhat late to Catherine and, though she collects advice-giving quotations and begins to move in the fashionable world, she never appears fully to absorb ideals of feminine conduct. Despite the rapid changes in her body that result in her transforming from being ‘very plain’ to ‘*almost* pretty’ (pp. 15-17) between the ages of fifteen and seventeen, her knowledge of and confidence in the body learnt through early freedom remains. She is able, for instance, to make the important and independent step in chasing the Tilneys: ‘she almost ran [...]. So rapid had been her movements that in spite of the Tilneys' advantage in

the outset, they were but just turning into their lodgings as she came within view of them' (p. 97). Austen thus permits her, like Elizabeth, to go free from physical distress.

In contrast to Elizabeth and Catherine, it is specifically women that are newly-trained in accomplishments who most disastrously tackle open spaces in the novels. Harriet in particular is the author's model of an accomplished body. This, in Austenian terms, does not mean that she represents the epitome of physical perfection or grace in her execution of accomplishments – in fact, the novel suggests that this is far from the truth, with Emma noticing that she 'want[s] [...] a little more knowledge and elegance' (p. 24). Instead, Harriet is paradigmatic of the disconnection that occurs between a woman's mind and body when corporeality has been solely registered in relation to appropriately feminine, or conduct-book-sanctioned, behaviours. The absence of the material body in the mind of Harriet and its replacement by an accomplished body is abruptly brought to the narrative surface in a scene of trauma in *Emma*. When she falls and is attacked by 'a party of gipsies', Austen locates the cause tellingly in Harriet's body. Under siege, Miss Bickerton, her companion, is able to 'r[u]n up a steep bank, clea[r] a slight hedge at the top, and ma[k]e the best of her way [...] back to Highbury'. Harriet, 'suffer[ing] very much from cramp after dancing', is rendered 'absolutely powerless' to follow. Quite literally, it is the fact that Harriet has used her body to perform which causes her to be physically useless. As the gypsies symbolise, outside the confines of domesticity, polite and fashionable behaviour is irrelevant. Crumpled and weak when he finds her, Frank can think 'of no other place' to bring Harriet 'to Hartfield' (pp. 312-13). Appropriately, this is where Emma has been endeavouring to refine Harriet's accomplishments and where her body, therefore, has relevance.

Throughout *Emma* this evident disjunction between Harriet's mind and physicality is both worsened and reflected in the heroine's treatment of her as a surrogate body. From the start, it appears to be easy for Emma figuratively to take possession of the body from which

Harriet is psychologically detached. Harriet becomes a stranger in particular to her own sexuality, with Emma largely able to steer the direction of her desire. She manipulates her feelings firstly away from Robert Martin then towards Mr Elton before Harriet, in her confusion and following the imprint of Emma's guidance, mistakenly believes herself to be attracted to Mr Knightley. Finally disassociated from Emma at the end of the novel, she symbolically appears to reclaim her body and sexuality. 'There was a tooth amiss', Austen writes, signalling the beginnings of Harriet's corporeal awakening. Emma sends Harriet who had 'really wished, and had wished some time, to consult a dentist' to have this dental issue addressed (p. 422).⁸³ In sending Harriet away to repair her broken body, after her having been inexplicably unable to thus far, Emma figuratively returns it to her. Following this minutest of beginnings, we next hear of Harriet as having taken entire control of her bodily life, being about to marry Robert Martin, the man she has unconsciously always desired.

Austen's women who suffer disconnection from the body in the very different sense that they over-privilege their erotic lives meet with even more severe episodes of accident and illness. The instances of bodily suffering endured by Louisa and Marianne are popularly viewed by critics as scenes of correction.⁸⁴ These arguments characterise Louisa's fall from the Cobb at Lyme, or Marianne's illness at Cleveland, as a forced cessation of their dangerously sexualised and improper behaviour that leads to re-education and improvement. However, this argument does not adequately explain the prominent and necessary role of the body in these instances. Critics that do read these scenes, and indeed the fiction, with an emphasis on corporeality – most notably Wiltshire and Heydt-Stevenson – tellingly do not

⁸³ In an essay on the subject of Austen and teeth, Mark Blackwell argues that 'teeth carry with them a cluster of associations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and that Austen uses issues concerning teeth as a convenient shorthand for questions about social displacement and threats to community', Mark Blackwell, 'Harriet's 'Tooth Amiss' and Transplantation in *Emma*', *Modern Philology*, 103 (2006), 474-97 (p. 476).

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Butler on Marianne, p. 192. Tony Tanner also writes that 'there is something punitive in the taming of Marianne' and that Louisa following her injury is 'improved' pp. 100, 237.

perceive these episodes as parables of correction.⁸⁵ As well as paying attention to the body, to understand fully why these instances are not simply didactic, we also need to look at the nuanced psychological changes that Austen suggests happen following these incidents. Characters' mental shifts following accident and injury are mostly illuminated through what are, as is also often missed by scholars, altogether unsatisfactory ends for these characters. The blueprint for what happens to Louisa and Marianne in these episodes can be found, as I have suggested, in Descartes' instructions for calming the passions by becoming aware of both the mind and body, as well as in fiction in Hays' adoption of this practice for the heroine of *Emma Courtney*.

Louisa, like Harriet, is newly accomplished but problematically she shows a stubborn and competitive fixation with her erotic life. Heydt-Stevenson argues that the event of Louisa's near-fatal fall has a 'comic tone' with the verb 'to jump' being a bawdy allusion to 'sexual intercourse'.⁸⁶ While sexuality is of course prominent in this scene, humour alone does not justify why these events are more than merely didactic. Louisa falls because she is fixating on her sexual life and desires the embrace of Wentworth to the extent that she ignores the limitations of her own body. Austen writes, 'she must be jumped down them [the steps] by Captain Wentworth [...] the sensation was delightful to her' (p. 101). Continually 'jumping' her on their walks, 'Wentworth has offered Louisa two months worth of 'delightful' physical activity'.⁸⁷ This extended period of erotic enjoyment is halted when Louisa is injured. A period of slow recovery follows during which the body, now broken, is finally at the forefront of Louisa's consciousness in a manner other than sexual. Meditating upon her body in this 'interesting state' (p. 157), she decides to silence it in favour of her mental life. This decision is represented in her new found fondness for books and choice of 'a

⁸⁵ See Wiltshire, p. 45 and Heydt-Stevenson, p. 201.

⁸⁶ Heydt-Stevenson, pp. 200-01.

⁸⁷ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 201.

clever man, a reading man' (p. 172) for a husband in Captain Benwick. This conclusion is unsettling, going against one of the few, and so pivotal, things we know about her: that she has a 'character of decision and firmness' (p. 81). Louisa shows the strain and discomfort of having to change, going against her known consistency of character to become 'a person of literary taste, and sentimental reflection' (p. 157). Almost visibly enacting her bodily repression, despite having 'very much recovered' she is depicted as being 'altered: there is no running or jumping about, no laughing or dancing' (p. 205). The final unlikely coupling of Captain Benwick and Louisa forms on the outskirts of narrative and is announced with little explanation. In doing so, Austen leaves the coupling to feel, not 'absurd and thereby laughable' as Heydt-Stevenson suggests,⁸⁸ but anomalous, fitting in only as an uneasy piece of plot convenience.

Marianne, showing that she perhaps represents the severest case of bodily self-deception in the fiction, is plagued by accident and injury throughout *Sense and Sensibility*. After an early accident and her already-discussed subsequent self-imposed illness, she is finally struck with a real illness.⁸⁹ Aligning her with not just Louisa, but also Harriet, Mrs Croft and Elizabeth, Marianne's illness is rooted in an outdoor incident in which she wanders where the 'grass was the longest and wettest'. Like Louisa's jump, her dangerous cold is imposed through a lack of real bodily awareness: instead of seeing herself as a potentially sick body if she fails to change her 'wet shoes and stockings' (p. 286), she is distracted by lamenting the wrongs done to her as a sexual body. In this instance, as Wiltshire writes Marianne's 'illness career [...] is given with specific medical detail'.⁹⁰ The medicalisation of this illness along with the close attention Elinor pays to 'her sister's pulse' and '[h]er breath,

⁸⁸ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 202.

⁸⁹ The first incident occurs when Marianne's rebelliously sensual existence, expressed through an ill-advised walk with Margaret in wet weather, is interrupted by a fall. Yet Marianne is not awakened to her physicality as a result of this accident. Rather, Willoughby's intrusion means that henceforth Marianne's body becomes, to her, primarily sexual.

⁹⁰ Wiltshire, p. 45.

her skin, her lips' (p. 292) means that her physicality, rather than sexuality, finally takes centre stage. At the same time, we are made oddly aware that rationality, rather than physical health, is the goal of her recovery. Her mother will arrive either to find her dead or 'to see her rational' (p. 292) and at the end of the sickness Elinor observes Marianne's 'composure of mind' resulting from 'serious reflection' (pp. 318-19). Marianne's illness, the novel shows, is significant in as far as it allows her to become acquainted with her body and learn to control its passions. Thus, this section is fixated by stressing that this new balance in the mind has, in Cartesian fashion, been achieved.

Having rediscovered their bodies through illness, Marianne and Louisa both knowingly abandon the body, becoming almost self-sacrificially plot devices by the end of each novel. What has been learnt by both women is an oppressive form of self-discipline: the body is muted in favour of privileging intellectual life. As we are briefly alerted to in her 'violent start' and 'hysterics' over Edward's marriage (p. 329), Marianne has not really been reformed. Instead she is in a state of self-punishment for the bodily sins that she committed which she recounts by verbally revisiting her fall – in which she was at fault both for falling whilst enjoying the sensation of the outdoors and 'falling' for Willoughby – and her self-imposed illness. Evidently Marianne still desires Willoughby, and we have no evidence to suggest that Louisa has really stopped desiring Wentworth. She will simply, Marianne tells us, keep her desires 'regulated' and 'checked'. This regulation is achieved through a focus on intellectual life as is symbolised by each of their uncharacteristic newly sworn dedication to books and study. In addition to reading, Marianne states that she will 'now live solely for [her] family' (p. 323); her union with Colonel Brandon is quite openly not for love or desire but a pragmatic decision.

Far from either woman achieving happy marriages, their endings are portrayed as unsatisfying and even death-like. Each of their illnesses is feared to bring them close to death.

This is in spite of the fact that ‘Marianne’s death exists only in the imaginations of others’ and her doctor is confident of her recovery.⁹¹ Louisa, too, is portrayed as dead when she is not; she is ‘taken up lifeless’: ‘her eyes were closed, she breathed not, her face was like death’ (p. 102). The idea of death is, then, introduced for symbolic purposes. Burying a part of themselves by silencing the influence of the bodies that had been all-consuming, they have effectively ‘died’, as is shown in their bizarre shifts in character.⁹² Louisa and Marianne complete these symbolic deaths by acting as stand-ins for dead women the novels make clear are still loved by Captain Benwick (Fanny Harville) and Colonel Brandon (Eliza). Marrying men who they have, in Marianne’s case, even found repugnant, they erase the body, neither desiring nor truly being desired.

Conclusion: bodily rediscovery that leads to self-knowledge

To ignore the body, as Louisa and Marianne finally commit to doing, is to ignore a fundamental element of the self, Austen shows. As I explore in this final part of the chapter, Austen makes this point clear through the trajectories of Emma and Anne, for whom rediscovering the body is rendered akin to achieving self-knowledge. This notion of reaching a state of self-awareness is widely accepted to be the fate of Austen’s heroines, with Catherine freeing herself from foolish Gothic illusions in *Northanger Abbey* and Elizabeth being unshackled from her prejudice towards Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*. But what has not been recognised, in line with the prevailing conviction that Austen ignores the body, is that having an understanding of one’s own physicality is central to what she defines as self-knowledge. In this way, her model of self-knowledge differs from existing paradigms with which her work is evidently in dialogue. While Descartes, too, theorises that corporeal

⁹¹ Wiltshire, p. 48.

⁹² While not going as far as my argument, Heydt-Stevenson similarly notes regarding Louisa: ‘in some literal way does kill her vitality and high spirits’, p. 201.

understanding is key, he promotes gaining this awareness as a means of self-control, or ‘correct[ing] our constitutional deficiencies’, a practice of which Austen, like Hays, is suspicious. The subject of self-knowledge is, conversely, hardly addressed in the individual sense by Wollstonecraft in *The Rights of Woman*. Although she repeatedly mentions the idea that women’s bodies should be strengthened in order to allow them to become independent,⁹³ Wollstonecraft betrays an overall desire to avoid the subject of body. To place too much emphasis on female physicality might render her complicit in the cultural practice of fixating on women’s bodies to maintain their ‘slavish dependence’. While *The Rights of Woman* is overall intended to make women collectively self-aware of the degradation of their sex, what Wollstonecraft largely deals with is the more foundational issue of their being allowed to ‘unfold their faculties’ and develop individual characters in the first place.⁹⁴ Far more accepting of the existence of female individualism, Austen shows that characters who do not understand their bodies risk not knowing themselves in terms of their desires, capabilities and position in the world.

Employed entirely in service to decorum, accomplishments and utility, Emma’s body is absent from her mind in any other respect for most of the novel. The most extreme manifestation of her repression of the body, her psychological displacement of it onto Harriet, comes to an abrupt halt when it seems that Harriet might truly usurp her bodily role in becoming Mr Knightley’s lover. The scene that follows Emma’s discovery of Harriet’s threat to her silenced desire is akin to the episodes of accident and illness in which female characters reach a new self-understanding:

Every moment had brought a fresh surprise; and every surprise must be matter of humiliation to her.—How to understand it all! How to understand the deceptions she had been thus practising on herself, and living under!—The blunders, the blindness of

⁹³ ‘Men have superiour strength of body; but were it not for mistaken notions of beauty, women would acquire sufficient to enable them to earn their own subsistence, the true definition of independence’, *The Rights of Woman*, p. 158.

⁹⁴ *The Rights of Woman*, pp. 71, 73, 72.

her own head and heart!—she sat still, she walked about, she tried her own room, she tried the shrubbery—in every place, every posture, she perceived that she had acted most weakly; [...]

How long had Mr. Knightley been so dear to her, as every feeling declared him now to be? [...] she had been entirely under a delusion, totally ignorant of her own heart—[...] she had never really cared for Frank Churchill at all! (pp. 385-86).

This section of the novel features heavily in accounts of Emma's supposed reformation, before later being rewarded with Mr Knightley.⁹⁵ Yet reading the above quotation closely, it is clear that Emma does not change in any essential way. Instead this scene is portrayed as an episode of enlightenment centred round the body. Showing the extraordinary extent to which she did not know herself until the moment of Harriet's revelation, Emma revisits events and reviews her actions as 'surprises' only now being unveiled to her consciousness. The unusual physicality of this episode tells us that Harriet's announcement has triggered a corporeal awakening which now coincides with Emma's self-discovery. Fidgeting and constantly changing position alongside her self-assessment, Emma acts out the uncomfortable process of a body being newly accepted by its owner. She asserts her psychological reclamation of the body by vowing to 'not allow any other anxiety to succeed directly to the place in her mind which Harriet had occupied' (p. 423). She will not allow her 'leisure moments', no longer filled by preoccupation with Harriet, to return to being a source of anxiety and will instead apply herself towards 'understand[ing] her own heart' (p. 386). Rather than Emma finally deserving him, the novel's conclusion shows her understanding her feelings for Mr Knightley and moving past the supposition that she would be best suited to Frank that was, in a state of detachment from her body, mistaken for true desire.

Anne, too, seems to 'relearn' her body in *Persuasion*. In her pre-narrative youthful romance with Wentworth, it is suggested, she knew her body, desire and indeed self. Her life

⁹⁵ For example, Wayne C. Booth, 'Point of View and the Control of Distance in *Emma*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 16 (1961), 95-116 (p. 102).

since has led her to bury these certainties. Heydt-Stevenson writes that, '[g]rief had turned Anne's body, in Cixous's words, 'into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure [...]'. While it is not just grief, but confinement and being treated as a non-entity by her family that has caused it, this sense of the otherness of Anne's body is appropriate. This deadened state of her physicality is rendered more uncomfortable still by Wentworth's antithetical ability to redirect his sexual energies towards Louisa. Thus, while Heydt-Stevenson maintains that Austen 'reanimates' both Wentworth and Anne in the novel,⁹⁶ I disagree. The process of bodily reanimation used in *Persuasion* is not specific to the relationship between Wentworth and Anne, but relates more widely to the politics of the female body. Anne's corporeal rediscovery occurs over a series, as Adela Pinch has noted, of 'strangely intrusive' moments of physical interaction between Anne and Wentworth.⁹⁷ When Wentworth lifts Anne's nephew from her back, for example, it comes as a surprisingly somatic moment, in which we as readers are suddenly made very aware of her body. The incident begins with Anne being 'obliged to kneel down by the sofa, and remain there to satisfy her patient' (p. 72); her body is servile and has faded into the background. When a child is later 'unfastened' from Anne and she is 'released', she is facing away from Wentworth and does not immediately know who has 'done it'. She is forced, therefore, to read her physical sensations to understand what is happening. This scene acts as a 'discovery' (p. 74) of her body foremost, and is only secondarily an incident in her on-going saga with Wentworth.

In her process of bodily rediscovery Anne nonetheless pointedly retains a distinct lack of corporeal agency. When Wentworth places Anne in a carriage, she appears to have learnt the lessons of before, confirming with herself, '[y]es, – he had done it. She was in the

⁹⁶ Heydt-Stevenson, p. 202.

⁹⁷ Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996) p. 153. McMaster and Nagle also assess these episodes of close physical interaction.

carriage, and felt that he had placed her there' (p. 84). Having registered the sensations of her body, Anne can positively assert what has happened to her. Yet as this quotation shows, problematically Anne's growing bodily awareness coincides with her ongoing physical dependence. When Anne declares for instance that she would rather walk home in the rain, Wentworth flatly denies her this autonomy and tells her 'it would be more prudent to let [him] get [her] a chair' (p. 166). In this light, although Anne reawakens her body it is in a problematically passive way that contrastingly emphasises men's bodily freedom. Her corporeal rediscovery is on Wentworth's terms, and only occurs because he has decided to act and acknowledge her physically. Overall, then, issues of female passivity that work to reinforce the notion of women's weakness are left unresolved in the novel. Thus, in spite of protests against treatment of the female body in the figures of Mary and Mrs Croft, the 'gender bias' of Harville's analogy lingers over the ending of *Persuasion* with Anne left by Wentworth in a state of anxious retirement.⁹⁸

Mrs Smith further underlines the problem of female passivity in *Persuasion*. We are told that she has led a 'dissipat[ed]' life 'very much in the world' (p. 144), linking her to a lifestyle of idleness associated with the aristocracy and those who wished to ape its behaviours. In introducing her in a state of sickness, Austen almost seems to present her as a manifestation of Wollstonecraft's notion of fashionable women being '[w]eak, artificial being[s]' who exaggerate their physical weakness to the point of appearing 'sickly'.⁹⁹ With her state of incapacitation, Austen figuratively shows that with this false conception of the body Mrs Smith is useless in the world of work she now finds herself required to enter. Having viewed it only through the lens of fashion, Mrs Smith does not have a clear conception of the body's materiality. She therefore has not only to relearn her

⁹⁸ Heydt-Stevenson argues in contrast that Austen 'neutralizes his (Harville) gender bias by reinvigorating Anne's health and vitality', p. 204.

⁹⁹ *The Rights of Woman*, pp. 73, 74.

accomplishments, as discussed in the previous chapter, but also her physicality. Now, alone and ‘limited to a noisy parlour’, she is left to engage in this rediscovery of her corporeality. In her isolated state of necessary self-sufficiency she is forced to ‘fin[d] employment [...] which was from Nature alone’ (p. 145). With her bodily sensations returning slowly and separately after her illness, Mrs Smith can become acutely accustomed to the reality of her body and its workings. She tells Anne, ‘[a]s soon as I could use my hands, [Nurse Rooke] taught me how to knit’ (p. 146). Having been used only for display her body is slowly retrained so that she is able to work with it and survive her new circumstances. Much more than the ‘puzzlingly predominant flaw or intrusion’ in the text, of which scholars have dismissively written,¹⁰⁰ Mrs Smith strikingly represents that in the world beyond leisured domesticity the relationship women of are socially led to create with their bodies is utterly untenable.

Throughout this chapter I have shown that in Austen’s fiction it is a major concern that society works, in effect, to ‘domesticate’ the middle-class female body. Austen shows that women’s limited sphere, and the way they are taught to behave within this, disassociates them from the body. Whether in absorption of or rebellion to domestic ideals, women appear to be equally dislodged from their physicality. In seeking faithfully to represent this absence of the body in the mind, Austen is notoriously silent in terms of depicting corporeal life. Departing from scholarship that has either been disappointed in a lack of physicality in Austen’s work, or sought reactively to exaggerate its presence, I have thus both acknowledged the absence of the female body in the novels and contended that they are deeply concerned with it. Austen’s strategic silence surrounding the body is interrupted, and the issues it gestures towards exposed, most notably through outdoor incidents that require the mind to communicate with the body. In the pain, stillness and isolation of sickness and

¹⁰⁰ Wiltshire, p. 165

injury that is often the result of these outdoor episodes, women are presented with a unique opportunity for the workings of the body to become disclosed to their minds. Through these events, female characters seem to arrive at a new degree of self-understanding. The novels move towards bodily knowledge and self-knowledge at the same rate in this way because, to Austen, these are one and the same. Not simply a surface to be read, as contemporary practices such as accomplishments, thinkers such as Wollstonecraft and More and even critics of the fiction suggest, the body is, Austen shows, a fundamental element of selfhood.

Although ultimately successful, Austen's scenes prompting a process of self-discovery are also distinctly dark in tone. In the novels, Louisa nearly dies, Harriet is viciously attacked and Mrs Smith has to become crippled. To Austen then, the misrepresentation women are given of their bodies is deeply serious. The sharp shock delivered by her chosen methods of revealing this misrepresentation reflects that, as Jane Spencer notes, 'Austen [...] want[s] a better status for women in [the gender] hierarchy'.¹⁰¹ Like Wollstonecraft she realises that to achieve this elevation women must first 'have power [...] over themselves'.¹⁰² But, going further than Wollstonecraft's demand for women to be allowed to strengthen the body, what Austen particularly recognises is that an accurate conception of the body is integral to this self-possession. This new-found power might result, as it does with Marianne and Louisa, in a more conscious repression of the body for pragmatic ends. More positively a consciousness of the body can result in a new found clarity and ability to act on one's desires as with Emma, or be the foundation for relative physical autonomy as it is with Elizabeth. Yet most profoundly and progressively, as Mrs Smith demonstrates in her transformation from fashionable cypher, that knowledge of the body is crucially the basis for a woman's ability to function with a degree of independence in society.

¹⁰¹ Spencer, p. 168.

¹⁰² *The Rights of Woman*, p. 133.

Chapter 3

Silence, distance and absence: The politics of female exclusion

‘That is, I can read poetry and plays, and things of that sort, and do not dislike travels. But history, real solemn history, I cannot be interested in. Can you?’

‘Yes, I am fond of history.’

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

‘Historians, you think,’ said Miss Tilney, ‘are not happy in their flights of fancy. They display imagination without raising interest. I am fond of history—and am very well contented to take the false with the true. In the principal facts they have sources of intelligence in former histories and records, which may be as much depended on, I conclude, as any thing that does not actually pass under one's own observation [...]’

‘You are fond of history!—and so are Mr. Allen and my father; and I have two brothers who do not dislike it. [...]’

Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818)¹

The Events of this Monarch's [Charles I] reign are too numerous for my pen, and indeed the recital of any Events (except what I make myself) is uninteresting to me; my principal reason for undertaking the History of England being to prove the innocence of the Queen of Scotland, which I flatter myself with having effectually done, and to abuse Elizabeth, tho' I am rather fearful of having fallen short in the latter part of my Scheme—.

Jane Austen, ‘The History of England’ (composed 1791)²

In *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine Morland articulates Austen's challenge to masculine literary – and specifically historical – authority. One of several important ideas expressed in the first of the above quotations is Catherine's sense of female alienation. As a consequence of

¹ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 104-05. All subsequent references are to this edition.

² Jane Austen, ‘The History of England’ (1791) in *Catharine and Other Writings*, ed. by Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) pp. 134-44 (p. 144). All subsequent references are to this edition.

women's omission from history books, with authors choosing to feature 'good for nothing' men instead, Catherine feels that young women readers cannot relate to these works. Historical books are targeted towards and find a male audience, the heroine suggests, listing all of the men who enjoy history in her close circle of acquaintance. Eleanor Tilney, presumably under the charismatic influence of her brother, Henry, proves to be an exception and enacts a defence of the form. Austen uses this defence, however, to question the authenticity of these works. Eleanor is granted the weak and ironic argument that the 'sources of intelligence in former histories and records' that they use 'may be as much *depended on* [...] as anything that does not actually pass under one's own observation' (my italics). The popular accounts of history used as authorities are unreliable, Austen suggests; they have suffered by being filtered through various retellings, becoming further removed from the original event each time. As this conversation subtly reveals, lacking access to the wider world and formal education women were necessarily more dependent on second-hand information received through sources such as history books. As the sex for whom generally fewer events of importance 'actually pass under one's own observation', their unreliability is particularly problematic for women. Yet, in pointing out that 'a great deal of [history] must be invention', Austen also works to level the ground between novels and history books. Gesturing towards her own authorial enterprise, she implies that her invented narratives might to some degree also serve the purpose of historical record.

Austen's impulse to write history can be traced back to 'The History of England' (1791) from the second volume of her juvenilia. In this satirical work, Austen joins the number of the 'nine-hundre[d] abridger[s] of the History of England' (p. 36) to which she scathingly later refers in *Northanger Abbey*. The piece sets out to expose the limits of historical works like Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England* (1764), one of several books from which it borrows its title. In her guise as '*a partial, prejudiced, and ignorant Historian*'

Austen mockingly states that she will include ‘very few Dates in this History’ (p. 134) and at regular intervals that she cannot ‘perfectly recollect’ (p. 137) certain details. Foreshadowing the conversation between Catherine and Eleanor, she further emphasises her work’s unreliability by depending on fiction for its sources. When describing the reigns of Henry IV and Henry V, Austen writes for instance that ‘I must refer the Reader to Shakespear’s Plays’ (p. 134). Alongside challenging the authority of history books through parody, she seeks to revise them by bringing women to the fore of ‘The History’. As the second quotation above demonstrates, Austen portrays male monarchs as ‘uninteresting’ (p. 144) compared to women, giving Elizabeth I by far the most space in her account. Though her professed ambition is to vindicate Mary I of Scotland, her work becomes a defence of Elizabeth I, claiming that: ‘she could not have committed such extensive mischeif [sic], had not these vile and abandoned Men connived at, and encouraged her in her Crimes’ (p. 140). Dedicating this work to her sister Cassandra, Austen shows a desire to address the alienation felt by female readers of history such as Catherine Morland. Drawing on fiction and taking what amounts to a feminist revisionist approach to history,³ ‘The History of England’ provides the foundation for Austen’s later achievement in her novels.⁴

Far from being viewed as an author engaged with historical events, Austen’s fiction has long been criticised for its perceived lack of interest in political matters traditionally of concern to histories. Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote that her novels seem ‘imprisoned in their wretched conventions of English society, without genius, wit, or knowledge of the

³ As Devoney Looser notes, others have also viewed ‘The History’ as a feminist revisionist text, Devoney Looser, *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 188.

⁴ Looser also emphasises the importance of ‘The History’ in terms of understanding Austen’s later work in her novels. She writes that ‘it deals with issues that reappear in altered form in later writings. Austen defines herself as a ‘Historian’ in this piece, but she produces something that looks like neither standard political history nor domestic fiction’. In this early work, Looser adds, the author ‘present[s] herself as a rival to historians’ as ‘a writer of worthy fiction’, pp. 186-87, 191. Drawing on Looser’s work, Lisa Kasmer similarly suggests that ‘The History’ presents a model that shows ‘a continuum between the genres of history and historical fiction’ which ‘not only exposes the fictionality of history’, but also challenges the notion of a distinction between ‘male’ history and ‘female’ novels, Lisa Kasmer, *Novel Histories: British Women Writing History, 1760-1830* (Plymouth: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), pp. 4, 3.

world. Never was life so pinched & narrow.’⁵ Winston Churchill also noted incredulously of Austen’s characters: ‘What calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution or the crashing struggle of the Napoleonic Wars’.⁶ More recently, in turning scholarly attention towards the silences regarding slavery in *Mansfield Park* (1814) Edward Said has found the novel troubling in its apparent uncritical complicity. Though Austen’s alleged omissions still shock readers to this day, this was in actuality a point of criticism she foresaw and contended with as she wrote. We see in her letters that she rejected a proposal from the Prince Regent’s librarian to write about a clergyman with knowledge ‘of Science & Philosophy’ on the grounds of her being ‘the most unlearned, & uninformed Female who ever dared to be an Authoress’. Writing of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) she affirms that she is ‘well satisfied enough’ with the novel, only to suggest ironically that the work might be improved by ‘a long Chapter – of sense [...] on Walter Scott, or the history of Buonaparte’.⁷ Austen’s failure to discuss overtly in her works pressing contemporary matters was always, she suggests with mocking self-deprecation, a conscious artistic choice.

With the pen, as she announces in *Persuasion* (1818), no longer only in men’s hands,⁸ Austen intended to write *women’s* history as she saw it unfolding. Seeking to correct the past ills to which Catherine refers, Austen marginalises pressing contemporary issues such as the debates concerning the slave trade, French Revolution and Napoleonic wars in order to capture female experience. Austen’s omission of these subjects does not betray her disinterest in ‘unfeminine’ matters, but rather her concern that they are culturally designated as such. As I discussed in relation to the body in Chapter 2, Austen uses silence regarding politics as a

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson in His Journals*, ed. by Joel Porte (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 495.

⁶ Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War, Volume V: Closing the Ring* (London: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), p. 377. Churchill is, of course, reiterating what the early Austen biographers said of her exclusion of key contemporary political events, most notably Henry Austen and James Edward Austen-Leigh (see the Introduction to this thesis).

⁷ Jane Austen, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 306, 203.

⁸ Through Anne Elliot Austen suggests that: ‘Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands’, Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 220. All subsequent references are to this edition.

strategy to expose the problematic silences in women's lives. It is owing to her desired fidelity to female experience that, for example, as Said observes of *Mansfield Park*, the issue of slavery exists only in the narrative background. For Austen, the absence of politics mirrors women's disconnection from these matters within domestic confinement and under the influence of psychologically oppressive domestic ideology. Responding to the failings of former histories, through her silences Austen documents the history of women's political exclusion in her fiction.

Of course, Austen was not the first female historian, nor is this thesis the first to figure her in such a role. A recent study by Janine Barchas, for instance, looks at references to eighteenth-century celebrity culture in Austen's work, arguing that she 'create[s], perhaps, her own prototype of the so-called historical novel'.⁹ Expanding upon William Galperin's statement in *The Historical Austen* (2003) that Austen is 'a historian of her milieu',¹⁰ Barchas, rejects the image of the author as 'a cloistered rectory daughter, innocent of larger social and political events'.¹¹ Devoney Looser has similarly argued that Austen presents her novels as 'present-tense "histories"' that offer an alternative to reading 'past history'. Looser however contends that Austen does not criticise history books for their exclusion of women because '[s]everal histories with precisely th[e] goal [to include women] had appeared in [recent] decades'.¹² While such texts were available, as Catherine shows these were not necessarily what children were given to read in the schoolroom; there is still corrective work to be done, Austen suggests. One of the contemporary writers to have addressed the absence of women in historical works was Lucy Aikin whose *Epistles on Women* (1810) receives particular attention in Lisa Kasmer's recent study, *Novel Histories* (2012). Other prominent

⁹ Janine Barchas, *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012), p. 115.

¹⁰ William Galperin, *The Historical Austen* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003) p. 217.

¹¹ Barchas, p. 2.

¹² Looser, pp. 184, 195, 188.

female historians of the period included Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution; and the Effect It Has produced in Europe* (1794) and Catharine Macaulay, the first woman to write a history of England. While, as Kasmer shows, these women's histories often had feminist intentions,¹³ all of these authors choose to map their work along essentially traditional political lines. In striving to put women at the centre of her writing, it is Austen's strategy to disregard the political events that feature centrally in the works of her forerunners. This chapter will thus depart from the recent critical trend that aligns Austen with histories by focusing on her minute contextual references. Rather, I want to foreground the silences that are at the root of her reputation as an ahistorical writer and yet which have often gone unacknowledged by the scholars who seek to refute this perception.

In showing Austen to be documenting history in her fiction, I am suggesting that, however unconventionally, her works are indeed political. By discussing Austen's political nature, my work contributes to a debate defined on either side by the seminal works of Marilyn Butler and Claudia Johnson. Both of these scholars believe that the key to understanding Austen's political position is in unlocking her silences. In *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (1975) Butler contends that when Austen was writing 'it was impossible to be untouched' 'by the current controversies'. Drawing upon Austen's exclusion of key contemporary events such as the Napoleonic Wars, Butler concludes that her work is 'expressive of the conservative side in an active war of ideas'. While it is true that Butler marked a shift in Austen criticism by opposing one 'of the commonest critical assumptions' that her work is apolitical,¹⁴ I would uphold Johnson's complaint that in showing Austen to be part of a dominant, conservative school of thought, she does not truly allow the author to be a 'warrior of ideas'. Looking primarily at gender politics, Johnson maintains that Austen's

¹³ Kasmer argues, for instance, that Lucy Aikin wrote a 'feminist history of women' and that Catherine Macaulay 'inserts herself and her fellow 'citizens,' including women, into the public intellectual debate concerning England's political future', pp. 15, 26-27.

¹⁴ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (London: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp. 124, 294.

political silence ‘permitted her to rewrite the lexicon of conservative discourse’ from within.¹⁵ Although I agree broadly with Johnson’s approach to Austen’s politics, I will take issue here, as signalled in my Introduction, with her interpretation of the author’s silences. To suggest that Austen’s silences are a mask behind which to forward a progressive agenda within the novels’ action is to underestimate the manner in which silence is employed in the fiction. Johnson’s model of silence suggests a sidestep from overt polemics to subtlety which, while perhaps appropriate to the question of women’s rights, does not adequately explain the novels’ treatment of other political issues. Unlike Johnson, I do not believe that the rights of woman debates constitute one of Austen’s exclusions in the same way that slavery, a particular focus in this chapter, does. As I show throughout this study, Austen takes a firm stance in relation to the contemporary situation of women. In contrast to other contemporary political matters, her experience allows and even necessitates her participation in these debates, she shows.

The question of women’s limited experience, and therefore knowledge, of non-domestic reality figures centrally in this chapter. In effect, the novels function as epistemological enquiries: they are studies of ways of knowing and how these are gendered by society. The subjects of knowledge and learning were burgeoning fields of debate in the long eighteenth century, with philosophers such as John Locke, David Hume, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and educational writers Maria and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, contributing influential texts.¹⁶ Austen joins this contemporary discourse by offering a critique of female

¹⁵ Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. xviii, xxv.

¹⁶ See: John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Thomas Basset, 1690) and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1693); David Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (London: A. Millar, 1748); Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile; or On Education* (1762) trans. Allan Bloom (New York, Basic Books, 1979); and Maria Edgeworth and Richard Lovell Edgeworth, *Practical Education* (London: J. Johnson, 1798).

practices of learning by rote in which we see the Bertram girls or Mary Bennet engaging.¹⁷ Aligning herself with the work of Frances Burney, Austen advocates learning from direct experience. Burney subjects her heroines to intense exercises in ‘coming out’, or, being introduced to society as a marriageable adult. Through experiences that allow for action, involvement in and perception of non-domestic environments her characters learn hard lessons about being a woman in contemporary society. In attaining knowledge through what are for women unconventional methods, as *The Wanderer’s* (1814) Juliet particularly shows, her heroines subvert gendered epistemic norms. Austen’s heroines in the process of coming out – Catherine and Fanny – do not have experiences so extreme. Instead, they are largely left with book-learning and conversations with men through which to understand the world. Marking her departure from Burney, most of Austen’s heroines are already ‘out’. With these characters Austen reflects women’s static way of life and the narrow, routine nature of their experiences. While they may be out, she shows, they certainly have not made their ‘entrance into the world’.¹⁸

Beginning with this theme of knowledge, I open the chapter with the issue of female ignorance in relation to the fiction’s complicated romance plots. Jane Bennet’s inability to communicate directly with Bingley after he leaves Netherfield despite travelling to be near him and Marianne’s parallel situation with Willoughby are crucial in creating the romantic suspense in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811). I demonstrate how these personal crises mirror wider issues of women’s relationships to and influence in terms of political matters. Tying in closely with this section, the second part of the chapter will look at

¹⁷ As part of her wider critique of systems of female education, Wollstonecraft also takes aim at this practice. She writes that ‘the severest sarcasms have been levelled against the sex, and they have been ridiculed for repeating ‘a set of phrases learnt by rote,’ when nothing could be more natural, considering the education they receive, and that their ‘highest praise is to obey, unargued’—the will of man. If they are not allowed to have reason sufficient to govern their own conduct—why, all they learn—must be learned by rote!’ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1792), ed. by Janet Todd (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 63-283 (p. 193).

¹⁸ Frances Burney, *Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008),

how lack of freedom for women results in a dependence on men as a source of information. A gendered hierarchy in terms of knowledge is established by Austen in which in deference to male companions characters such as Catherine and Fanny neglect their often superior powers of intuition. Lastly, the chapter will turn to exploring female political exclusion in relation to slavery, principally, in *Mansfield Park*. The slave trade is both the subject for which Austen is most notorious for having mentioned and, post-Said, for not having discussed in any detail. The silence surrounding slavery in the fiction is echoed with regards to other contemporary political matters, including the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars. While I will draw upon these matters, this chapter dwells most concertededly on slavery as the issue through which, Austen implies, women's limited access to information and autonomy as citizens becomes the most troubling. Domesticity, Austen shows, creates silences in women's lives. In addressing the silence regarding slavery in particular, she questions what the implications of domesticity are for women's moral agency.

Female ignorance and the romance plot

Austen's romantic plots are often revealing of the wider epistemic constraints women labour under in the fiction. In their romantic dealings, female characters are hindered and frequently suffer emotionally due to a paucity of knowledge. The lack of information women have regarding their love lives bears direct correlation to their limited freedom of movement compared to men. In the novels, Austen is fixated with the idea of a woman going to great lengths in order to follow a love interest, only for them to be confined and unable to see them. In Marianne and Jane Bennet's episodes of travelling to be near the absent Willoughby and Mr Bingley, for example, they each gain only a maddening proximity rather than the ability to confront their lovers. Through instances such as these, Austen uses the personal to make a multi-layered political argument. On the one hand, she shows, women are unjustly prone to

manipulation in romance owing to their not having the rights and freedom of movement political citizenship affords men. On the other, these episodes of romantic frustration present paradigms of women's position in relation to matters of wider political significance. The dynamic between Anne and Wentworth in *Persuasion*, I will illustrate, most clearly showcases the personal and political lines of Austen's argument at work.

In the novels, it is symbolically in London – the country's centre of business and politics, and so a predominantly masculine sphere – that female characters find themselves confronted with the limits of their power. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Bennet, having been quietly confident of his affection, is inexplicably abandoned by Mr Bingley. With this event, the Bennet sisters are left in a state of aimless conjecture. Bingley, a character about whom Jane and Elizabeth had felt that they possessed a good understanding becomes an enigma; he is 'a subject, in short, on which reflection would be long indulged, and must be unavailing'.¹⁹ With no access to further information, soon 'Bingley's name was scarcely ever mentioned' (p. 135). As with other matters beyond women's reach, Bingley becomes a domestic silence in the novel. Given the opportunity of a visit to the Gardiners, Jane decides to follow him to London. In aping masculine freedom of movement in this way, she hopes to have access to the same understanding as Bingley of their romantic status. Yet even in London, she remains in the same state of unknowing passivity. Mrs Gardiner foresees the frustrations that await Jane as a result of women's restricted autonomy: 'We live in so different a part of town, all our connections are so different, and, as you well know, we go out so little, that it is very improbable they should meet at all, unless [Bingley] really comes to see her' (p. 139). Thus, 'Four weeks passed away, and Jane saw nothing of him' (p. 145). As Elizabeth observes of Jane's letters, it is never 'in her *power*' (p. 144, my italics) to share any intelligence of

¹⁹ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 132. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Bingley. Even when pushing the limits of their freedom in episodes of travel, it seems, women are only reminded of their limitations and end up recreating the conditions of their domestic confinement elsewhere.

Jane's disempowered status in her relationship with Bingley mirrors the dynamic we see between Marianne and Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility*. Highlighting a strange passivity in her decision to travel to London, Marianne is described as being 'carried by her eagerness to be with Willoughby again'.²⁰ Marianne, to her mind, is travelling towards a welcome reunion. Yet in London she is more housebound than she ever was at home in Sussex and is unable to secure a reconnection with Willoughby. More so than Jane, she appears to feel the unfairness in having travelled for three days to be no closer to achieving communication. She oscillates daily between the emotional extremes of 'the anxiety of expectation and the pain of disappointment' (p. 158). Demonstrating the illogical nature of women's social restraints, Marianne's situation proves to be excruciatingly counter-intuitive to her character. She exercises every means at her disposal to achieve a better understanding of her relationship. She is forward as far as possible, persistently 'writing to Willoughby' from her moment of arrival (p. 153). Having done so, she can only resolutely remain at home awaiting a reply. Trying to grasp for power in passivity, Marianne is emblematically reliant on the domestic space as a hub of received intelligence.

Marianne and Willoughby, it transpires, are operating according to separate concerns and within different systems of understanding. For Marianne and her (all-female) family, she has broken from decorum in their intimacy and so they must be engaged; for Willoughby, financial pressures mean that this engagement is impossible. Her disadvantaging lack of knowledge is, tellingly, within the traditionally masculine field of economics. In the end,

²⁰ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 147. All subsequent references are to this edition.

Willoughby triggers a crisis of understanding for Marianne: what she thought she knew, ‘his heart’ (p. 200), appears to have been false. Marianne’s reaction against this injustice is articulated in revealingly general terms:

‘Go to him, Elinor, [...] force him to come to me. Tell him I must see him again—must speak to him instantly.—I cannot rest—I shall not have a moment’s piece till this is explained—some dreadful misapprehension or other.—Oh go to him this moment’ (p. 168).

Commanding her sister to act, Marianne erupts in protest against socially-imposed female inaction with which she has been contending throughout her time in London. Gesturing towards Austen’s broader political purpose, in reparation for her betrayal she wants primarily not Willoughby’s returned affection, but an explanation and so an end to her enforced state of ignorance.

While the examples of Jane and Marianne are suggestive of a wider symbolic significance, it is through Anne and Wentworth that Austen’s concern with female ignorance in romance takes on its most explicitly political character. Their relationship was – and is once again at the novel’s close – based on Anne’s feminine confinement in contrast with Wentworth’s masculine activity. When they begin their romance they are described as having required only ‘[h]alf the sum of attraction, on either side, [...] for he had nothing to do, and she had hardly any body to love’ (p. 26). After Wentworth leaves to join the navy, Anne is left uncertain of his activity, feelings, and so her likely future in terms of their relationship. Like the other female characters I have been discussing, she suffers emotionally as a consequence of not having the similar powers of movement and freedoms of communication afforded to men. In not knowing what Wentworth is doing – and this appears to be her only concern – Anne by implication does not know what is happening in terms of the war. With their romance being rekindled only when Wentworth once more ‘ha[s] nothing to do’, and their later marriage threatened by ‘the dread of future war’ (p. 236), their relationship is

nonetheless entirely dependent on political affairs. Despite this dependence Anne appears only aware of the Napoleonic Wars as far as they affect her domestic circumstances. She is from the offset (in a dynamic that Wentworth likely fosters given his disdain for women aboard naval ships) defined in relation to Wentworth as an absence from naval life. We see this type of relationship echoed in *Pride and Prejudice* with the officers socialising for the primary ends of flirtation. Women, the novel implies in their poor treatment by the militia, are perceived as a frivolous respite from, and so the antithesis to, their military actions. Female ignorance in terms of politics is therefore problematically figured as not only desirable, but also as necessary to the romance plot.

Gendered ways of knowing

With an inability to access information crucial to their romantic lives, on the one hand, and political matters on the other, women are left with men having the upper hand in relationships. It is through men's perspective that they are primarily able to gain understanding of the world. Thus we see Anne, in implied episodes of learning about the events of the Napoleonic Wars, 'ha[ving] only navy lists and newspapers for her authority' (p. 29). While Wentworth encounters the realities of war, she can only read the experiences of absent men relayed second-hand through male journalists. While Anne is drawn into inadvertent political enquiry through her concern for Wentworth, the relative situation of men and women in terms of knowledge is more strictly segregated in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Following mainly the experiences of Elizabeth and her sisters, readers witness female-only or mixed-company discussions of polite, non-political topics. At the same time, the militia's presence at social gatherings and the implied male-only conversations they would form part of suggest a continual background discussion of war. Warren Roberts has argued that such detail in the novels reflects 'Austen's ability to pick up the vibrations of a society that was in

the throes of change'. Her novels, he maintains, 'show how profound was the impact of the war on England, the many points at which the war touched Austen's life, [and] how she responded to it.'²¹ Yet in making his case for Austen's conservative reaction to social upheaval, Roberts does not adequately contend with the role that Austen's arguments about gender play in keeping political details as only a background 'vibration' in the novels. By not allowing female characters, and by extension the reader, to be privy to information such as that presumed to be discussed by *Pride and Prejudice*'s militia, Austen asserts the exclusiveness of male authority on these matters and, by implication, female dependence on this authority.

Women are thus predominantly figured as receptacles of male knowledge in the fiction. This gendered dynamic has come to form part of the view, promoted by Butler, that Austen's 'plots are a movement from ignorance to knowledge, culminating in a moment of [the heroine's] intelligent discernment'.²² Butler's interpretation is, however, limited in that it regards Austen as working within the conventions of the conservative novel in which young women are guided through society by 'lover-mentor[s]'.²³ Austen, like Burney, with whom she aligns herself on this issue of gendered intellect, has a far more complex approach to this subject than Butler suggests.²⁴ In demonstrating this approach, I will be looking at *Mansfield Park* and *Northanger Abbey*, novels that are often perceived as Austen's more politically-engaged works,²⁵ but which also feature heroines that are especially deferential towards men as a source of knowledge. Female characters such as Catherine and Fanny often prove to be more discerning than men in their abilities to read social situations, and yet mistrust their own

²¹ Warren Roberts, *Jane Austen and the French Revolution* (London: The Athlone Press, 1979), pp. 7, 10.

²² *War of Ideas*, p. 292.

²³ Jane Spencer, *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 177.

²⁴ As Butler indicates in her notes to *Northanger Abbey*, Austen is referring to the character of Indiana in *Camilla* (1796) when, discussing the attractiveness of ignorance in women, she writes: 'The advantages of natural folly in a beautiful girl have been already set forth by the capital pen of a sister author' (pp. 106, 250).

²⁵ While acknowledging that Austen 'made a deliberate choice not to discuss directly the events that so disturbed her world', Roberts writes that 'it is well known that England's war with France is a theme in *Mansfield Park*' and that 'Catharine' and *Northanger Abbey*, show an awareness of the French Revolution and its impact on English life', pp. 7, 10, 18.

understanding. Their intuitive powers that defy their lack of experience and education present an implicit challenge to women's dependence upon male intellect and confinement to domestic concerns. Women's expertise when it comes to assessing domestic situations is met with the contrast of aborted female political conversations in the novels. These episodes serve as troubling commentary on the systemic refusal to allow women to participate independently in political discourse.

Henry Tilney acts as Austen's most exaggerated assertion of men's presumed role as society's principal vehicles for knowledge. Such is Henry's assurance of his intellectual superiority that he believes that he not only has a better understanding of typically female interests, but also of women's interior lives. He proclaims to Catherine on the subject of novels: 'I myself have read hundreds and hundreds. Do not imagine that you can cope with me in a knowledge of Julias and Louisas' (p. 103). As well as robbing Catherine of her area of expertise, in naming heroines rather than titles he implies that he has a thorough understanding of women themselves. This belief is reasserted in his mocking ventriloquising of the words he expects Catherine will use in her journal following their initial meeting. 'I know exactly what you will say', he tells her, before going on to propose 'what [she] ought to say' (pp. 26-27). So simple and transparent are women, his casually invasive attitude suggests, that they are entirely knowable. Contrary to claims like Butler's about female learning in Austen's novels, Henry seems to desire merely an audience for his displays of intellect rather than to educate Catherine. Demonstrating to Catherine that her life is a 'picture of intellectual poverty' (p. 76), he reinforces his own authority and establishes a firm binary of male intellect and female ignorance. Placing this dynamic at the heart of *Northanger Abbey*, Austen seeks to reflect upon romantic relationships in general:

[Catherine] was heartily ashamed of her ignorance. A misplaced shame. Where people wish to attach, they should always be ignorant. [...]. A woman especially, if

she have the misfortune of knowing anything, should conceal it as well as she can (p. 106).

Whilst avoiding confirming that Catherine or women in general are ignorant, the narrator signals the issue of the attractiveness of a female lack of knowledge. Upholding this problem, Henry sees Catherine entirely through the prism of his own intellectual charm: ‘in finding him irresistible, [she] becom[es] so herself’ (p. 95), the narrator observes. Being impressed by Henry’s displays of learning suggests her lack of knowledge and therefore a desirable dependence upon him for information.

Despite her belief in her own ignorance, Catherine is used by Austen to challenge the validity of the notion of male intellectual authority. In the novel, Henry seems willing to assume a representative role in relation to men’s intellectual pre-eminence. Following the discussion of history cited at the start of this chapter, he empathetically talks on ‘behalf of our most distinguished historians’ (p. 105). Catherine, however, resists his defence of history and more broadly the type of formal education such reading represents. Continuing her childhood defiance of such learning, she states boldly that ‘to *torment* and to *instruct* might sometimes be used as synonymous [sic] words’ (p. 105). In spite of the fact that while Henry ‘had entered on [his] studies at Oxford’ she was ‘working [her] sampler at home’ (p. 103), Catherine is ultimately able to expose his limitations in understanding. When it comes to assessing the seriousness of the flirtation between Isabella and Frederick in particular, Catherine proves to be the more perceptive of the two. Although problematically concluding after hearing his dismissal of the issue that ‘Henry Tilney must know best’ (p. 144), in being proven right Catherine weakens the legitimacy of his claim to render her intellectually dependent upon him. Johnson has similarly recognised a contest between male and female intellectual authority in the novel, writing: ‘With the authority of Johnson and Blair behind him [...] Henry is empowered to consider feminine discourse – conversation or gothic novels

– as either mistaken or absurd'.²⁶ If Henry channels the authority of masculine texts, Catherine is implicitly aligned with the female-authored novels that nearly entirely make up her reading. Inverting Johnson's observation, the heroine's triumph over Henry in understanding is, then, one enacted on behalf of both Austen as a novelist and female intellectual authority in general.

Whereas Austen's arguments regarding men's claims to intellectual ascendancy centre on literature and education in *Northanger Abbey*, in *Mansfield Park* she looks more widely at the relative scopes of men and women's epistemic reach. While Henry revels in the alluring ignorance of Catherine, Edmund, viewing Fanny as a cousin, and increasingly a sister, genuinely seeks to assist in her education. Maria and Julia pursue an education that consists of empty memorisation of facts, learning for instance 'the chronological order of the kings of England [...] and all the Metals, Semi-Metals, Planets, and distinguished philosophers',²⁷ alongside their accomplishments. Fanny meanwhile benefits second-hand from Edmund's more advanced studies. Austen writes that 'his attentions were [...] of the highest importance in assisting the improvement of her mind [...] he recommended the books which charmed her leisure hours, he encouraged her taste, and corrected her judgement' (p. 22). This studious activity later extends to their shared scrutiny and evaluation of the behaviour of the members of their social circle. Fanny has more in common with Eleanor Tilney, then, than Catherine in her willingness to participate companionably in Edmund's assessment of the world. Men and women might, the novel suggests, achieve a semblance of equality in terms of knowledge through a mutual ability to learn from texts and domestic observation.

Nonetheless, as far as knowledge that can be gained through experience of the wider world is concerned, women are at a distinct disadvantage. Although spoken to by him on

²⁶ Johnson, pp. 38-39.

²⁷ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 19. All subsequent references are to this edition.

relatively equal terms as she develops in the novel, Edmund has power over Fanny. He reminds her of his authority when ordering her to marry Henry Crawford. In a misguided step towards ‘correct[ing] her judgement’, he tells her: ‘let him succeed at last, Fanny’ (p. 322). Moreover, while she can grow intellectually through their joint reflective study, her ultimate dependence upon him owing to his ability to reach the outside world is established from the outset. In first endearing himself to her by assisting in the ‘bold measure’ (p. 17) of sending a letter, Edmund symbolically demonstrates a masculine capability to reach beyond domestic confines. Indeed, the situation with regards to gendered knowledge can be summarised with the observation that, as Fanny struggles to ‘put the map of Europe together’ (p. 18) in order to gain an academic understanding of the world, her brother William simultaneously travels and experiences it first-hand.

To be truly masculine, Henry Crawford appears to suggest in the novel, is to know the world in the manner that William Price does;²⁸ by implication, to be truly a woman is to not know it. In light of their upbringing, the Crawford siblings represent a commentary on this gendered binary. Henry was nurtured by Admiral Crawford, a man with political knowledge and direct involvement in worldly affairs; by contrast, Mary was the ‘*protégée*’ (p. 39) of an aunt who ‘always felt affected if within ten miles of the sea’ (p. 386). While Henry continues to feel the burden of pleasing his uncle, Mary reacts, in the wake of her aunt’s death, against the form of power he represents as a man expounding deeply conservative views on women.²⁹ Throughout, Mary seeks to resist female cultural disadvantage by challenging her

²⁸ ‘Young as he was, William had already seen a great deal. He had been in the Mediterranean – in the West Indies – in the Mediterranean again [...]. [Henry Crawford] longed to have been at sea, and seen and done and suffered as much. His heart was warmed, his fancy fired, and he felt the highest respect for a lad who, before he was twenty, had gone through such bodily hardships, and given such proofs of mind. The glory of heroism, of usefulness, of exertion, of endurance, made his own habits of selfish indulgence appear in shameful contrast; and he wished he had been a William Price, distinguishing himself and working his way to fortune and consequence with so much self-respect and happy ardour, instead of what he was!’ (pp. 218-19).

²⁹ With her notorious joke about the navy – ‘my home at my uncle’s brought me acquainted with a circle of admirals. Of *Rears* and *Vices* I saw enough. Now, do not be suspecting me of a pun, I entreat’ (p. 57) – she is laughingly dismissive of the masculine authoritative body her uncle represents. For analysis of this quotation and the use of sexual puns in Austen’s work, see Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

lack of freedom. When she is left by her brother and Edmund at Mansfield against her wishes, she sits in silent protest feeling the ‘tediousness and vexation’ of being ‘confined within doors’ (p. 263). Her ongoing rebellion also more pointedly targets female disadvantage in terms of knowledge. In discussion with Edmund she questions the accuracy, and even point, of his manner of measuring time and distance.

‘Oh! I know nothing of your furlongs, but I am sure it is a very long wood; and that we have been winding in and out ever since we came into it; and therefore when I say that we have walked a mile in it, I must speak within compass.’

‘We have been exactly a quarter of an hour here,’ said Edmund, taking out his watch. ‘Do you think we are walking four miles an hour?’

‘Oh! do not attack me with your watch. A watch is always too fast or too slow. I cannot be dictated to by a watch’ (p. 89).

With what is termed her ‘feminine lawlessness’ (p. 88) she contests the very foundations upon which Edmund bases his understanding of the world. Through these abstract and essentially nonsensical methods of argumentation, Mary resists being confined in any way by masculine authoritative ways of knowing.

Despite their more obvious differences, a parallel can be drawn between Mary Crawford and her love rival Fanny in terms of how they operate intellectually in the novel. Using imaginative methods of resistance, Mary Crawford is a shrewd and manipulative operator, doing as much as possible with the information she has at her disposal throughout the novel. Though more passive in her approach, Fanny also has an advantage when it comes to knowledge of the Mansfield Park circle. In a similar fashion to Catherine, as Edmund seeks to nurture her dependence on him, Fanny quietly develops more sophisticated ways of understanding the world than he possesses. Her keen observation allows her better to intuit, for instance, the situation between the Bertram sisters and Henry Crawford. Discerning accurately the desires of others, these heroines display a form of intelligence that defies their lack of education. This ability to achieve the intellectual upper hand within the arena of

domestic affairs serves to challenge the ascendancy of traditional masculine ways of knowing. Moreover, their intellectual capabilities raise the issue of women's culturally-enforced inability to apply their minds to matters that extend beyond the home.

Conversational silences between women in the fiction are deployed by Austen as a stark reflection of women's narrow permitted field of knowledge.³⁰ In *Northanger Abbey*, the scope of conversation between the Tilneys and Catherine during their long-awaited walk is vast. Yet when politics and 'the state of the nation' are introduced as subjects by Henry it is 'an easy step to silence' (p. 107) for the women. With the other discussed topics including history and the picturesque, there are extant models of textual authority upon which to rely. Politics is however current and ever-changing, requiring active participation in order to remain informed. Eleanor and Catherine's silence is, the novel suggest, inevitable. Similarly, in *Sense and Sensibility* at one social gathering Austen writes that

When the ladies withdrew to the drawing-room after dinner, this poverty was particularly evident, for the gentlemen *had* supplied the discourse with some variety—the variety of politics, inclosing land, and breaking horses—but then it was all over [...].

All of the discussion previously provided had been associated with activity and life beyond domestic confines. When the men leave, the women are unable to continue talking on these subject matters and consequently have nothing to say to one another. In leaving them then to discuss 'the comparative heights of Harry Dashwood, and Lady Middleton's second son William' (p. 220) Austen establishes a lingering and awkward vacuity to their conversation. *Persuasion*'s Mrs Croft in contrast proves herself to be equipped to discuss non-domestic matters. Discussing the countries to which she has travelled she queries whether 'Bermuda or Bahama' might be called 'the West Indies'. She is met with silence from Mrs Musgrove,

³⁰ As Roberts reminds us: 'According to the manners of the time politics was a male preserve, not to be discussed in mixed company or by women. [...] In [Austen's] novels men talked about politics alone, as women, seated elsewhere, occupied themselves with subjects appropriate to their sex, such as fashions or neighbourhood gossip', p. 12.

however, who ‘ha[s] not a word to say in dissent; she could not accuse herself of having ever called them anything in the whole course of her life’ (p. 66). In having had the experience of naval life, Mrs Croft, is no longer able fully to communicate with other women in the novel. She has become in effect an anomaly in female society, suited only to conversations with men and the ‘many women [who] have [travelled] more’ than her (p. 65).

In this manner, Mrs Croft and the halted conversations in *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility* recall the situation of the eponymous Emma Courtney of Mary Hays’ novel who suffers under the limitations of female-only conversation. Having been enraptured by a group of men’s ‘discussion on the Slave Trade’, the heroine is then forced to abandon it:

Mrs Melmoth, who had yawned and betrayed various symptoms of weariness during the discussion, now proposed the adjournment of the ladies into the drawing-room, whither I was compelled, by a barbarous and odious custom, reluctantly to follow, and to submit to be entertained with a torrent of folly and impertinence.³¹

In portraying Emma as a frustrated and unjustly shunned intellectual, Hays joins authors such as Burney and Maria Edgeworth in engaging with the contemporary notion of the socially-aborrent learned woman. In *Camilla* (1796), for instance, Burney features a much-abused character, Eugenia, who studies intensely to compensate for having been disfigured by a childhood accident. Through her misfortunes, ‘Burney [...] represent[s] the eighteenth-century prejudice against learned women’.³² According to this prejudice, as exemplified by one of the gentlemen in Edgeworth’s *Letters for Literary Ladies* (1795), educated women become ‘vain of exhibiting mental deformities’ and ultimately ‘cease to be women’. Female ‘[p]rodigies’, he adds, ‘are scarcely less offensive to my taste than monsters’.³³ The threat of such criticism goes some way towards explaining why, so often in the works of these authors,

³¹ Mary Hays, *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 112, 113.

³² Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), p. 146.

³³ Maria Edgeworth, *Letters for Literary Ladies. To Which is Added, An Essay on the Noble Science of Self-Justification* (1795) (Gloucester: Dodo Press, 2008), pp. 2, 1.

women are silent and unwilling to become involved in matters of intellect that have been deemed masculine territory.

Rather than sharing this interest in vindicating the ‘monstrous’ literary lady, Austen’s primary concern is with the issue of female inexperience and inability to participate in non-domestic life. The texts from which Eugenia and others learn are part of, not a solution to, women’s problems, she shows. Women can acquire information from scholarly texts but, as Catherine Morland’s disdainful attitude towards historical works suggests, this is simply another form of dependence upon male authority. Austen, thus, continues the conversation started by Hays, Burney and Edgeworth, but chooses to progress the argument against socially-imposed female ignorance. These contemporary women writers invented exceptions to the social norm in the form of highly educated women who, through displays of eloquence, confront the female silence surrounding political affairs. Burney’s and Edgeworth’s female ‘prodigies’ even take on a political character in their later works. In *The Wanderer*, we see Eleanor travel to France to encounter the events of the French Revolution first hand. In the later novel, *Helen* (1834), Edgeworth was prepared to go even further than this and, with Lady Davenant, presents a character that attempts to have an active role in political life. While, in showing the failures of Eleanor and Lady Davenant, these authors focus on the costs of rebellion and exhibit suppressed female potential, Austen seeks to illuminate the everyday realities of exclusion. Most famously with the ‘dead silence’ in *Mansfield Park*, Austen chooses to display things as they are and sustain the discomfort of what she perceives to be inevitable female silence. Said argues that the moment of ‘dead silence’ occurs regarding the slave trade at Mansfield Park to show that ‘one world could not be connected with the other since there simply is no common language for both’.³⁴ In showing the political silence in conversations to exist exclusively amongst women, it is my contention that it is

³⁴ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), p. 115.

women who lack a language of their own with which to interact with these ideas.

Disempowered from entering political discourse, they are trapped within a system designed to stop them becoming engaged citizens.

Women's 'colonial otherness'³⁵ in *Mansfield Park*

In this section, I turn to a close analysis of *Mansfield Park*, a novel that is, notoriously, implicated in debates on slavery and offers a particularly fraught instance of female political exclusion. The Mansfield Park estate is uniquely isolated when compared with the central households featured in Austen's fiction and is full of characters protective of this isolation. At the same time, through Sir Thomas Bertram's ownership of an Antiguan plantation it is associated with what is arguably the period's most politically controversial subject: slavery. In both exhibiting intense isolationism and gesturing silently, but prominently, towards contentious global affairs, the novel acts as Austen's most stark assessment of women's relationship to the political sphere. Post-abolition following the Slave Trade Act of 1807, slavery was distanced from British domesticity and women, by and large, could only receive its 'truths' through the communication of male colonialists.³⁶ As with other forms of knowledge I have been discussing in this chapter, women were necessarily reliant upon men. In *Mansfield Park*, Sir Thomas embodies this masculine exclusivity of information. Fanny's famous inquisitiveness about the slave trade, I will argue, contrary to popular critical opinion, strategically signals absolute female dependence upon male knowledge. While it is only Sir Thomas (and for a time Tom Bertram) that encounters the realities of slave exploitation, the

³⁵ Susan Greenfield writes that in eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature, 'femininity is portrayed as both similar to and different from colonial otherness in ways that destabilize the English woman's relation to empire', Susan C. Greenfield, 'Abroad and at Home': Sexual Ambiguity, Miscegenation and Colonial Boundaries in Edgeworth's *Belinda*, *PMLA*, 112 (1997), 214-28 (p. 215). This section explores Austen's nuanced contribution to the trend observed by Greenfield.

³⁶ Of course, women would have had access to the abundance of abolitionist, as well as pro-slavery, literature made available in the late eighteenth century; for an account of this writing see: Brycchan Carey, *British Abolitionism and the Rhetoric of Sensibility: Writing, Sentiment, and Slavery, 1760-1807* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Clare Midgley's account of female involvement in the anti-slavery movement: Clare Midgley, *Women Against Slavery: The British Campaigns, 1780-1870* (London: Routledge, 1995).

estate inhabited by the Bertrams is funded by colonial profit made possible through slavery. Although they have no first-hand experience of or direct connection with it, Austen's female characters therefore have lifestyles that are dependent on slavery. Women are thus left in a strange, paradoxical non-relationship with slavery; it is this everyday domestic reality of colonialism that is depicted in *Mansfield Park*.

Far from seeing women as separated from the issue of slavery, following Said's intervention in *Mansfield Park* criticism in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) several scholars have sought to emphasise the link between the treatment of women and slaves in the novel. In a work published in the same year as Said's, Moira Ferguson asserts that the novel presents 'a post-abolition narrative that intertwines with a critique [...] of gender'. Slavery is used allegorically, she claims, to show that domestic dynamics between men and women 'parallel and echo traditional relationships of power between the colonialists and the colonized peoples'; Fanny, in particular, 'resemble[s] the Eurocentrically conceived 'grateful negro''. Slavery itself is not a primary concern in the novel, she suggests. Instead, Austen is interested in 'the refiguring of a legitimate British ruling class in the wake of the French Revolution and in the emergence of a newly aggressive capitalism'.³⁷ Susan Fraiman takes on Said directly, challenging his lack of consideration for Austen's 'position as a bourgeois woman' in his analysis. The Austen depicted by Said, she contends, 'is a veritable Aunt Jane naive, complacent, and demurely without overt political opinion'. Like Ferguson, it is her contention that 'the slave trade offers a convenient metaphor' for Sir Thomas's 'domestic tyrannies' inflicted upon the novel's women.³⁸

³⁷ Moira Ferguson, *Colonialism and Gender Relations from Mary Wollstonecraft to Jamaica Kincaid: East Caribbean Connections* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 4.

³⁸ Susan Fraiman, 'Jane Austen and Edward Said: Gender, Culture, and Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 21 (1995), 805-821 (pp. 809, 807, 812). The essays in *The Postcolonial Jane Austen* (2000) also offer various interpretations of this model comparing slavery to the situation of women. Jon Mee argues for example that 'Austen's real concerns are less with the terrible sufferings of the slaves on West Indian plantations than with the role of women within English society. Female patriotism for Austen meant that women – especially gentlewomen – ought to be recognized as part of the nation and not as slaves', Jon Mee, 'Austen's Treacherous Ivory: Female Patriotism, Domestic Ideology, and Empire', in *Postcolonial Jane Austen*, ed. by You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 74-92 (p. 84). And Clare Tuite, in

More recently, critics have posited that *Mansfield Park* takes a firm anti-slavery position through its treatment of women. Michael Karounos, for instance, also notes that ‘Fanny is Mansfield Park’s slave’, but suggests that the novel moves towards Sir Thomas’s reformation and the ‘social liberation of Fanny’, making it, overall, ‘an anti-slavery’ work.³⁹ Marcus Wood, with whom my own argument more closely aligns, makes the important point that it is problematic to compare the exploitation of colonial labour and British women. He writes: ‘[t]he equation of the suffering of slaves [...] with the suffering and dis-empowerment endured by English women [...] tend[s] to misrepresent the experience of all concerned, and to suggest that human suffering can be considered in essentially comparative ways’. Wood adds nuance to an established critical idea by writing that Austen hints at comparisons between white women and slaves, and allows the reader to make connections, but avoids ‘crude and direct conflation’. Through the economic ‘language of improvement’ applied to Fanny, he shows, she is implicitly tied to the Antiguan plantation. The author uses this subtle connection to enact ‘an extended critique of the effects of slavery upon English society’.⁴⁰

As numerous critics have indicated, parallels certainly appear to be drawn between slaves and women in the novel, most notably through the oppressive treatment of Fanny. Like Wood, I would suggest that it is nonetheless too simplistic to read *Mansfield Park* as conjuring the image of slavery as a means of critiquing female subordination. Rather, it is my contention that the moments in the novel that are suggestive of a comparison serve in fact to indicate a gulf. The only similarity shared by women and slaves, Austen shows, is a certain ‘otherness’ in that neither group can relate to the perspectives and experiences of male

direct engagement with Said, contends that the novel ‘recast[s] political relations as domestic relations’; Sir Thomas, according to her critique, is a ‘subtle satirical critique of the West Indian planter’ who is ultimately ‘reformed’, Clare Tuite, ‘Domestic Retrenchment and Imperial Expansion: The Property Plots of *Mansfield Park*’ in *Postcolonial Jane Austen*, ed. by You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 93-115 (p. 104).

³⁹ Michael Karounos, ‘Ordination and Revolution in ‘Mansfield Park’’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 44 (2004), 715-736 (pp. 729, 730, 731). For other works arguing that Austen takes an anti-slavery stance, see: Gabrielle D. V. White, *Jane Austen in the Context of Abolition: ‘A Fling at the Slave Trade’* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Helena Kelly, *Jane Austen: The Secret Radical* (London: Icon Books, 2016).

⁴⁰ Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 295, 314, 321, 296.

colonialists. By creating parallels and relentlessly making allusions to this shared otherness, she elucidates the irony that the position of women in this novel is so inextricably linked with slavery, and yet they are entirely removed from its realities. As I will demonstrate, Austen's intentions in prompting a comparison become clear if we look at the fact these links are made through recurrent themes of silence, distance and absence. These concepts, as the grounds on which parallels between women and slaves are drawn in *Mansfield Park*, serve more to underscore a troubling disconnection than offer a direct comparison. As Said has rightly pointed out 'everything we know about Austen and her values is at odds with the cruelty of slavery'.⁴¹ Departing from the significant advancements in this debate made by Wood, I would agree with Said that irrespective of what the author's politics are likely to have been, her work refuses to take a clear position on this issue of slavery. Yet in doing so, Austen is far from demonstrating complacency, as Said concludes. Instead, Austen's apparent apoliticism on this matter is a conscious move to convey women's position as confined to and defined by a domestic space and corresponding ideology constructed as the antithesis to colonial life.

In making this argument, I begin by examining how Austen establishes Mansfield Park's unique state of isolation. Overseen by the symbolically 'absent' Lady Bertram, the estate is meant to exist in opposition to the realities of colonial life. Moving on to discuss the heroine, I explore how through her oppressive treatment Fanny seems to embody themes of silence, distance and absence in the novel. Departing from the consensus in postcolonial assessments of *Mansfield Park*, I contend that Fanny is not representative of slaves themselves, but rather the ideal relationship between British domesticity and slavery. Her feminine qualities are such that she is there to ensure the appropriate distinction between domesticity and the wider political world. This part of the chapter will also reinterpret

⁴¹ Said, p. 115.

episodes most frequently at the centre of postcolonial readings of the novel. The performance of *Lovers' Vows* (1798), my argument shows, unsettles the division between domestic and colonial worlds represented in the character of Fanny. Finally, I will turn to the scene in which Fanny elicits a 'dead silence' in response to her question about the slave trade. In this moment, Austen illuminates the problematic separation of the women in Mansfield from the colonial world upon which they rely.

Early on in *Mansfield Park* Austen establishes the central estate as a hub of domestic silence and female exclusion. In the novel, Mrs Price writes offering the services of her son William to Sir Thomas in his 'West Indian property'. Yet when Mrs Norris determines 'that poor Mrs Price should be relieved from the charge and expence of one child' (p. 7), it is stipulated that it must be the oldest girl that is sent for. When she arrives at Mansfield, Fanny is overwhelmed by Sir Thomas's 'well-meant condescensions' (p. 14) and is distressed to have left her home. When considered in light of William who is nearly the same age, eager to leave home, and desires the attentions of Sir Thomas, the Bertrams' actions appear misdirected and inappropriate. Mrs Price highlights the fact that this exchange was entirely gender driven, noting that: she is 'surprised that a girl should be fixed on' at the cost of one of her 'fine boys' (p. 12). From the Price family perspective, expectations were geared towards a narrative of William's colonial pursuits under the guidance of Sir Thomas. By making this 'swap' and forcing us to enact a realignment of our attention from William to Fanny, we become aware that the heroine's story is told at the expense of a lost narrative of colonialism. Through William's on-going, implied background presence, the possibility of an alternative

narrative exists in the novel.⁴² We are reminded that Fanny is a replacement, the ‘other’ Price child, whose story was never meant to be told.⁴³

Alongside the Bertrams avoiding openly supporting William’s colonial endeavours, we are also introduced to the family in the process of asserting their titular estate’s absolute distance from colonial life. ‘From about the time’ the family choose the other, female Price, Austen informs us, Lady Bertram ‘gave up the house in town [...] and remained wholly in the country’. Along with her children, she is effectively sealed off in the country, regardless of any ‘diminution of comfort [that] might arise from her absence’ (p. 20). Lady Bertram’s residence at Mansfield Park is defined here, in relation to her removal from town and Sir Thomas’ business, as an ‘absence’. The novel, in having the Bertrams adopt a girl then contain her, along with Lady Bertram, in Mansfield Park recreates what Clara Tuite has referred to as the contemporary ‘reconstitution [of the domestic] as a private and gender-specific feminine space’ to serve ‘as a screen that deflects attention away from colonial expansion’.⁴⁴ Mansfield Park, therefore, is more than the place where Lady Bertram absents herself from the dullness of her husband’s work; it is where she presides over a space constructed as an absence from the family’s dependence on slavery. Lady Bertram is Sir Thomas’s ‘social appendage in the female form’,⁴⁵ his ‘other’, charged with providing domestic ‘comfort’ by creating this feminine space of absence. Generally portrayed as being in a semi-conscious state, Lady Bertram symbolises the very notion of domestic absence.

⁴² We are reminded of William throughout in his correspondence with Fanny: ‘William, her brother, the so long absent and dearly loved brother, was in England again. She had a letter from him herself, a few hurried happy lines, written as the ship came up Channel, and sent into Portsmouth, with the first boat that left the Antwerp, at anchor, in Spithead; and when Crawford walked up with the newspaper in his hand, which he had hoped would bring the first tidings, he found her trembling with joy over this letter’ (p. 215).

⁴³ When Fanny returns to Portsmouth late in the novel, this idea is emphasised. William is still enthused over by his mother who asks him a stream of questions; at the same time, she ‘hardly look[s] at’ (p. 351) her estranged daughter with whom she is being reunited.

⁴⁴ Tuite, pp. 95, 101.

⁴⁵ Ferguson, p. 79.

Lady Bertram's role as symbol of absence is underlined by her relationship to colonial commodities. In this period women were linked to colonialism through their role as consumers of colonial goods. Examining women's ties to empire, Laura Brown writes of 'the association of the female figure with accumulation, consumption, and the products of trade'. She adds that 'apologies for empire and attacks on its domestic implications are expressed [in early-eighteenth-century literature] through the female figure'.⁴⁶ One more nearly contemporary example of 'attacks' on women based on their colonial role in Austen's time came from Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He argued vehemently that in continuing to consume sugar, women were complicit in perpetuating barbarity against slaves. In a swipe at female complacency and the cult of sensibility he writes: 'the fine lady's nerves are not shattered by the shrieks [of slaves]! She sips a beverage sweetened with human blood, even while she is weeping over the refined sorrows of Werter'.⁴⁷ Penetrable through the import of goods, the British domestic realm according to Coleridge cannot be considered as entirely distinct from the colonial world. Despite this everyday presence of colonial produce in the household, such items are largely absent from *Mansfield Park*, except when following a visit from William Lady Bertram says:

[...] Fanny, William must not forget my shawl, if he goes to the East Indies; and I shall give him a commission for anything else that is worth having. I wish he may go to the East Indies, that I may have my shawl. I think I will have two shawls, Fanny' (p. 282).

As Austen's sole explicit mention of colonial produce in the novel, these words can be read as emblematic of her perception of women's relationship to colonialism. Tuite views this moment as an 'attac[k] [on] women as the sources of desire that generated the production of commodities through slave labour'.⁴⁸ However, in the ease with which she thinks William

⁴⁶ Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'On the Slave Trade', *The Watchman*, 25 March 1796, pp. 100-09 (p. 108).

⁴⁸ Tuite, p. 103. See also, Fraiman, p. 819.

might travel to the East Indies just for her shawls, Austen also showcases Lady Bertram's misguided conception of not just the activities of the navy, but of global geography. In doing so, rather than simply rehearsing Coleridge's views, Austen plainly exhibits and problematises women's minimal understanding of the colonial practices from which they benefit.

The relationship between women and colonialism exemplified by Lady Bertram is, however, disturbed by Mrs Norris. The 'absence' of Mansfield Park is intended to exhibit the lifestyle Sir Thomas is able to afford in disassociation from the origin of his wealth. Sir Thomas is given the comfort of knowing that in the insulated environment at Mansfield his daughters 'exercise their memories, practise their duets, and grow tall and womanly' (pp. 20-21). Mrs Norris is at risk of upsetting this delicate balance between separated colonial and domestic worlds. At one point, she expresses a desire to save money in order to support the Bertram girls now 'the Antigua estate is to make such poor returns'. Engaging in open discussion of Sir Thomas' financial situation, she is the threatening antithesis to Lady Bertram who maintains a verbal distance from her husband's business, referring to it as '*that*' (p. 29). In light of this officiousness, Mrs Norris has been read as a model of a plantation overseer.⁴⁹ Her concerns for household management are, however, generalised and extend beyond plantation profitability.⁵⁰ It is more accurate, then, to say that Mrs Norris's activities reflect more a widow's anxiety to remain socially useful, as discussed in Chapter 1. In breaking the silence regarding the Antiguan estate, her role in this instance is to unsettle Mansfield Park's ability to exist as a silent benefactor of slavery. The female head of the household's absence is too literal to counter this; the estate requires a stronger kind of female otherness to preserve it in a state of sealed-off absence.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Ferguson, p. 70 and Tuite, p. 109.

⁵⁰ During the visit to Mr Rushworth's residence, Sotherton, Mrs Norris, incapable of remaining passive during their tour, is described as 'having fidgetted about, and obtained a few pheasants' eggs, and a cream cheese from the housekeeper' (p. 98).

My use of the terms ‘absence’ and ‘otherness’ here differs somewhat to the way in which similar terms have been deployed within modern feminist criticism. In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir uses the concept of the female ‘Other’ to illuminate the way in which women are always treated as relative to the all-consuming male subject. ‘[T]he ‘true woman’ is required to make herself object, to be the Other’, she explains. Women are defined in society according to certain myths of femininity and cease to be women when they fail to align with these categories.⁵¹ As far as ideals of womanhood prescribed within eighteenth-century domestic ideology might be considered to have formed a myth, my use of the term otherness bears similarity to Beauvoir’s. More recent critics have explored the connection between women and absence or, as it is more commonly termed, ‘lack’. Judith Butler writes that ‘[i]t is said, of course, that women are always already punished, castrated, and that their relation to the phallic norm will be penis envy’. In not having a phallus, she explains, women bear ‘the mark of castration, a mark which is after all a lack, a lack which designates absently the domain of the feminine’.⁵² In ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’ (1975), Hélène Cixous decries this association between women and lack. Criticising the resulting inhibitions placed upon women as writers, she encourages her female readers no longer to ‘pledge allegiance to the negative’. My use of the term absence bears a subtle yet important distinction to ‘lack’.⁵³ Whereas the concept of lack defines women in the negative – according to their status as non-male – absence is constructed positively through behaviours that exert aspects of femininity such a non-concern for politics. Lady Bertram’s absence, although symbolic, does not fall under this definition. While she is appropriately disinterested in her husband’s colonial pursuits, her mind is not fully present and so she does not exert herself in the exercise of shoring up the estate as a space of absence. Ensuring Mansfield remains a comforting

⁵¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949) (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 291.

⁵² Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993) pp, 101, 104.

⁵³ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1 (1976), 875-893 (p. 884).

antithesis to plantation life requires work and maintenance for which only Fanny shows willingness and aptitude.

Fanny: silence, distance and absence

Arriving in order to support Lady Bertram, Fanny is shown to embody core themes of silence, distance and absence and so acts as the main grounds on which the novel explores the relationship between women and slavery. The treatment that leads her to assimilate these themes has been read as a sign that she is the novel's representation of a slave.⁵⁴ Yet, as a silenced, distanced and largely absent being, Fanny in fact more accurately encompasses the ideal state of slavery in relation to domesticity. The heroine, in this way, is an extreme example of the female other whose role it to remain distinct from colonial matters. Initially, she appears to embody absence and distance in Mansfield to a near-excruciating level. She is described as 'small of her age', 'shrinking from notice', and in possession of a 'gravity of deportment' (p. 13). She appears bodily incapable of existing within the house's confines and withdraws herself as far as possible. Austen writes that '[t]he rooms were too large for her to move in with ease; whatever she touched she expected to injure' (p. 15). Like the issue of slavery, she appears somehow incompatible with English domesticity and exists in constant conflict with her surroundings.

In order to underscore Fanny's otherness the Bertrams work to ensure 'the distinction proper' is maintained between Fanny and the rest of the family. Owing to these efforts, spearheaded by Mrs Norris, she is never allowed to forget 'who and what she is' (p. 137). Fanny is reminded that she really belongs somewhere geographically and economically distant from her current occupation. Mrs Norris thus endeavours psychologically to absent Fanny from Mansfield Park. Such treatment leaves her uncertain of what space to occupy

⁵⁴ See, for example, Karounos, p. 729, Ferguson, p. 73, Fraiman, p. 812, and Johnson, pp. 107-08.

physically; her very existence becomes problematic. She eventually resolves this difficulty through appropriation of the ‘useless’ and ‘deserted’ ‘East room’. The room’s title implies it is distant, separate, and almost foreign, to the rest of the house. With Mrs Norris also ensuring it is not warmed by a fire, Fanny’s psychological haven is a hole in the domesticity of Mansfield Park. We are told that by filling the room with her possessions she ‘naturally [...] worked herself into it’ (p. 140). Fanny’s identity thus becomes interwoven with this forgotten part of the house. It is a place that serves the paradoxical dilemma of her having simultaneously to live somewhere and maintain due distance from it.⁵⁵

Silence, for Fanny, goes alongside her responsibility to remain absent within Mansfield Park as far as is possible. To speak would be to draw attention to her existence. Silence becomes intrinsic to her being to the point where speaking is generally a conscious, premeditated act or dismissed as impossible. Her complete opposite in this respect, Mary Crawford, articulates Fanny’s commitment to silence: ‘You don’t speak, Fanny – Miss Price – you don’t speak’ (p. 267). Visually, this sentence adds to our understanding of the heroine’s quietness: ‘Fanny – Miss Price’ appears quite literally trapped by her inability to talk and, as the combination of Mary’s repetition and multi-naming shows, this creates uncertainty around Fanny’s identity. What is more, Fanny’s ‘natural medium of quiet’,⁵⁶ allows others to take charge of her interests. In one instance she lies on the sofa with a headache whilst Edmund scolds his aunt for causing this and conducting what he calls ‘a very ill-managed business’ (p. 69). This is just one of many occasions in which the family debates the ‘business’ of Fanny while she remains ‘a quiet auditor of the whole’. By way of contrast, her silence is exaggerated and she is placed in tension with the Fanny that is spoken *of*.

⁵⁵ The relationship between Fanny and the East room will be explored in more depth in Chapter 4.

⁵⁶ *War of Ideas*, p. 237.

The qualities embodied by Fanny that render Mansfield Park distinct from colonial life are undermined when Sir Thomas leaves for Antigua. Sir Thomas is aware he is ‘leaving his daughters to the direction of others at their present most interesting time of life’ (p. 31). In essence, in leaving, he gambles with his daughters’ sexuality in order to secure the financial security of Mansfield Park. Sir Thomas’s absence creates a chasm in the private enclosure of his estate through which outsiders, the Crawfords and Mr Yates, enter and exert their influence. The transformation of the estate occurs literally with the building of an indoor theatre which leads Mansfield Park to become a dangerously intimate, enclosed arena for public performance. The roles of women are similarly destabilised when, in the *Lovers’ Vows* rehearsals, the Bertram women literally adopt new characters. Acting itself was thought to be ‘almost certain to prove, in its effects, injurious to the female performers’ because it would encourage ‘unrestrained familiarity with persons of the other sex’.⁵⁷ Realising these fears, Maria uses the guise of her role as a means to flirt with Henry. Overall, the family adopts a strange existence in which they appear not entirely contained within Austen’s novel, living instead through the text of *Lovers’ Vows*.

Marilyn Butler calls this ‘a strange hole in the heart of the novel, an absence from the text’;⁵⁸ her use of the term ‘absence’ is revealing. Tom goes so far as to say, in relation to his father’s absence, that he ‘consider[s] it rather as a motive’ (p. 117). In fact, Sir Thomas’s absence is so often referred to that it renders him a very present tension in the proceedings. By leaving Sir Thomas has occasioned the indecorum that ensues. His daughters feel ‘at liberty’ and ‘above restraint’ (p. 120). This sense of freedom by contrast indicates the oppressive power his presence has both at home and by extension on the plantation. Critics

⁵⁷ Thomas Gisborne, *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* (London: T. Cadell jun. and W. Davies, 1797), pp. 174, 175. Evidence of the widely-held nature of this attitude towards female performance can also be found in *The Wanderer*. In episodes comparable to *Mansfield Park*’s *Lovers’ Vows* rehearsals, Burney’s heroine is horrified when she is called upon to perform twice in the novel, once in a private performance at Mrs Maple’s and later on a public stage.

⁵⁸ Marilyn Butler, ‘Introduction’, in *Mansfield Park* (1814), ed. by Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. vii-xxviii (p. xxi).

have contended that in this instance Antigua and Mansfield Park are comparable; Mansfield's inhabitants mirror the 'insurrectionary potential'⁵⁹ of the slaves Sir Thomas has left to control and the play is 'Austen's parable of revolution'.⁶⁰ I argue that the two situations remain separate for Austen. The issues of plantation profitability and female sexuality are not conflated, though both have the power to undo Sir Thomas. The paralleled situations instead show that, in becoming a public space, Mansfield Park maintains *less* of a distinction from the Antigua plantation. It is Sir Thomas's presence that determines the need for a public and private division upheld by women. Fanny, recognising that a wholesale inversion of public and private could prove damaging to both the reputation and stability of Mansfield Park, refuses to act. She has a 'very absent, anxious mind' (p. 155); this absence of mind implies an affinity with the absent Sir Thomas. She thus continues to be appropriated to her uncle in the role of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as the 'domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self'.⁶¹ In seeking to protect the privacy of domesticity, Fanny works to support Sir Thomas in his absence by preserving Mansfield Park as a space distinct from his actions abroad.

Sir Thomas's return both brings a reminder of the origins of the family's wealth and marks an unwelcome end to the freedoms previously enjoyed. The novel's women view 'the black month fixed for his return' ominously. Strangely, they seem to disassociate his return entirely from the nature of his absence. Maria notes that his letters led her to 'a most unwelcome exercise' of having 'to think of her father in England again' (p. 100). She can only fathom her father in terms of the restraint that will come with his return. Like Maria, Mary is only concerned with how domestic life at Mansfield is to be affected. While Edmund suggests that 'such an absence' will have 'includ[ed] so many dangers', Mary merely notes

⁵⁹ Ferguson, p. 85.

⁶⁰ Karounos, p. 721.

⁶¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 262-80 (p. 272).

that his 'return will be a very interesting event' (p. 101). When Sir Thomas does arrive it is suddenly, and the performers meet the news with 'absolute horror'. Without warning, they must adapt to Sir Thomas' existing as more than an idea, or an underlying tension. In a state of terror, they melodramatically ask: 'What will become of us?' (p. 163). For those at Mansfield, he now represents an unknown malevolent authority. Yet, as it is revealed, Sir Thomas is excessively affable upon his return. Karounos notes that 'the change in him is one of physical alteration because of his moral improvement'.⁶² Austen unmistakably draws attention to his physical change, though not as a straightforward metaphor for 'moral improvement'. She describes Sir Thomas as having 'the burnt, fagged, worn look of fatigue and a hot climate' (p. 166). Tellingly, she conducts this observation through the eyes of Fanny immediately after Sir Thomas' comments on her increased beauty. This contrast in appearances highlights that, whilst the women benefit materially from colonialism and are able to blossom at a distance, only Sir Thomas can bodily encounter its truths.

Upon learning about the play, Sir Thomas undertakes a reprivatisation and reordering of his house that reflects his need to reassert the space as an absence from colonial life. Said argues that in this episode Austen 'synchronizes domestic with international authority'.⁶³ Indeed, in his 'anger on finding himself [...] bewildered in his own house' (p. 170), Sir Thomas behaves with a brutality that might suggest a connection to the kind of authority he exerted in Antigua. Austen also writes, however, that owing to his experiences he has a renewed 'value for domestic tranquillity' (p. 173). In banishing the disorderly influences of *Lovers' Vows* and the Crawfords he is, I argue, trying to create the complete antithesis to his plantation. In this respect, when he hurriedly draws Fanny towards him, it is not as a 'slave-owning [...] planter sizing up a piece of his property'.⁶⁴ He grasps her as a prime example of

⁶² Karounos, p. 730.

⁶³ Said, p. 104.

⁶⁴ Wood, p. 312.

womanly otherness, an exemplification of the silence and order he now so values; he knows he will ‘find Fanny every thing [he] could wish’ (p. 174).

In the novel an oppressive silence appears to descend over Mansfield Park’s women in particular when Sir Thomas returns. This silence oddly contrasts to the narrator’s references to the great zeal with which Sir Thomas discusses his business in Antigua: on the subject he is ‘communicative and chatty in a very unusual degree’ and ready to ‘answer every question of his two *sons*’ (p. 166, my italics). Such is his garrulous delight, he speaks until all his ‘immediate communications were exhausted’ (p. 168). Despite Sir Thomas’s garrulity, not a word of his narrative is transcribed by Austen; she creates a silence in the text. Both Edmund and the narrator notice ‘a striking change in the ways of the family’ (p. 182) that amounts to a gloomy quietness. In discussion of this altered atmosphere, Edmund tells Fanny she is ‘one of those who are too silent in the evening circle’ (p. 184). Addressing primarily his sons in narrating his travels, the novel’s women it would seem have been alienated by Sir Thomas’ choice of subject. Importantly, Fanny is the only one who appears to notice that ‘it was always much the same’ (p. 183); from her viewpoint, no sudden alteration has occurred. Fanny has always been characterised by an extreme otherness that, as a result of Sir Thomas’ renewed colonialist fervour, now applies to her female cousins too. The field of femininity, it seems, has been levelled through the implied excess of colonial discussion.

Women’s disconnection from the colonial realities discussed by Sir Thomas becomes most starkly apparent with the response to Fanny’s notorious question about the slave trade. In interpreting this episode, critics have tried to pinpoint the likely moral angle of this unarticulated question. Tuite for instance argues that in asking her question, ‘Fanny problematizes Sir Thomas’s silence’ on the subject of slavery.⁶⁵ As I have discussed,

⁶⁵ Tuite, p. 104.

however, Sir Thomas is far from silent. I want to suggest that what is important in this scene is not the nature of Fanny's question, but rather the fact that she breaks *women's* silence and in so doing, confirms her otherness to colonialism. It becomes clear that Austen is not offering a comment on slavery if we examine the context of the discussion. In the conversation in which the slave trade discussion is relayed, Fanny is told by Edmund that her uncle thinks she is 'very pretty' since she has 'gained so much countenance' (p. 183) and, as a result, she 'must really begin to harden [her]self to the idea of being worth looking at'. To further cement his approval, she should, he adds, 'talk to him more than [she] used' to (p. 184). Fanny's questioning Sir Thomas, then, is her attempt to 'harden' herself to being heard. She says that hearing him talk about the 'West Indies', 'entertains [her] more than many other things have done' (p. 183). By asking him about the slave trade, she is endeavouring to add to Sir Thomas' comfort by perpetuating discussion on his new favourite topic. As this quotation implies, she is trying to align herself with Sir Thomas and distance herself from the inappropriate entertainment recently enjoyed by the others through their play rehearsals in his absence.

Fanny's efforts are, nevertheless, stalled when she is met with the painful contrast of the Miss Bertrams' 'dead silence'. It is her fear that she might appear as if she 'wanted to set [her]self off at their expense, by shewing a curiosity and pleasure in [Sir Thomas's] information' that stops her from asking more questions. What is at stake here, then, are the dynamics of domesticity. In showing an interest specifically in the slave trade, Fanny notably does not behave in the manner of other women on this topic: she acts in a way Sir Thomas 'must wish his own daughters to' (p. 184). Rather than her question being a sign that Fanny and her uncle often discuss 'the minutiae of his slave plantation' and that she, therefore, develops a stance on slavery, as is claimed in particular by Wood,⁶⁶ her question suggests her

⁶⁶ Wood, p. 315.

lack of knowledge and her absolute distance from it. This state of disassociation is evident as, in spite of her professed curiosity about the slave trade, when Fanny is in Portsmouth, a town that ‘witness[es] [...] scenes involving the sale of people’,⁶⁷ she feels that she is at a ‘distance from every thing that had been wont to interest her’ (p. 365). By questioning Sir Thomas, Fanny pleases him by confirming her appropriate separateness from colonialism and her reliance on him as a medium through which she can become informed. She exhibits therefore a feminine otherness more extreme than that of her worldly cousins. Ultimately, the ‘dead silence’ is the grounds created between Fanny, the non-speaking ‘other’, and the unspoken otherness of slaves. In emphasising this silence instead of articulating the question asked, Austen renders this momentary link between women and slavery insubstantial and ironically asserts a disconnection between the two.

As the ultimate symbol of female otherness, Fanny is, throughout the novel, the dormant ideal of womanhood waiting to step in. The notion of Fanny as supplement is foreshadowed by Lady Bertram who frequently insists she ‘cannot do without her’ (p. 263). Fanny, often positioned appendage-like to her aunt, fills in for her deficiencies as the head of feminine domesticity. The other Bertrams only come to realise the necessity of Fanny when she becomes truly absent in Portsmouth. The family become desperate for her to return and repair the damage done through female indiscretions (namely her cousin’s affair) to domestic privacy. Her return allows Sir Thomas to purge the threatening examples of womanhood from his estate, with Fanny stepping in, in place of Mary Crawford, to be the wife of its most morally sound offspring, Edmund. The novel’s end emphasises a new-found ‘mutual attachment’ (p. 438) between Fanny and Sir Thomas. He has been too governed by ‘worldly wisdom’ (p. 429), or as it is implied, his role as a colonialist. As the ‘spiritual mistress of

⁶⁷ Ferguson p. 86.

Mansfield Park',⁶⁸ as Said terms her, Fanny will counter this disorder and ensure the preservation of the estate's privacy and tranquillity. As Jon Mee summarises, 'Fanny's symbolic virtue is precisely that she is ignorant of the wider world'; she is linked entirely to 'home and hearth as a place of essential Englishness'.⁶⁹ Fanny works both in opposition to, and in balance with, slavery, then. On the one hand, her qualities ensure the estate maintains a feminine distinctness from the plantation and so slavery remains absent within domestic confines. On the other, her femininity is directly paralleled to the profitability of slavery: both are the silent staples that underpin the stability of Mansfield Park.

Conclusion: 'Without knowledge there can be no morality!'⁷⁰

In choosing to show this relationship of disconnection, Austen is exposing an especially uncomfortable aspect of female subjugation. It is because of their lower status that women do not have access to the knowledge or experiences that would allow them to develop an informed stance on slavery. In their sheer otherness to colonialism therefore the women of Mansfield Park become complicit in slavery without much choice. Portraying Fanny as a rigorously subordinated woman – and, indeed, the most oppressed throughout the novels – who so easily lends herself to comparison with slavery is, hence, the darkest of *Mansfield Park's* ironies. More so even than other female characters, Fanny can have no real conception of the lives of the people with whom she is ostensibly being compared. Women's complicity with the ongoing practice of plantation slavery is in this way an unsettling truth that lingers throughout Austen's fiction. In closing this chapter, I want to consider the problem of women's limited moral agency as a consequence of their exclusion from global political affairs. To do so, I look at other key instances in which colonialism overtly figures in her

⁶⁸ Said, p. 101.

⁶⁹ Mee, p. 90.

⁷⁰ Wollstonecraft, p. 133.

work: when the slave trade is mentioned in a conversation between Mrs Elton and Jane Fairfax in *Emma* (1815); Mrs Smith's possible connection to slavery in *Persuasion*; Mrs Croft's travels to the West Indies; and the allusions to a West Indian heiress in *Sanditon* (1817). These as further instances in which Austen's political silence appears to be broken shed light on women's moral position in the fiction.

The reference made by Mrs Elton to the slave trade in *Emma* reinforces my analysis of *Mansfield Park*. In this deceptively complex scene, Jane, refusing Mrs Elton's help in looking for a position as a governess, says:

'[...] I am not at all afraid of being long unemployed. There are places in town, offices, where inquiry would soon produce something—Offices for the sale—not quite of human flesh—but of human intellect.'

'Oh! my dear, human flesh! You quite shock me; if you mean a fling at the slave-trade, I assure you Mr. Suckling was always rather a friend to the abolition'.⁷¹

As a consequence of her outburst, Mrs Elton has been read as revealing her anxiety regarding the colonial origins of her family's new-found wealth. Galperin describes Mrs Elton as a 'wealthy heiress whose family has risen in trade and, as it is maliciously hinted, in business aligned with the slave trade'.⁷² By suddenly mentioning the slave trade, George Boulukos adds, she is 'inadvertently revealing her own imperfectly repressed guilt'.⁷³ Yet, if Galperin's reading is correct, with her constant bragging about 'Maple Grove' (p. 254), the grand residence of her brother-in-law, Mr Suckling, Mrs Elton has been reminding her new acquaintances of her connections to money earned through slavery ever since her arrival in Highbury. Discussing only this wealth's provision of domestic luxury, Mrs Elton shows, like the women of Mansfield Park, her psychic disassociation from the origins of colonial wealth.

⁷¹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815) (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 279.

⁷² Galperin, pp. 198-99. According to this interpretation, Mr Suckling's wealth is presumed to come from the slave trade owing to Maple Grove being located in Bristol, a city bearing strong contemporary associations to the slave trade. See: Elaine Jordan, 'Jane Austen Goes to Seaside: *Sanditon*, English Identity and the 'West Indian' Schoolgirl in *Postcolonial Jane Austen*, ed. by You-Me Park and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 27-55 (p. 37).

⁷³ George, E. Boulukos, 'The Politics of Silence: *Mansfield Park* and the Amelioration of Slavery', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 39 (2006), 361-83 (p. 377).

Furthermore, although it is her that introduces the idea of the slave trade in this moment, she does so in the context of a discussion about female employment. In assuming that the slave trade is being invoked as a metaphor for women's labour, as with her speeches about Mr Suckling's estate, she appears only able to conceive of slavery through the lens of her own feminine experience. With this evident detachment, guilt seems to be far from accurate in terms of characterising her emotional state.

Echoing the strategy employed in *Mansfield Park*, Jane is used by Austen to enact a dismissal of the comparison drawn between British women and slaves in *Emma*. 'I did not mean, I was not thinking of the slave-trade,' replied Jane' following the above speech by Mrs Elton. Her initial stuttering repetition here seems to suggest that she is taken aback by the inappropriate nature of what her companion has said. Through Jane's denial, Austen chides those who might all too easily leap to a hyperbolic comparison between the situation of women and slaves.⁷⁴ With the phrase 'not quite of human flesh',⁷⁵ Austen teasingly prompts this connection only then to show the extent to which women in particular are distanced from the realities of slavery. Having refuted Mrs Elton's claim, Jane goes on to say:

'governess-trade, I assure you, was all that I had in view; widely different certainly as to the guilt of those who carry it on; but as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies. But I only mean to say that there are advertising offices, and that by applying to them I should have no doubt of very soon meeting with something that would do' (pp. 279-80).

Mrs Elton plants the seed of a comparison between women and slaves which Jane then pursues. Her continued drawing of this link is to be taken, however, as symptomatic of her

⁷⁴ The comparison between women and slaves was a common trend in writing of the period. Mary Wollstonecraft, for example, writes in *The Rights of Woman*: '[women] may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent', p. 67. Hannah More also draws this connection at length, criticising the 'coming out' season for women in an anonymous essay: 'Hints for Abolishing the White Female Slave Trade', *The Christian Observer*, 27 (1804), 156-59.

⁷⁵ With the strange use of the phrase 'not quite of the human flesh', Jane is likely to be making a reference to the contemporary association between female work and prostitution, see Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 79.

dread of a life as a governess, without Frank, and her inability to see beyond her own concerns. Jane's use of a vague euphemism in referring to 'those who carry it on' shows her mental disassociation from slavery. What is more, her claim that 'as to the greater misery of the victims, I do not know where it lies' acts as an assertion of her limited knowledge on the issue. Her lack of understanding is clear both in the crude and, therefore for Jane, uncharacteristic, implication that being a governess is worse than the suffering of slaves, as well as in what she literally says: 'I do not know'. In spite of their disagreement on the surface, this episode ultimately unveils an affinity between the two characters. Whilst Jane is initially used to expose Mrs Elton's mistake, both are shown to be susceptible to the female fate of existing in a state of desensitising ignorance.

In *Persuasion* we see even more troubling evidence with regards to women's tacit complicity with slavery and apparent lack of consideration for its moral implications. As Galperin notes, in the novel Mrs Smith's 'main goal is to regain her West Indian property, and the slaves that presumably go with it'.⁷⁶ The property belonging to her late husband has fallen out of her possession; she hopes Anne will marry Mr Elliot and use her influence on him to arrange for the return of the property. This plan failing, Wentworth is instead called upon to assist:

Captain Wentworth, by putting her in the way of recovering her husband's property in the West Indies; by writing for her, acting for her, and seeing her through all the petty difficulties of the case, with the activity and exertion of a fearless man and a determined friend, fully requited the services which she had rendered, or ever meant to render, to his wife.

Mrs Smith's new found strength and self-reliance gained through her recovery from illness have boundaries within which they can be exerted, Austen illustrates. Whether it is Mr Smith, Mr Elliot, or Wentworth, the influence of 'a fearless man' is needed to enact any transactions

⁷⁶ Galperin, p. 232.

with regards to a foreign property. While what Wentworth carries out are essentially administrative tasks, the language used by Austen, connoting danger and adventure, suggests that owing to the subject matter these tasks are masculine in character and at odds with female capabilities. The novel makes a point in its closing paragraphs of emphasising that Mrs Smith, in profiting from slavery through the filter of male management, is removed from the detailed realities of her West Indian plantation. Austen does not explicitly mention slavery in this section, nor offer an explicit comment on the situation. Instead, she opts to emphasise the utter joy of Mrs Smith through abundant references to her ‘enjoyments’, ‘cheerfulness’, ‘felicity’, and the ‘glow of her spirits’ (p. 235). As readers we are left to contemplate the implications of this blissful ignorance for Mrs Smith’s moral status. Although not a main character, in these final pages she is dwelled upon and aligned with Anne, the heroine, as the author unites them in their exclusion and powerlessness. At the same time she draws our attention, in contrast, to Wentworth in turn playing an active role in regaining slave ownership and the Napoleonic wars, the most pressing political affairs of the period.

While through the examples of the Bertrams, Mrs Elton and Mrs Smith Austen maintains the morally problematic separation between women who benefit from slavery and its realities, she also offers hints of the possibility of British female life and colonial truths colliding. Mrs Croft, we are told in *Persuasion*, travels widely with her husband, including to Caribbean islands known to have slave plantations. Insisting, as we saw in the previous chapter, on not having different treatment aboard a ship, Mrs Croft likely has first-hand experience of the colonial world. But as she receives only minor attention in the narrative, and fails to find an adequate companion in her discourse on foreign affairs, we are never permitted to learn what in terms of politics she knows or thinks. More tantalising still than the prospect of Mrs Croft’s unspoken experiences is the arrival of Miss Lambe, a West Indian

heiress, in *Sanditon*. With the excitement of the other characters, Austen builds a great deal of anticipation around her introduction to the town. In all the mentions of the delicate state of her health, Miss Lambe's status as 'important and precious' is underlined: '[s]he [...] was to have the best room in the Lodgings, and was always of the first consequence in every plan' (p. 341), Austen writes. Despite all of the discussion about Miss Lambe, in the portion of the novel available she remains in the background, without a voice. With the interest gathered, however, once healthy again Miss Lambe would be at the heart of Sanditon's female society. Her presence in the novel represents the possibility of colonial and British domestic worlds meeting in the foreground of the narrative that never comes to fruition.⁷⁷

More so even than *Mansfield Park*, the above examples highlight that women's moral agency is at stake in their political exclusion. While Fanny is young and is herself exploited, Mrs Smith and Mrs Elton are mature women, each shown to be disturbingly gleeful as beneficiaries of colonial wealth. More problematic still, with Austen noting Mrs Smith's 'mental alacrity' (p. 235) for instance, women are suggested to have the mental capacity to engage with politically fraught concepts. In fact with Catherine and Fanny, along with other female characters, exhibiting social intelligence and a tendency towards caring for others, the novels leave us to contemplate whether given the opportunity they might be not only particularly apt in discussing, but also concerned by matters such as slavery. Yet as the frequent voids in female conversation testify, female characters are barred by custom from engaging in the debates necessary to develop an informed ethical stance. With men such as Sir Thomas endeavouring to mould women according to a feminine ideal as an escape from their political lives, and Henry Tilney advocating the attractiveness of intellectual inferiority, the fiction shows how female ignorance and thus their political silence is routinely cultivated.

⁷⁷ For an extended consideration of the significance of Miss Lambe in *Sanditon*, see the chapter by Elaine Jordan cited above.

There are exceptions to this status quo, as Austen gestures towards with Mrs Croft who experiences non-domestic life and appears to thrive intellectually. As Austen would have known, contemporarily there were women active on the political scene. Writers such as Wollstonecraft and More led unconventional lives and as a result of their broad experiences developed informed moral stances on political issues.⁷⁸ But these are exceptions and as Austen shows by placing Mrs Croft in the side-lines, she is interested in recording the ordinary.

This impulse to record the ordinary lives of genteel women, I have argued, marks Austen as a historian of her period. Austen has been read as ignoring the national and global subjects traditionally of concern to histories owing either to her sense of their inappropriateness or disinterest. Recent scholars that have allowed that Austen has an interest in these matters have often still contended that she places gender above the politics of the day.⁷⁹ Rather than issues of politics being displaced by those of gender, I show, these two types of issue are on the contrary intimately bound in the fiction. Where Austen sidesteps politics, it is in representation of, and out of concern for, women's inability to learn about and so participate in these debates. When references to war or the slave trade surface, they are depicted from women's gendered perspective, but as the author makes clear, this perspective is unavoidably narrow. Ways of directly knowing the world beyond domesticity as men did were conventionally beyond the epistemic reach of women. Austen chooses to convey their necessary detachment from political affairs through political silences in the novels that

⁷⁸ The exemption they have from the female exclusion that concerns Austen is, as histories of women's political writing confirm, only partial. Wollstonecraft's daring to comment on the French Revolution was met with fierce controversy and judging from More's imaginative and largely plagiarised *The Sorrows of Yamba* (1795) she too was inhibited in the field of debate by limits in her understanding of slavery. Moreover while these authors, and indeed Mrs Croft, might have knowledge that allows women to take an informed moral position, they do not have political citizenship that would allow them to participate in enacting change.

⁷⁹ Writing of *Persuasion*, Jordan argues that '[t]races of a concern with slavery disappear in Austen's most questioning novel about gender', p. 39. Mee points out in *Mansfield Park* Austen is concerned less with slaves than 'the role of women within English society', p. 84.

feature alongside female entanglement with matters like slavery. In doing so, we have seen, Austen signals the various moral and personal issues in women's lack of access to the wider world. Austen's silence is however also an empowered sign of her own authorial revolt. Mirroring Catherine's dismissal of the histories relied upon by Henry Tilney, her work is a rejection of masculine forms of information. As well as showing women's disadvantage, she uses silence to her advantage as a tool through which to create political works that *do* include women and the truth of their experience.

Chapter 4

‘I hate describing such things’¹: Austen and the fabric of the home

[A] wise mother anxious for her daughter’s best interests [...] knows that the superstructure of the accomplishments can be alone safely erected on the broad and solid basis of Christian humility: nay more, that as the materials of which that superstructure is to be composed, are in themselves of so unstable and tottering a nature, the foundation must be deepened and enlarged with more abundant care, otherwise the fabric will be overloaded with its own ornaments, and what was intended only to embellish the building, will prove the occasion of its fall.

Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1799)²

‘To me it is faultless. Nay, more, I consider it as the only form of building in which happiness is attainable, and were I rich enough I would instantly pull Combe down, and build it up again in the exact plan of this cottage.’

Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)³

Late eighteenth-century conduct literature shows us that domestic ideology sought to merge middle-class female identity with the concept of home. Not only were women supposed most often to remain at home, but all of their time, thoughts and actions were to be consumed by the household’s upkeep and rituals. Hannah More’s rhetorical association of women and the home is especially acute and striking. In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, More conflates women with the very fabric of the household. In a chapter on the theme of ‘External Improvements’, More shows that she is, as we have already seen in Chapter 2, highly suspicious of female accomplishments. She claims that in order to ‘build’ an ideal young woman, a ‘solid basis of Christian humility’ is required and that girls should not be ‘overloaded with [...] ornaments’, or in other words, fashionable accomplishments. In using architectural imagery to describe a young woman’s moral and intellectual composition,

¹ Jane Austen, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 33.

² Hannah More, *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, 2 vols (London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1799), I, pp. 94-95.

³ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), p. 73. All subsequent references are to this edition.

More in one sense simply employs a useful analogy for illustrating the role of education in constructing a stable female character. Fashionable young women, without a solid moral or intellectual basis, are described as ‘tottering’ figures who are weighed down to such an extent by showy bodily ornamentation that they are unable to walk. Yet what is most important about her conflation of women and home, here, and what most bespeaks the intention of conservative works such as More’s who rely on this strategy, is the ease with which she allows women and houses to become interchangeable entities. What begins as a discussion about a mother’s concern for a daughter culminates in an explicit reference to woman as ‘building’.

The rhetorical sleight of hand performed by More here models a paradigm for discussing women that is utilised for altogether different ends in Austen’s work. In the above quotation from *Sense and Sensibility*, Willoughby is using a conversation about Barton cottage as an indirect means of professing his admiration for its inhabitant, Marianne. Just as the cottage represents, he claims, his ideal living space, Marianne, the novel will reveal, is ‘his secret standard of perfection in woman’ (p. 353). The connection is reinforced throughout the novel. Just as his supposed reasons for not constructing his own cottage are due to limited funds, so are his reasons for not proposing to Marianne financial. Willoughby’s conversation about Marianne is just one of numerous moments in Austen’s novels in which women are brought into alignment with a particular house. In conflating women and houses through characters such as Willoughby, Austen, then, repurposes a technique used within conservative discourse to inculcate a particular kind of femininity. By allowing domestic spaces to become a shorthand through which to discuss women, she reflects the troubling readiness with which middle-class women were associated with a restrictive model of identity based around the home.

The collapsing of distinctions between women and the home enacted by More and Willoughby is one to which Austen and her work have historically been subjected. As I explored in the Introduction, Austen has long been variously associated with the broader notions of ‘home’ and ‘homeliness’; but her reputation has also become intimately bound with the domestic spaces in which she wrote and lived. The ongoing fascination of readers with Austen’s homes was originally cultivated by her earliest biographers and critics, in particular James Edward Austen-Leigh. Despite his proclamation that he ‘cannot recommend any admirer of Jane Austen to undertake a pilgrimage to this spot [Chawton]’, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) seems almost designed to encourage Austen tourism. Austen-Leigh dedicates several pages to guiding the reader around Austen’s homes at Steventon and Chawton and their vicinities. Unable to give much faithful detail of the domestic layout as it stood in either home when Austen lived there, he compensates by giving a general account of the customs of the times in terms of interiors, so important is it that the reader is able to view Austen as situated in her time and place. ‘There would often be but one sofa in the house, and that at a stiff, angular, uncomfortable article’, he speculatively writes of Steventon. Able to write with more confidence about Chawton cottage, he concludes that it was an ‘altogether a comfortable and ladylike establishment’,⁴ a fact reinforced by Caroline Austen’s observation that it was ‘arranged as best might be, for ladies’ occupation’.⁵ Overall, Austen-Leigh cultivates an idea of Austen’s domestic interiors as important nurturing spaces for the author’s creativity: they are ‘the cradle[s] of her genius’. Though Austen, who never joined the literary establishment in her lifetime, was unable to ‘pierce through the obscurity of her

⁴ James Edward Austen-Leigh, *A Memoir of Jane Austen* (1870) in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 1-134 (pp. 69, 31, 69).

⁵ Caroline Austen, ‘My Aunt Jane Austen: A Memoir’ (1867) in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and Other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 163-82 (p. 168).

domestic retirement',⁶ Austen-Leigh in offering readers a window into her living spaces tries to do just that.

While Austen and her homes have become inextricably linked in her posthumous reputation, her novels have taken on the character of domestic spaces in the cultural imagination. In *Cultural Institutions of the Novel* (1996) Deirdre Lynch outlines this phenomenon. Lynch writes that in the twentieth century, 'Englishness [...] found fullest expression in the little touches of comfort that made up life in the English home'. Examining commentators on Austen in the inter-war period, she claims that, 'the Austen text' was '[r]epeatedly rescripted as source material for [...] definitions of England as home'. At a time of social instability the novels became symbolic of home or, to use Lynch's phrase, 'every English person's permanent residence'.⁷ It is a view that Virginia Woolf also helped to propagate when she described Austen's creative process as that of a bird marking its nest: 'Humbly and gaily she collected the twigs and straws [...] and placed them neatly together'.⁸ For Woolf, Austen's writing is analogous to a – highly feminised – process of constructing a home. According to many of Austen's biographers and critics, then, she wrote entirely within the confines of an appropriately feminised domestic space and drew inspiration from what was within these four walls, creating 'nests'/novels of her own. In visiting Austen's home, as thousands of literary tourists have done for years in visiting Chawton, readers both seek Austen's original source material and find a way to act on their own feelings of being 'at home' when they read her works.

Yet ironically, for works that have become so emblematic of domestic space the novels feature strangely little domestic detail. While one early reviewer summarised them as

⁶ Austen-Leigh, pp. 24, 9.

⁷ Deirdre Lynch, 'At Home with Jane Austen', in *Cultural Institutions of the Novel*, ed. by Deirdre Lynch and William B. Warner (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 159-92 (pp. 165, 163, 172).

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 2 vols (London: Vintage, 2003), I, p. 139.

being ‘Teniers-like pictures of the domestic interiors of provincial homes’,⁹ more recent critics have recognised that the description of interiors is almost absent from Austen’s novels. For scholars exploring the domestic space in the work of eighteenth-century novelists, Austen either does not factor in their analyses, or is noted for her minimalism. In Simon Varey’s study of ‘habit[s] of spatial thinking’ in *Space and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (1990), Austen’s work is sidelined in favour of lengthy discussions of the fiction of Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson.¹⁰ Austen is also notably absent in Karen Lipsedge’s more recent *Domestic Space in Eighteenth-Century British Novels* (2012). Lipsedge discusses novels in which in the narrative we generally know ‘the name of a room, its location in relation to other rooms, and its route of access; the number of windows and doors [...]’ and so on.¹¹ Austen, by avoiding this kind of specificity does not merit consideration. She is, however, more present in Cynthia Wall’s *The Prose of Things* (2006), which offers an examination of the change in modes of literary description of interiors throughout the century. Yet Austen does not receive the same level of treatment as her contemporary, Sir Walter Scott, does, on the grounds that ‘Austen’s novels are more classical in description than other contemporary authors’ when it comes to interiors. Her novels are, in that sense, closer to Defoe’s or Fielding’s than to Radcliffe’s’, which imbue settings with ‘psychological significance’.¹² Lipsedge endorses this point when she notes that ‘a sense of setting is absent’ from the work of earlier novelists to which Austen’s fiction is routinely compared: her novel’s spaces, by contrast, are only ever ‘implied spaces’.¹³

⁹ ‘Heartsease; or, the Brother’s Wife’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, November 1854, p. 490.

¹⁰ Simon Varey, *Space and the Eighteenth-Century English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 4.

¹¹ Karen Lipsedge, *Domestic Space in Eighteenth-Century British Novels* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 3-4, 13.

¹² Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 178, 5.

¹³ Lipsedge, p. 14.

My contention, in this chapter, is that the consensus that Austen's depiction of domestic detail is minimalist has unjustly masked her significant contribution to contemporary debates about domesticity. Nancy Armstrong concurs with the critical trend established by Varey, Lipsedge and Wall, suggesting that in domestic fiction 'Richardson's tediously protracted description of the household [...] [is] supplanted by Austen's minimalist representation'.¹⁴ For Armstrong, the domestic detail given by Richardson serves the objective he shares with conduct books of promoting a new domestic ideal. As this ideal was already so well established by the time Austen wrote, Armstrong suggests, she did not need to include the same level of detail when depicting the home. Such accounts, while influential, fail to account for the moments in the fiction in which houses and their interiors *are* discussed at length. These moments have not been entirely neglected, however. Alistair Duckworth famously made the case for the symbolic significance of domestic description in Austen's novels, proposing that her commitment to preserving 'inherited culture' is represented in her treatment of the country house. In the manner of Edmund Burke, Duckworth asserted, Austen expressed a 'dislike of radical change [...] in terms of injuries done to an estate or house'.¹⁵ Duckworth's work thus builds upon the long-standing assumption that Austen's depiction of the home is at the heart of her conservatism.

This chapter revisits and reassesses Duckworth's analysis of the house-as-metaphor in Austen's fiction, finding, instead, that Austen's domestic detail is in fact the key to uncovering her subversion of the domestic ideal. Like Armstrong I argue that rather than 'pre-existing structures of morality and religion' the fabric of the household is symbolic of contemporary domestic ideology. In viewing the estate as an emblem of tradition Duckworth

¹⁴ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 63.

¹⁵ Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate: A Study of Jane Austen's Novels* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971), pp. 73, 45. For Duckworth's discussion of Burke's use of buildings to symbolise traditional values in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) see pp. 45-46.

reads its detail too much at face value. For Duckworth estates ‘function [...] as indexes to the character and social responsibility of their [most often male] owners’. Making this argument, he cites the famous example of Pemberley which in exhibiting Darcy’s ‘excellent aesthetic taste denotes an excellence of moral character’.¹⁶ Reading the household as reflective of men’s private and public selves, his work largely ignores the often more complex relationships between women and domestic spaces. This chapter moves on from this critical tendency to treat Austen’s households in predominantly masculine terms. To borrow Karen Harvey’s distinction, instead of looking at domestic structures in relation to the concept of ‘the [male] house’, I look at ‘the [female] home’.¹⁷ In studying the fiction’s houses and estates in their guise as ‘the home’ they are revealed as arenas for the reinforcement and practice of domestic ideology. When viewed in this light, Austen’s portrayal of women’s relationships with the spaces they inhabit must inevitably be a commentary on their relationship with this governing ideology.

This chapter, then, acknowledges that there is domestic description in Austen’s fiction. Nonetheless, it contends that her overall tendency to silence domestic detail is not to be ignored. Rather, it demonstrates that this silence is a crucial part of her strategy in using the depiction of the fabric of the home to interrogate the domestic ideal. As with other apparent exclusions in the novels, Austen requires us to pay close attention to the moments when her silence around domestic description is interrupted. Moments such as when Austen describes Fanny’s East room, or the layout of Barton cottage is discussed, are jarring in their richness of detail. Using only isolated moments of domestic detail such as these, Austen loads

¹⁶ Duckworth, pp. 57, 38, 124.

¹⁷ Karen Harvey, *The Little Republic: Masculinity and Domestic Authority in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 12-13, 138. For further discussion of these gendered concepts see the Introduction to this thesis, pp. 9-10.

her descriptions with symbolic weight. For Austen, I argue, the structure of the household functions primarily in a metaphorical role as part of her wider theorisation of domesticity.

In making this case for Austen's symbolic treatment of houses and their interiors, this chapter begins by placing her mode of description in literary context. Looking, in turn, at amatory fiction, Richardson as a forerunner in domestic fiction, and the Gothic tradition, I will demonstrate how Austen strategically departs from the various literary models of domestic description she had available to her. The next section will then explore the central idea that domestic ideology works to conflate female identity with the notion of home. Through examples of linguistic conflation of women and houses, such as the aforementioned moment with Willoughby, Austen seeks to shed light on this practice. Taking this concept a step further, Austen shows that women such as Fanny Price who most adhere to the domestic ideal seem almost physically to integrate with the house. Keeping to the theme of how courtship is played out through the language of property, I then turn to marriage and in particular the trope of women's pre-marital home-viewing. In doing so, I mark a clear departure from critics such as Duckworth who have viewed the heroes' houses as symbols of traditional masculine authority to which heroines must learn to conform. Given the culturally-imposed centrality of domesticity to middle-class female identity in the period, this section asks, what does moving from the family home to become the mistress of a new household mean for women? Finally, I examine the female-only rooms or houses that appear in the fiction. Austen's domestic detail reveals subtle acts of resistance whereby women work within or against the confines of home, and symbolically conservative ideology, to establish their own spaces both physically and psychologically.

Domestic description in eighteenth-century fiction

By the time Austen began writing, the novel had been long enough established for there to be an array of literary models (principally derived from amatory fiction and, later, the Richardsonian and Gothic novel) available to her to frame her construction of domestic space. In this section, I want to explore these options and the varying degrees to which Austen decided to depart from these models. As the appointed ‘novelist of home’¹⁸ and chronicler of the domestic sphere, Austen’s lack of attention to the details of domestic interiors when compared with that of her forerunners and contemporaries may appear anathema to the mode she adopted. I will suggest, however, that the purpose of Austen’s minimalism and reason for her rejection of available descriptive modes lies in recognising her political intentions in depicting home life. For Austen, establishing her desired stance in relation to the home relied not only upon disassociating herself from how domestic description was used by these other authors or genres, but also avoiding altogether an emphasis on the typically feminine concern of the materiality of the domestic interior.¹⁹

Critics commonly claim that amatory fiction was produced before a model for describing settings had been fully developed in the form of the mid-late eighteenth-century novel.²⁰ Yet, even at this early moment in the history of the novel, characters’ environments are more fully realised than in Austen’s works. This is particularly true when it comes to portraying gardens and outside spaces. In this period, Janine Barchas has shown, gardens and landscapes bore strong associations with sexuality and the female body.²¹ Description in

¹⁸ The Editor of ‘The Standard Novels’, ‘Memoir of Miss Austen’ (1833), in *A Memoir of Jane Austen and other Family Recollections*, ed. by Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 145-54 (p. 154).

¹⁹ Asserting the deep-rootedness of this association, Amanda Vickery writes that ‘[c]lassical philosophers and Christian moralists have long associated men with the rational world and women with the material’, Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 106.

²⁰ Lipsedge contends that it was not until ‘the mid-eighteenth century, British novelists began to depict their characters in a recognisable living space’, p. 4. Wall similarly recognises that: ‘in the late eighteenth-century, and throughout the nineteenth, description underwent a sort of amplification, or ‘enlargement’, of its own [...]. Description, long treated as a static object within prose or poetic narratives, began to find itself absorbed within narrative lines, at home and in place’, p. 7.

²¹ There is ‘a dominant presence of sexualized aesthetic in most eighteenth-century discussions of landscape’, Barchas states. Discussing *Sense and Sensibility*, she argues that landscape in the novel is symbolic of the sexualised female body. The

amatory fiction seems to uphold this close connection, often portraying the outdoors as complicit in facilitating women's sexual expression. Eliza Haywood has been signalled by Wall as particularly significant in establishing 'a floor plan for early eighteenth-century uses of fictional space'.²² In *Love in Excess* (1720) she describes Melliora and D'Elmont 'passing thro' a walk with trees on each side, [w]hose intermingling boughs made a friendly darkness, and every thing undistinguishable', permitting their 'burning kisses'. Being in the open is suggestive of freedom from restraint yet at the same time these spaces also offer convenient temporary privacy. This treatment of space is not limited to the outdoors. *Love in Excess* shows D'Elmont meticulously planning an encounter with Melliora, noting that in her 'chamber there was a little door that opened to a back pair of stairs [...] and at the bottom of that descent, a gate into the garden'.²³ While in Richardson's novels this kind of interior detail would foreshadow female imprisonment, for Haywood this description relates the precision and coordination required to pursue clandestine sexual activity. As Kathleen Lubey maintains, the richness of Haywood's detail used allows readers to 'immers[e] themselves most fully in the erotic adventures of her characters'.²⁴ Description, on the one hand, reveals how settings are employed by Haywood to facilitate characters' sexual encounters. On the other, in their detail these descriptions also evoke the physicality of these episodes for readers. Given that, as I argue in Chapter 2, Austen's intention is to convey women's mental detachment from the body and sexuality, it would make little sense for her to have pursued this model.

Viewed alongside amatory fiction, Richardson seems to represent the opposite path down which Austen could have travelled in terms of description. His work is commonly

proposed idea of removing the trees from the Dashwoods' initial residence at Norland Park, she contends, might even be read figuratively as 'an assault upon the female body'. Janine Barchas, *Matters of Fact in Jane Austen: History, Location, and Celebrity* (Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 2012), pp. 181, 199.

²² Wall, p. 129.

²³ Eliza Haywood, *Love in Excess; or, the Fatal Inquiry* (1720) (Letchworth: Broadview Press, 2000), pp. 122, 144.

²⁴ Kathleen Lubey, 'Eliza Haywood's Amatory Aesthetic', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 39 (2006), 309-22 (p. 320).

credited with advancing a sea change in the history of domestic description: not only does he include more material detail of settings than his predecessors, but he also imbues these settings with greater symbolic meaning.²⁵ In *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), the environments Richardson depicts are associated with male power, predatory surveillance and women's sexual endangerment. Emphasising female powerlessness, his heroines are of low or uncertain social status and are imprisoned partly owing to this class vulnerability. Conversely, Haywood's women are often upper-class characters with a correspondingly greater command of space and freedom of movement.²⁶ Despite these more overt contrasts, Richardson similarly draws on the association between female bodies, sexuality and gardens used in amatory fiction through frequent depiction of scenes involving 'removed garden building[s]'.²⁷ These function, however, as further instances of the enclosed spaces with which Richardson was fixated. Their situation outdoors serves only to foreshadow the sexual nature of events as well as create a sense of female isolation and danger.

In demonstrating Mr B.'s terrorisation of Pamela through his command of domestic space, Richardson's work offers, in one sense, a commentary on the gendered politics of space.²⁸ Furthermore, it examines the psychological significance of individual spaces. So critical to the novel are the rooms frequented by Pamela that her progress can be traced through her changing relationship with them. Upon returning to the Bedfordshire estate after marrying Mr B., Pamela greets not only its occupants, but its rooms; she tells Mrs Jervis that

²⁵ Lipsedge, for example, writes that 'it is in those novels by Richardson that the reader receives the clearest impression of a living space'. In his novels, 'the reader has greater insight into each heroine's physical and psychological substance by having an awareness of both the location and decorative style of the parlours, dressing-rooms and summer-houses that she occupies, and how she thinks about and uses each room'; Richardson's work is set apart by creating 'intimate relationship[s]' 'between persons and domestic objects', pp. 14, 15.

²⁶ This greater liberty is shown in the manipulation and voyeurism conducted by the heroine of Haywood's *Fantomina* (1725), for instance, or *Love in Excess*'s Alovisa.

²⁷ Lipsedge, p. 19.

²⁸ Varey similarly observes that Pamela's 'ensnarement and imprisonment are [...] evidence of Mr B's authority and power: his power is manifested most of all by his control of space, which therefore determines the nature of social relationships'. '[P]ersonal space and the politics of space', he argues, 'give Richardson's fiction [...] its uniquely compelling power', pp. 91, 184.

she wishes to ‘behold the dear Apartments, which I have seen before with such different Emotions to what I shall now do’.²⁹ Both the politics and psychological import of space are subjects developed upon by Austen’s fiction. But, as with amatory fiction, Richardson’s manner of portraying domestic detail was overall one from which she departed. Unlike Frances Burney, who adapts much of how Richardson characterises interior space to outdoor locations,³⁰ Austen is not interested to the same extent in the trauma of sexualised surveillance. In portraying rooms and spaces of psychological importance, Austen avoids using spaces such as the bedroom and closet featured particularly in *Pamela*. Culturally, these rooms are loaded with meaning both in their everyday social significance as spaces of female privacy and through Richardson’s use of them to show the extent of the harassment to which his heroine subjected. In order to convey the unique symbolic significance of the rooms she features prominently, Austen needed to detach from these associations.

More so than Richardson’s work, Gothic fiction is renowned for its excess of description and is, on the surface at least, furthest away from Austen’s own style of portraying domestic space. While Richardson’s fiction marked an increase in the attention paid to interiors and the significance of this detail to character psychology, the Gothic novel can be said to have carried these developments even further. *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) widely perceived to be the first Gothic novel, is known for its use of an abundance of supernatural objects in its plot; Wall notes that it ‘has often seemed to faint under the weight of [...] its implausible collection of things’. Writing later in the century, Ann Radcliffe was famed for her inclusion of long and frequent landscape descriptions, so much so that ‘[she] was considered a pioneer in the art (or excess) of description’. While Radcliffe was as much

²⁹ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 459.

³⁰ See, for example when Evelina is ‘seized’ first by a ‘young officer’ and then two ‘unhappy women’ at Marylebone gardens, *Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 234-36.

criticised as she was admired for her descriptive detail, it is Wall's contention that she 'actually puts her 'lifted' [from travel journals] descriptions to quite sophisticated work'. As is undoubtedly also the case with Horace Walpole's array of objects, she 'makes description, not a background, not an ornament, but a self-referential system that begs for its own interpretation'.³¹

Austen interacts with the descriptive modes of Walpole and Radcliffe in *Northanger Abbey* (1818). The Gothic-inspired descriptions and the presence of mysterious objects in the titular estate shows her acute consciousness, in distinct contrast to works of this genre, of her own minimalism. When Catherine arrives at Northanger, the Abbey is mapped intricately: '[r]eturning through the large and lofty hall, they ascended a broad staircase of shining oak, which, after many flights and many landing-places, brought them upon a long wide gallery'.³² When Catherine's fear is at its peak in this building, a sensory element is added to the description: '[t]he wind roared down the chimney, the rain beat in torrents against the windows [...] Her heart fluttered, her knees trembled [...] A cold sweat stood on her forehead' (pp. 160-61). In contrast, upon the reader's later first introduction to the Allens' residence we are given no more information than that '[t]he two houses were only a quarter of a mile apart' (p. 221). When Catherine returns home from Northanger, and is freed of her illusions of terror, there is a purposeful step back into the mode of minimalist description. This sudden decided shift reinforces the notion that Austen's lack of description is just as meaningful as Wall reads Radcliffe's excess to be.

Whilst drawing on the Gothic in *Northanger Abbey* to highlight her departure from it, Austen is also seeking to demonstrate one crucial similarity with this genre. Setting aside the descriptive hallmarks of writers including Walpole and Radcliffe, a common theme emerges

³¹ Wall, pp. 114, 208, 209, 314.

³² Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 154. All subsequent references are to this edition.

when looking at Gothic works. Writers within this genre often build their plots on the theme of male ownership, or attempt to secure ownership, of property. Owing to this right to property, men are able to exercise control over domestic space, and consequently those that inhabit it. As with Richardson, domestic dwellings in Gothic fiction more often than not act as symbolic sites of patriarchal terror.³³ In Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) Emily, the orphaned heroine, experiences what appear to be supernatural occurrences whilst being imprisoned in a castle by her aunt's cruel husband, Montoni.³⁴ In *The Castle of Otranto*, Isabella flees via a subterraneous passage between the castle and a connecting church. She is forced to choose between the unsatisfactory patriarchal institutions of the family represented by the castle, where she is preyed upon by Manfred, and the church wherein she must commit herself to religious service. In *Northanger Abbey*, a novel in which Austen openly assesses the status of the novel, Austen not only plays with the Gothic mode to examine its descriptive style, but also scrutinises its symbolic treatment of the household. Although in the end she rejects this model and its use of excess in description, this dismissal is not as outright as it may seem. While Gothic spaces literally manifest the horrors of extreme patriarchal power, Austen's spaces are emblematic of domestic ideology which she shows requires an altogether different descriptive strategy. The lack of overt terror employed by Austen demonstrates that the domestic ideology she confronts is a feminised, disguised form of patriarchal control. In invoking the Gothic, but having its tropes fall away to reveal a more true-to-life villain in General Tilney, Austen quietly suggests that we should keep the Gothic model, and its message, in mind when looking at domestic spaces. Domestic ideology,

³³ Here, I am drawing upon a long-standing critical view, as outlined recently by Ellen Malenas Ledoux: 'Gothic space symbolizes patriarchal power, and the trials heroines face within these spaces mirror the quotidian subjugation of women', Ellen Malenas Ledoux, *Social Reform in Gothic Writing: Fantastic Forms of Change, 1764-1834* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 55-56.

³⁴ E. J. Clery elucidates the symbolic purpose of the supernatural in *Udolpho*, arguing that it 'signifies a consciousness of the actuality of women's subjection as a sex' and 'describes the experience of a woman defined by property laws', E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 120.

her own methods show and as this chapter will demonstrate, is perhaps all the more insidious for its seeming innocuousness.

As I have been arguing, in reining in her descriptions of domestic settings, Austen was knowingly going against a trend in fiction for heightened detail and set herself apart from existing paradigms for conveying domestic settings. For Wall, this abrupt change in direction is because ‘[b]y the time of Austen (post- Richardson, post-Radcliffe), the author could actually focus on the boring and ultraordinary of the social rather than the material world’. Yet the notion that Austen was simply writing at a moment that was in a sense ‘post-description’ is somewhat misleading. First, Austen shows within her letters that she *was* interested in everyday domestic detail to an extent belied by the novels.³⁵ What is more, her treatment of the Gothic, and especially the 1790s author Radcliffe, occurs in a novel predominantly produced in the 1790s, *Northanger Abbey*. Austen is sidestepping, therefore, away from what was a contemporary example of excess description. Amanda Vickery’s work suggests that thorough description of the home would almost have been expected of Austen simply because she was a woman. According to Vickery ‘a minutely detailed interest in interiors was seen as a distinctively female trait’ in the Georgian era. This characteristic in writing was also seen as especially feminine.³⁶ In establishing her own literary mode, Austen appears therefore to subvert what would have been expected of her by readers of the period. Ultimately, in being concerned with the politics of the home, Austen shows she has little concern for portraying its surface minutiae. Writing of Lovelace in Richardson’s *Clarissa*,

³⁵ Whenever she is in a new place or attends a social event, Austen is keen to convey to the reader the materiality of the scene. Accordingly she is generally careful to note the details of food, drink, clothing, gardens and household objects and interiors. Upon arrival at her new residence in Castle Square, Austen for instance describes to Cassandra: ‘The Border under the terrace Wall, is clearing away to receive Currants & Gooseberry Bushes [...] The alterations & improvements within doors too advance very properly, & the Offices will be made very convenient indeed – Our Dressing-Table is constructing on the spot, out of a large Kitchen Table [...]’, *Letters*, p. 119.

³⁶ Vickery explains this through the example of when ‘[t]he Bishop of Rochester wrote to Alexander Pope that *The Arabian Nights* were likely the ‘product of some woman’s imagination’ because of all the ‘descriptions of dress, Furniture etc’, *Behind Closed Doors*, pp. 301-02.

Lipsedge makes the claim that '[d]escription [...] is, of course, power'.³⁷ In refusing to dwell on detail however, Austen succeeds in reducing the importance of the materiality of the houses she discusses in order to amplify their symbolic role as the sites and representative spaces of domestic ideology. Silence and minimalism are, for Austen, her most powerful literary tactics.

The conflation of women and the home

While Austen's descriptions are characterised by a lack of detail, when properties are discussed within the fiction it is often to reveal societal attitudes towards women. I have already given an example with Hannah More of how close linguistic association between women and houses shows conservative attempts to conflate female identity with the home as part of promoting domestic ideology. But this conflation also has a wider historical foundation. Vickery has written on the important eighteenth-century analogy between the body and the house: 'The external perimeter of the house was a frontier in custom and law. The house has long been a universal metaphor for the person and the body'. Violation of the household perimeter was therefore, Vickery implies, tantamount to violation of one's person. Turning to interiors, she informs us that '[t]here was a strong tendency to view a woman and her decorations as an ensemble, observers moving seamlessly from silk dress, to sofa, to curtains in their descriptions'.³⁸ Women then were not only decorative by way of their performative accomplishments (as I contend in Chapter 1), but also through their clothing and appearance which formed part of the ornamental domestic scene. Karen Harvey, going against the critical tendency to look at women's association with the home, argues that the 'house/body analogy',³⁹ as Vickery terms it, can similarly be applied to men. 'Just as women

³⁷ Lipsedge, p. 144.

³⁸ Vickery, pp. 29, 301.

³⁹ Vickery, p. 29.

were linked corporeally to particular things—to fine china and petite desks’, she writes, ‘sturdy tables and chairs were exemplary masculine objects, synecdoches for men’s bodies’. More than just having a symbolic relation to the body, the house also holds significance, Harvey asserts, in establishing male identity and reputation.⁴⁰ She concedes, nevertheless, that although the home was an important psychological space for men: ‘[t]he alignment of the space of the domestic interior and the space of the mind or self in the eighteenth century was [...] of particular relevance to women’.⁴¹

In this section I will demonstrate how Austen interprets this historically-entrenched and multi-layered association between the household and female identity. Developing her own paradigms of the conflation between women and the house, Austen exposes the narrow confines into which such contemporary associations readily force female identity. Looking at moments from *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), I first of all examine the recurring tendency in Austen’s work of language relating to houses being used in place of openly discussing female characters. These examples reveal the extent to which women are automatically considered to be almost interchangeable with the home, and also how characters seek to ingrain this connection further. Returning to Vickery’s notion of women seeming to form part of the interior decoration of the home, I want to explore the extent to which Austen also allows that women are physically, as well as linguistically, merged with the house. Illustrating Austen’s central critique with stark clarity, the women who most adhere to middle-class domestic ideology appear quite literally to form part of the household fabric.

⁴⁰ Harvey writes that ‘[m]en’s self-identities were grounded in the physical and emotional space of the house and the social relationships of family’ and that their ‘right to citizenship was firmly grounded in their own material practices in (not just possession of) a house’, pp. 167, 187.

⁴¹ Harvey, p. 158.

Male characters in Austen's novels often express their desire through conversation about the homes or prospective homes of the object of their admiration. In *Sense and Sensibility*, men frequently comment on the Dashwoods' cottage which the family are seen to be uniquely qualified to inhabit. Informing us that the cottage had long been vacant, Willoughby exclaims: '[h]ow often did I wish when I was at Allenham this time twelvemonth that Barton cottage were inhabited!' (p. 74). Highlighting their apparent suitability, Sir John Middleton is 'charmed with the inhabitants he had now procured for his cottage'; 'he had the real satisfaction of [...] settling a family of females only in his cottage' (p. 25). By allowing that the Dashwoods have essentially found their counterpart in property at Barton, the novel sets the stage for an easy interchangeability between the desirable Dashwood sisters and the cottage. As part of his outpouring of appreciation for the Dashwood home, Willoughby adds that he had previously

'[...] never passed within view of it without admiring its situation, and grieving that no one should live in it. How little did I then think that the very first news I should hear from Mrs. Smith, when I next came into the country, would be that Barton cottage was taken: and I felt an immediate satisfaction and interest in the event, which nothing but a kind of prescience of what happiness I should experience from it, can account for. Must it not have been so, Marianne?' speaking to her in a lowered voice (p. 74).

While for Sir John, occupation of the cottage means he has finally found suitable tenants, for Willoughby this event means his ideal woman has arrived. His hushed speech here, and use of words such as 'admiring' and 'immediate satisfaction', amounts to a highly suggestive and thinly-veiled commentary on his desire for Marianne. Through conflation of women and houses, this instance shows, Austen plays with the contemporary analogy between body and home to allow for disguised discussion of women's sexual attractiveness.

True to character, Edward's discussion of Elinor and his feelings through the medium of discussing the cottage has a more practical, considered bearing than Willoughby's. Throughout his stay at Barton, his opinion of the house and its surroundings fluctuates in

seeming parallel to his struggle with his feelings for Elinor. She observes that ‘the reservedness of his manner towards her contradicted one moment what a more animated look had intimated the preceding one’ (p. 94). In a disguised explanation of his inconsistency in behaviour, Edward tells Marianne that ‘[i]t is a beautiful country, [...] but [...] among the rest of the objects before me, I see a very dirty lane’ (pp. 87-88). His potential relationship with Elinor is ‘muddied’, he covertly confesses, owing to his betrothal to Lucy and he cannot see any clear domestic prospects for them. In spite of these obstacles, he ends his visit in a state of heightened affection: ‘he grew more and more partial to the house and environs—never spoke of going away without a sigh’ (p. 99). For a confessedly ineloquent character such as Edward in particular, the language of domesticity is more effective than direct language expressing love or desire. Working within an analogy of the home provides him with a vocabulary with which to express thoughts it would be inappropriate openly to speak. For Edward, this language is also suggestive of the problems of property he would face in choosing Elinor for a wife. Yet most significantly, the language of domesticity, used in place of the language of desire, communicates the true nature of courtship in bringing women closer towards the fulfilment of a crucial goal of domestic ideology through marriage.

Alongside this general discussion of its merits, the eighteenth-century discourse of ‘improvement’ is also invoked by characters regarding Barton cottage. Featuring prominently in the fiction, the notion of improvement, in its apparent applicableness to either women or the home, provides an efficient means through which the conflation of the two can be explored. As part of his masked professions of desire for Marianne, Willoughby ‘exclaim[s] — ‘Improve this dear cottage! No. *That* I will never consent to. [...] [T]his house you would spoil, Mrs. Dashwood? You would rob it of its simplicity by imaginary improvement!’ (pp. 73-74). To express his wish for Marianne’s – presumably marriage – status to remain unaltered, he once more turns to Barton cottage. Improvement, however, famously receives

the most attention from Austen in *Mansfield Park*. The ‘improvement’ of estates and their grounds is relentlessly conversed about in the novel, with its most fashionable male character, Henry Crawford, being portrayed as the expert in these discussions. As Marcus Wood has drawn attention to, the language of improvement is used to an almost peculiar extent with regards to Fanny and her progression in the novel.⁴² For Fanny, ‘improvement’ pertains to her sexual maturity and therefore readiness for marriage. Observing her new marriageability, her uncle is excited to find that her ‘complexion is so improved!—and [she] ha[s] gained so much countenance!—and [her] figure [...]’.⁴³ The language of the home is in this sense appropriate as Fanny, following her improvement, will be able to fulfil the ends of the domestic ideal for which she has been trained.

Much has been made of Fanny in relation to this subject, but Maria Bertram presents perhaps an even more interesting case of this term being applied to a woman in the novel. In a seeming reversal of Fanny’s situation, Mr Rushworth wants to ‘improve’ his house to make it ready for the ‘out’ and marriageable, and according to Bertram standards, already ‘improved’ Maria.

He had been visiting a friend in the neighbouring county, and that friend having recently had his grounds laid out by an improver, Mr. Rushworth was returned with his head full of the subject, and very eager to be improving his own place in the same way; and though not saying much to the purpose, could talk of nothing else. [...] Miss Bertram’s attention and opinion was evidently his chief aim [...] (p. 50).

This conversation about improving the Sotherton estate, in being aimed at Maria, is evidently intended to make it, and by extension its owner, more appealing to her. Yet Mrs Grant’s later words present Mr Rushworth’s enthusiasm for improvement in a different light.

‘It wants improvement, Ma’am, beyond any thing. I never saw a place that wanted so much improvement in my life; and it is so forlorn that I do not know what can be done with it.’

⁴² Marcus Wood, *Slavery, Empathy, and Pornography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 305.

⁴³ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 183. All subsequent references are to this edition.

‘No wonder that Mr. Rushworth should think so at present,’ said Mrs. Grant to Mrs. Norris, with a smile; ‘but depend upon it, Sotherton will have *every* improvement in time which his heart can desire’ (p. 51).

What will truly improve Sotherton, Mrs Grant intimates, is the presence of Maria following her likely marriage to Mr Rushworth. Teaming her use of the term ‘improvement’ with a suggestion of Rushworth’s romantic desire for this improvement, Mrs Grant collapses fully the distinction between Maria and renovations that could be made to the estate. In figuratively absorbing Maria into the walls of Sotherton in this way, Mrs Grant adds substance to her fears expressed (and later acted on) in the novel of feeling trapped or being enclosed.⁴⁴ If the house is the ultimate status symbol for men and, for Mr Rushworth, a unique selling point to compensate for his awkward social demeanour, Maria is to be its chief domestic adornment.

Yet it is not just through the attempts at seduction of male characters that women are conflated with the home through language in the fiction. Like Mr Rushworth, and as Willoughby is in line to be, the widowed Lady Catherine in *Pride and Prejudice* is the owner of a grand estate. Speaking from this unusual position of female authority, she draws a subtle parallel between Elizabeth and her home. The size and quality of homes are of course easy indicators of social rank and so for Lady Catherine, for whom class is paramount, the home serves as an apt symbolic representation of the individual. Discussing Elizabeth under the guise of commenting on Longbourn, Lady Catherine achieves the double feat of underscoring the heroine’s association with her family estate and of having a means through which to convey her feelings about her when in company.

‘You have a very small park here,’ returned Lady Catherine after a short silence. [...]
 ‘This must be a most inconvenient sitting room for the evening, in summer; the windows are full west.’

⁴⁴ Upon reviewing her marital prospects, Maria says: ‘that iron gate, that ha-ha, give me a feeling of restraint and hardship. I cannot get out, as the starling said’ (p. 93).

Mrs. Bennet assured her that they never sat there after dinner [...]

‘Miss Bennet, there seemed to be a prettyish kind of a little wilderness on one side of your lawn. I should be glad to take a turn in it, if you will favour me with your company.’ [...]

Elizabeth obeyed, and running into her own room for her parasol, attended her noble guest down stairs. As they passed through the hall, Lady Catherine opened the doors into the dining-parlour and drawing-room, and pronouncing them, after a short survey, to be decent looking rooms, walked on.⁴⁵

Aesthetically, Lady Catherine suggests, there are some pleasing aspects to the estate: the rooms she sees are ‘decent looking’ and at least part of its grounds are ‘prettyish’. This language echoes descriptive terms commonly used in the reserved flattery of Elizabeth, widely agreed to be the second most attractive Bennet sister.⁴⁶ In fact, Lady Catherine appears at first quite admiring of Elizabeth, even trying to persuade her to extend her stay at Hunsford so that she might see more of her. Looking at her description of Longbourn we see that it is the structural aspects of the estate to which she objects; the park is on the whole ‘very small’ with its entire layout causing the sitting room to afford an unfortunate prospect. In insulting its size and situation, Lady Catherine highlights her particular exception to fundamental and unchangeable aspects of the estate. Though Elizabeth might be pleasing in some ways, like her home she is, it is being asserted, inescapably impeded by a lack of wealth and the advantages of social rank. Just as she cannot change her class origins, the Bennets would lack the means substantially to heighten the grandeur of Longbourn.

In drawing her into direct comparison with her home in this way, Lady Catherine effectively prefaces her argument against Elizabeth marrying Darcy with evidence that she is always going to be a ‘Longbourn’ and never a ‘Pemberley’. It is this line of argument rather than the case actually made by Lady Catherine to which Elizabeth takes exception in their

⁴⁵ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 333-34. All subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴⁶ Darcy famously first deems Elizabeth only ‘tolerable’ (p. 13), Colonel Fitzwilliam refers to her as ‘Mrs. Collins's pretty friend’ (p. 168) and Lady Catherine herself thinks she is ‘a very genteel, pretty kind of girl’ (p. 160).

meeting. Elizabeth's responses to Lady Catherine's tirade expressing the inappropriateness of her presumed engagement are not about her desire to marry Darcy. 'You are then resolved to have him?', Lady Catherine asks, for Elizabeth to remind her that she has 'said no such thing' (p. 338). Her arguments instead are targeted towards unravelling the 'wholly unreasonable' (p. 337) line of argument pursued by her visitor. Drawing upon her own broader and more complex view of human relationships, she rejects the parameters within which Lady Catherine views the world. When she does argue back within the lines of debate being set out by Lady Catherine, it is to expose the meaninglessness and arbitrary nature of her points.

'[...] If you were sensible of your own good, you would not wish to quit the sphere, in which you have been brought up.'

'In marrying your nephew, I should not consider myself as quitting that sphere. He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman's daughter; so far we are equal.' (p. 337)

Keeping to the logic Lady Catherine attempts to put forward, Elizabeth intentionally ignores the more discrete elements of class difference she has tried to draw out through the attention she has paid to Longbourn, a symbol of the Bennets' 'sphere'. Elizabeth finally puts an end to the conversation when Lady Catherine says: "[...] Heaven and earth!—of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to be thus polluted?" (p. 338). Here, Lady Catherine comes closest to open conflation of Elizabeth and the home. While her character and situation, Lady Catherine suggests, allow for a perfect analogy between Elizabeth and Longbourn, to try and draw Elizabeth and Pemberley together can only result in a perverse pollution of the latter. By choosing to halt the conversation this point, Elizabeth becomes the one character to protest the conflation of woman and the home. In doing so, on one level she is refusing to be placed in the restrictive class category of only ever being a 'Longbourn'. On another, this forms part of a broader resistance to being identified in relation to the home and the model of ideal femininity it culturally represents.

The sense Lady Catherine creates of an almost physical incompatibility between Elizabeth and the Pemberley estate echoes a technique used more widely by Austen in the novels. In contrast, Austen seems to show how female characters that fully comply with domestic ideology, and the order of their households, seem to integrate physically with the house. For these women, the house is the symbolic mould into which they quite literally fit. *Northanger Abbey* provides perhaps the clearest example of Austen's deployment of this idea. In the novel, we learn little about Mrs Tilney, but what we do learn portrays her in a light close to perfection. Her 'very like' (p. 171) portrait presents an image of a 'lovely woman, with a mild and pensive countenance' (p. 180). According to her son, Henry, '[t]he world [...] never saw a better woman' and her most outstanding attributes were her 'virtue' and 'domestic, unpretending merits' (p. 184). Given the unassuming character of Mrs Tilney, Henry is surprised by Catherine's interest in her. Her fascination takes the form of her being convinced that Mrs Tilney is still alive and has been imprisoned within the Abbey:

[...] the probability that Mrs. Tilney yet lived, shut up for causes unknown, and receiving from the pitiless hands of her husband a nightly supply of coarse food, was the conclusion which necessarily followed.

Catherine becomes determined to locate 'the very spot of this unfortunate woman's confinement' which she believes to lie within a 'suspected range of cells' (p. 177) beneath Mrs Tilney's apartments. The Tilneys' descriptions of their mother's passivity and kindness have, in part, led Catherine to fabricate a narrative in which she has become trapped, literally, within the fabric of the house. Given the praise she receives and the assertion by Henry that there was little more to her than virtue and modesty, in searching for Mrs Tilney Catherine in effect looks for a lost emblem of the feminine ideal. So exemplary a domestic woman was she that she has seemingly been absorbed within the physical structure of the home. Rather than conveying her in person, the ideal woman Austen suggests is best described metaphorically as part of the house.

In *Emma* (1815) Frank Churchill seems both to shed light on and add further complexity to this figurative idea introduced in Austen's earlier novel. Speaking of marriage choices he says: 'It is only by seeing women in their own homes [...] that you can form any just judgment. Short of that, it is all guess and luck—and will generally be ill-luck'. Frank's words here are suggestive of the house being materially important in determining and unveiling female identity. Not only are houses reliant upon women for their upkeep, but women, it appears, are also dependent upon their homes. Women must be physically present in their houses in order to be understood fully and have any hope of finding a suitable marriage partner. Frank implies a form of symbiotic relationship in which a woman completes the home, and the home in turn completes her. Austen's problem with this concept is, in this instance, immediately signalled through the example of Jane Fairfax, to whom Frank is secretly engaged. Neither truly belonging to the Campbell family, nor seeming to consider the Bates' residence as home, Jane, along with Harriet, is one of Austen's dispossessed characters. According to Frank's assertion, the unknowability of Jane Fairfax makes sense. However on hearing him make the above claim, Jane offers a rare interjection:

'I was only going to observe, that though such unfortunate circumstances do sometimes occur both to men and women, I cannot imagine them to be very frequent. A hasty and imprudent attachment may arise—but there is generally time to recover from it afterwards. [...] it can be only weak, irresolute characters [...] who will suffer an unfortunate acquaintance to be an inconvenience, an oppression for ever'.⁴⁷

Her literal meaning here is that very few, and only 'weak', people marry following a brief, insubstantial acquaintance with someone. But what she also intimates is that Frank's assertion about the home is wrong: marriages based on having only seen a woman outside of the home are not necessarily disastrous. Reluctant to speak in general, she is forced to dispel the notion that she, without a home, and having become acquainted with Frank in 'a

⁴⁷ Jane Austen *Emma* (1815) (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 349. All subsequent references are to this edition.

watering-place' (p. 401), might not have revealed or even have been capable of revealing her true self.

In contrast to Jane, this notion of a symbiotic relationship with the home is fulfilled to an exemplary degree by *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny. As she progresses on her journey towards becoming 'the perfect model of a woman' (p. 322) under Edmund's and then her own guidance, Fanny comes to be figuratively embedded in the walls of Mansfield. Just as the estate seems in a very literal sense to need her – she is the '[s]omething [...] wanting *within*' (p. 430), to use Sir Thomas's phrase – she becomes incapable of leaving. When in Portsmouth visiting her estranged family, she can 'think of nothing but Mansfield' (p. 363), Austen tells us. What should be an emotional reunion with her immediate family is characterised as a painful absence from the estate. Significantly she dwells not on individual inhabitants in her longing, but on 'Mansfield' itself. Having initially had difficulty in growing accustomed to the domestic interior of Mansfield, she now struggles to cope within the space of her family home at Portsmouth: [t]he smallness of the house, and thinness of the walls, brought every thing so close to her, that [...] she hardly knew how to bear it' (p. 354). Mentally, she makes herself back at Mansfield again as far as possible, even becoming closer to the reprehensible Crawford in light of his association with it. As much as Fanny is perceived to complete Mansfield Park then, the estate comes to symbolise the mould of the domestic ideal into which she has grown; she has been 'formed for domestic life' (p. 439), but specifically so at Mansfield Park. Showing her intimate attachment to the estate, at the close of the novel her thoughts go return once more to it: 'the parsonage [...] soon grew as dear to her heart, and as thoroughly perfect in her eyes, as every thing else within the view and patronage of Mansfield Park had long been' (p. 439). Fanny's marriage becomes not about her final romantic union with Edmund, but as it is implied with the suggestion that it

took some time for the parsonage to ‘gr[o]w [...] dear’, her initially painful removal from Mansfield Park.

Homes and the marriage contract

Through a variety of architectural metaphors and the metaphoric absorption of female characters into the walls of the household, Austen shows that the relationship between women and their homes is intimate and binding. As the implied fearfulness of Fanny at the end of *Mansfield Park*, and overt distress during her period of separation at Portsmouth, shows us, a vast amount is at stake personally when women make the decision to enter through marriage into a new household. In this section I argue that through the recurring trope of female characters viewing the homes of their prospective husbands, questions concerning female identity and its relationship to domestic space come under intense scrutiny by Austen. Illustrating the social importance such episodes of home-showing hold, Vickery contends that in genteel society ‘the successful viewing of the house [...] bec[a]me an implied contract of marriage’.⁴⁸ If, as I have contended, courtship is channelled through estates via women being discussed through conversation about their homes, then these tours are the presumed final stage of romantic negotiations in which women are asked, or decide whether, to give up their family home to become mistress of another household. Given the close cultural association between the middle-class woman and the home, through these subtle negotiations enacted in tours women are asked not only to make a decision about their future living space, but about their future selves. Moving from being, as nearly all of Austen’s heroines are, one of several offspring in a household under the influence of parents to being the mistress of an estate may seem an empowering step.⁴⁹ Here, I question just how

⁴⁸ *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 84

⁴⁹ Vickery outlines the notion of ‘female dominion indoors’ in the Georgian era. She describes women’s duties including the ‘management of servants, the guardianship of material culture and the organisation of family consumption’, Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman’s Daughter: Women’s Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 160, 8.

far episodes of home-showing are in fact about potential female freedom, and a chance for women to establish their identity outside of the family home. More often, the act of home-showing is a somewhat manipulative reassertion of women's limited domestic role, with individual rooms and the opportunity to decorate frequently being offered as a concession creating only the illusion of independence. The only women in the fiction to be truly 'mistress' or close to being in independent control of their houses are the few home-owning widows in the fiction. Characters such as Lady Catherine doubtless possess greater power in relation to property than Austen's soon-to-be-wed heroines, yet as I show later in the chapter this pales in comparison to that of their male home-owning counterparts.⁵⁰

My analysis of scenes of home viewing will show that there is far more to women's encounters with their potential future homes than has been allowed in readings that take their cue from conventional accounts of Elizabeth's first revelatory encounter with Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*. Traditionally, Elizabeth's viewing of Darcy's home has been read as an implicit promotion of mercenary motives in marriage and in light of the hero's character finally being unveiled to the heroine. Duckworth observes that in her 'great recognition scene' Elizabeth comes to value 'the money and the status of Pemberley'. He also describes how 'Elizabeth's journey through the park, from its boundary to the house, is a spatial recapitulation of her association with Darcy from her first prejudiced impressions of his external appearance [...] to a final arrival at the central core of his character'. Viewing property primarily in relation to male characters, Duckworth argues that in moving house female characters are finally confined to and constrained by the social values that these homes and their male owners represent. He contends that 'Elizabeth's final location within

⁵⁰ For further reading on widows in the period and their limited property rights, see Susan Staves, *Married Women's Separate Property in England, 1660-1833* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 27-55. For works on Austen and widows, see Karen Bloom Gevirtz, *Life After Death: Widows and the English Novel, Defoe to Austen* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005) and Laura Fairchild Brodie, 'Society and the Superfluous Female: Jane Austen's Treatment of Widowhood', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 34 (1994), 697-718.

the park of Pemberley is also the self's limitation of its power to define its own essence, the heroine's recognition of moral and social limits within which she must live'.⁵¹ Lionel Trilling similarly writes that '[w]ith what the great houses represent the heroines of the novels are, or become, completely in accord'.⁵² As Duckworth suggests, women's encounters with these estates do pertain to their self-definition and ability to integrate with the kind of domestic lifestyle represented by the household they are viewing. However, along with Trilling, Duckworth both exaggerates the ease with which women embrace this integration and underplays the significance of, and potential for personal crisis in, their decision to join a new household. As with other female characters in the novels, I argue that Elizabeth's scene of home viewing is decidedly about the heroine. Her rumination upon what it might mean 'to be mistress of Pemberley' (p. 235) is not the giddy testament to wealth and status-driven motives that it has so often been perceived to be. Rather, it is indicative of a serious consideration of the boundaries – both literal and figurative – within which she might need to operate in her future life.

Though Elizabeth's viewing of Pemberley may be one of *Pride and Prejudice's* most well-known moments, the symbolic significance of a woman being seen to be, and seeing herself in, a potential marital home is established in parallel scenes much earlier in the novel. Like his relationship with Jane Bennet proves to be, Mr Bingley's relationship to property at the start of the novel is socially problematic. Leaving his 'sisters [...] very anxious' (p. 17) and the local Hertfordshire community uncertain of his status, Bingley is said to have 'inherited property [...] from his father, who had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it' and also looks likely similarly 'to leave the next generation to purchase' (p. 17). Probed by Mrs Bennet, he affirms the probable impermanence and unpredictability of his

⁵¹ Duckworth, pp. 122, 124, 125, 140.

⁵² Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 74.

situation at Netherfield: 'if I should resolve to quit Netherfield, I should probably be off in five minutes' (p. 42). Despite the unstable foundation on which her expectations are built, Mrs Bennet, wise to the rituals of courtship, forces a prolonged encounter between Jane and Bingley at Netherfield. It is her hope that, to paraphrase Frank Churchill, by seeing Jane in his home, to Bingley she will not only appear to advantage, but entirely compatible with his domestic situation. Mrs Bennet's desire to emphasise her daughter's belonging at Netherfield is shown through the near-conflation of Jane with Bingley's estate through speech. Promoting Jane she says: 'she has, without exception, the sweetest temper I ever met with. I often tell my other girls they are nothing to *her*', before going on to add: 'You have a sweet room here, Mr. Bingley [...]' (p. 42). Jane's sweetness, she unsubtly suggests, would allow for her successful assimilation into the life and space of Bingley's home. Despite these earnest attempts to facilitate Jane's removal to Netherfield, the visit proves to be almost entirely abortive. Becoming ill following her rain-soaked arrival at the estate, she is confined to a single room before Bingley can return; she is absent from her own visit, an absence only exaggerated by Elizabeth's eventual contrastingly disruptive presence.

The unsuccessful nature of this visit only serves to highlight how pivotal home-viewing is in the process of determining a woman's future. Not only is this particular instance inauspiciously forced by Mrs Bennet and premature in terms of the relationship between Jane and Bingley, but it should also arguably never have occurred owing to the uncertainty as to whether Netherfield would indeed be Jane's future home if she were to marry Bingley. Jane's illness and removal of herself from the social spaces of the estate acts as a kind of boycott of her introduction to Netherfield. Revealing her strategy for marriage success, Mrs Bennet says that 'she had no wish of [Jane] recovering immediately as her restoration to health would probably remove her from Netherfield' (p. 41). To escape the situation at Netherfield into which she has been forced is, tellingly for Jane, to return to health. In contrast, the Darcy

family home at Pemberley is stable and unchangeable; Elizabeth is, therefore, able to reach a new stage of certainty in her relationship with Darcy following a visit in which she is able to assess the kind of future she could have there. While Mrs Bennet might be content that Bingley has had the chance to see what it might be like to have Jane in his home and as part of his domestic circle, Jane has not had the opportunity properly to weigh her prospects. Although ultimately Bingley and Jane's marriage does begin life at Netherfield, Austen ensures that the relationship must continue long term in a new and stable home at the end of the novel, when: 'The darling wish of his sisters was then gratified; he bought an estate in a neighbouring county to Derbyshire' (p. 364). While temporary accommodation might suit Bingley, the centrality of the home to women's daily lives, as his sisters' anxiety suggests, means women require firmer foundations for living.

Like this *Pride and Prejudice* episode, Marianne's visit to Allenham in *Sense and Sensibility* stresses the seriousness with which society, and Austen, imbued the process of a woman being shown her potential home. Throughout the early stages of the novel, Willoughby seems to be building towards the introduction of Marianne into his home by courting her using, as I have shown, language infused with references to domestic space. Giving Marianne a tour of his intended home seems a natural progression: rather than just thinking about her in relation to domesticity, he goes a step further by wanting to see her physically in his soon-to-be inherited estate. Yet when viewed in light of Willoughby's eventual abandonment of Marianne, the domestic language he uses takes on an entirely different character. Instead of revealing that he is imagining her as a fixture of his home, in conflating Marianne often with Barton cottage, Willoughby in fact seeks to reinforce her ties to that household. By desiring the cottage so earnestly to remain as it is, he is figuratively attempting to seal her within its boundaries, preserving her in a state of belonging to a

property fit, owing to its humble proportions, only for single women.⁵³ Much like Willoughby's suggestive language the visit to Allenham amounts to a false promise, and one that occurs in circumstances teeming with impropriety. Duckworth has pointed out why the visit is simply inappropriate on politeness grounds: 'From the point of view of the present owner, the unannounced visit of her heir and a young female companion can only indicate barely concealed impatience for her death'.⁵⁴ Jill Heydt-Stevenson has also written of this episode and the suggestion that Marianne has been 'ruined' during this secretive visit to the estate.⁵⁵ But the most immediate risk to Marianne's reputation does not surface in relation to her virtue, as Elinor seems to fear.⁵⁶ Despite its suspicious circumstances, such social weight does the home visit carry that it is taken by Marianne and her immediate circle to be a tacit confirmation of her engagement to Willoughby, one that proves to be disastrously unfounded.⁵⁷

Crucially, Willoughby ensures that Marianne views his estate in private and therefore that any implicit confirmation of an intention to marry goes unwitnessed. By contrast, as Mrs Bennet no doubt knows, Jane must be seen to be in Netherfield to be more likely to secure an engagement to Bingley. As the failure of this visit is widely perceived, there is no ensuing presumption of a confirmed match. In *Mansfield Park*, Maria Bertram's incompatibility with

⁵³ There is much talk in the novel of the size of property and its corresponding suitability to married/unmarried people. Colonel Brandon, for instance, seems to fear Delaford and its living, are too small for the soon-to-be-married Edward. Mrs Jennings dismisses these fears: "'Aye, aye, the parsonage is but a small one,' said she, [...] 'and very likely *may* be out of repair; but to hear a man apologising, as I thought, for a house that to my knowledge has five sitting rooms on the ground-floor, and I think the housekeeper told me could make up fifteen beds! [...] It seemed quite ridiculous. [...]" (p. 273).

⁵⁴ Duckworth, p. 108.

⁵⁵ Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen's Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 37-40.

⁵⁶ Hinting that her discomfort over Marianne's visit is to do with the appearance of sexual impropriety, Eleanor chastises Marianne for having 'exposed [herself] to some very impertinent remarks' by traveling to and visiting Allenham with 'no other companion than Mr. Willoughby' (p. 69).

⁵⁷ It is subtly implied in the scene of revelation about the trip to Allenham that Marianne does think a marriage with her and Willoughby is near definite; she appears close to stating as much before Eleanor completes her sentence:

'[...] I am not sensible of having done anything wrong in walking over Mrs. Smith's grounds, or in seeing her house. They will one day be Mr. Willoughby's, and'...

'If they were one day to be your own, Marianne, you would not be justified in what you have done.'
She blushed at this hint; but it was even visibly gratifying to her' (p. 69).

her soon-to-be husband Rushworth is palpable at every stage of the Sotherton tour conducted in front of their immediate circle. Yet even for the incompatible, a home-viewing when conducted publicly is understood an incontrovertible precursor to matrimony. Though not in public, Marianne's tour is for her convincingly thorough, and Willoughby's deception consequently all the more complete. She tells Elinor:

‘[...] There is one remarkably pretty sitting room up stairs; of a nice comfortable size for constant use, and with modern furniture it would be delightful. It is a corner room, and has windows on two sides. [...] I did not see it to advantage, for nothing could be more forlorn than the furniture – but if it were newly fitted up – – a couple of hundred pounds, Willoughby says, would make it one of the pleasantest summer-rooms in England’ (pp. 69-70).

In choosing a favourite room and refurnishing it in her mind, Marianne has already begun to make some of the key decisions about the domestic interior that would go in to setting the foundations for married life. Willoughby has ensured that in allowing them to take place covertly these agreements are unsubstantiated; it is as though they did not happen. By showing her around Allenham, Willoughby enacts a private fantasy of a life with Marianne that he knows is unachievable. For Marianne to have behaved similarly and to have gone to Allenham without real investment in the occasion would be tantamount to having knowingly agreed to sexual impropriety. Choosing to believe in an unspoken engagement, for her Willoughby's abandonment results in not only social humiliation, but the erasure of an entire vision of a future life at Allenham.

The potential for the use of home-viewing as a tool for female manipulation is, nevertheless, most clearly showcased in *Northanger Abbey*. For General Tilney, showing Catherine Northanger Abbey is compensation for what he believes will be the disappointing experience of seeing Henry's more modest house at Woodston. By showing the estate to advantage, he wishes to woo her, and so her presumed wealth, on behalf of his son. Refusing Catherine's desire to view the estate on her own terms, General Tilney stubbornly tries to

shape her experience of the building. When Eleanor is about to lead Catherine towards Mrs Tilney's room he 'call[s] her hastily, and [...] angrily back' (p. 175). His tour takes her instead to 'the ancient kitchen of the convent' (p. 173), desiring her to observe the 'domestic arrangements' (p. 174) that would fall within a mistress' domain. General Tilney, in showing her the spaces and people that would come under female management, seeks to give Catherine a sense of the power she might have in the household. Essentially, throughout the Northanger tour we see a conflict between Catherine seeking Mrs Tilney, or the reality of what it would mean to be mistress of the estate, and the General trying to control her interpretation of what life for a woman in the Tilney family might be like. In portraying this conflict, Austen dramatises more overtly than in her other works the issues of female identity that lie under the surface of home-viewings.

At Woodston however Catherine is offered a real opportunity to weigh the suitability of a potential setting for her future life. As Pemberley represents Darcy, and Northanger Abbey for Catherine embodies the patriarchal evils of General Tilney, the idyllic abode at Woodston is emblematic of the more pleasant Henry.⁵⁸ Nonetheless as in Austen's other novels, the tour of this house proves to be more reliable and revealing in what it says about the heroine. At Northanger Catherine learns she would need to be a Mrs Tilney in the model of the former possessor of that name, fitting into the role of the feminine ideal General Tilney tries to place her in; but at Woodston there is the suggestion that she can be herself. The heroine has an easy affinity with his home, not needing to be forced in her admiration for it as she does with Northanger: 'she expressed her admiration [...] with all the honest simplicity with which she felt it'. Like Marianne with Allenham, she reveals her imaginative integration with life at Woodston through choosing a favourite room, exclaiming at one point: 'Oh! Why

⁵⁸ Henry, in his constant flaunting of education and patronising of Catherine, is not entirely free from association with the patriarchal tyranny that characterises his father's behaviour; he arguably, therefore, does not correspond fully with the perfection Catherine finds at Woodston.

do not you fit up this room, Mr. Tilney? [...] it is the prettiest room in the world!'. Yet as with the Abbey, this tour proves to be a fundamentally problematic episode. Catherine is again shown around by General Tilney while Henry seems altogether absent from the occasion. It is the General that asks 'for her choice of the prevailing colour of the paper and hangings'. Stopping herself from committing to the house any further 'nothing like an opinion on the subject could be drawn from' Catherine (p. 200). Though her overall experience is positive, with the tour not featuring a dialogue between the intended couple its negotiations prove to be hollow. The idea of marriage surfaces in Catherine's mind as she departs Woodston, showing the symbolic weight of situation has been impressed upon her, but she, and an engagement, are left unsettled.⁵⁹

While scenes of home-viewing are critical and almost occur by rule in Austen's works, there are nevertheless exceptions. Looking at the later novels, Melissa Sodeman has contended that Austen's fiction as a whole presents a move away from an interest in fixed, tangible homes towards a form of 'domestic mobility' in which the 'emotional gratification' associated with belonging to a home is found in the wider community. As Sodeman indicates, *Emma* and *Persuasion* (1818) in particular do not depict women's relationships with their potential marital homes in the same ways as in the earlier works. *Emma*, as Sodeman argues, 'revise[s] the model of house hunting established in Austen's earlier novels',⁶⁰ yet the space of home remains important. Although Emma does visit the home of her future husband in the novel (and has done so many times) she retains a degree of detachment from the property during these visits, undergoing none of the rituals, such as choosing a favourite room or imagining redecorating, that other women carry out. She observes it at a distance, noting its

⁵⁹ Revealing Catherine's uncertainty, Austen writes: 'so well assured was her mind on the subject of his expectations, that, could she have felt equally confident of the wishes of his son, Catherine would have quitted Woodston with little anxiety as to the How or the When she might return to it' (p. 201).

⁶⁰ Melissa Sodeman, 'Domestic Mobility in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 45 (2005), 787-12 (pp. 801, 791, 789).

‘respectable size and style of the building, its suitable, becoming, characteristic situation’ (p. 335) and vaguely that it has ‘one or two handsome rooms’ (p. 336). Refusing to acknowledge her own romantic life at this point, she cannot see Donwell Abbey as a potential residence. Throughout *Emma* the estate of Hartfield and Donwell are described as two polar institutions of Highbury, spearheaded by Emma and Mr Knightley. Indeed, the estates are almost bywords for the pair with Emma, fearing Mr Knightley is to marry Harriet, hoping that ‘Donwell and Hartfield lose none of their precious intercourse of friendship and confidence’ (p. 390). Emma, though remaining tied to her father, in staying at Hartfield at the end does not have to undergo any of the negotiations that would come with integration into Donwell Abbey. Already the established mistress of a household, Emma does not have to integrate with a new domestic space and all that it symbolises.

Going further than in *Emma*, Austen’s next novel *Persuasion* seems almost altogether to neglect the process of a heroine’s home-viewing, so much so that we do not learn anything about the house finally lived in by the reunited Anne and Wentworth. But with Austen having established repeatedly the significance of home-viewing for women in her other works, a lack of known household for Anne can only be a point of concern. While the novel does feature a tour of a home, it is uncomfortably for Anne one of Uppercross. Unwillingly subjected to viewing her childhood home adapted to the tastes of its new residents, the Crofts, this episode in the novel serves to reassert her dispossession. Her state of detachment from a stable household continues beyond the novel as we are informed: ‘Anne had no Uppercross-hall before her, no landed estate’.⁶¹ As with the circumstances that led to the Elliots losing Uppercross, Anne has no visible control in determining her future home. Omitting the inclusion of a confirmed household at the novel’s close reflects that, owing to his mode of employment and social status, property is of little interest to Wentworth. Yet the space of

⁶¹ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 234.

home remains emphatically central to Anne in her future life. At the end of the novel we find her in a situation of anxious retirement in which she waits for her husband as he undertakes his duties abroad. Leaving her final home unknowable only underscores her discontent: while Wentworth's absence and activity are emphasised, Anne is left in a state of not only relative confinement, but unresolved rootlessness.

Even with the absence of a clearly defined home as in *Persuasion*, then, houses seem on the surface to be reflective of the men that own them. As Harvey's work shows houses undoubtedly reflect men's social status and the heroine, in viewing a house and men's relationship with it, can learn about her future husband. With widows being a notable exception, the ownership of property and the importance of the house in connection to public reputation were largely male concerns. It is then entirely appropriate that the physical body of estates in the fiction should be broadly connected to male character. However, owing to the dominance of domestic ideology, Austen shows, the home inevitably has more significance in relation to women. Austen crystallises this significance in scenes of home-viewing. These episodes are for women foremost an introspective exercise in weighing their compatibility with a space that could define the rest of their lives. On the one hand, in moving about the house they can trace the physical boundaries within which they will occupy most of their time. On the other, they are able to gather information about the form of domestic lifestyle to which they must adhere and assess whether they are suited to it, or willing to become so.

Scenes of home-viewing then are far from being simply about the material merits of a household or the mercenary motives of female characters. Maria for instance does not care for the grandeur of Sotherton, but rather that it signals a step from one unsatisfying domestic identity to the next. Similarly Catherine prefers the modest Woodston to the Abbey with its status and connections to history (of which we have seen she is so dismissive). Elizabeth's viewing of Pemberley is most notoriously associated with mercenary motives. Yet, during the

tour Mrs Reynolds cannot interest Elizabeth in the material qualities of Pemberley such as ‘the dimensions of the rooms’ to which she would likely always refuse to be confined, or ‘the price of the furniture’ (p. 239). For women these tours are exercises in whether they can accept the culture of a household and what it means to take on the identity of its mistress. Facing no pressure from her relatives, Elizabeth, as the only one aware that Pemberley could be her future home, is able to assess it on her own terms. In knowing the estate, as has been widely noted, Elizabeth comes to understand Darcy better. Part of this understanding is her recognition that it is possible he could love her as she is and in spite of their class divide. In accepting Darcy’s view of her, Elizabeth is able to establish that in living at Pemberley she might have her best chance in marriage of acting with autonomy and as herself. Unlike other heroines forced to make concessions and adopt single rooms of self-identification, Elizabeth is seamlessly to become ‘mistress of Pemberley’ in its entirety.

Rooms of women’s own

Through the examples of home-viewing I have highlighted we observe potential brides frequently being drawn to particular rooms in their hoped-for homes that they might be able to call their own. These are rooms, women are led to believe, upon which they would be able to be the primary influence. Catherine Morland for example admires particularly the ‘prettily shaped’ ‘drawing-room’ at Woodston that waits, General Tilney suggestively says, ‘only for a lady’s taste!’. Asserting her preference for and strong connection to the room Catherine proclaims: ‘if it was my house, I should never sit any where else’ (p. 200). The unfortunate Marianne, as we have seen, similarly hones in on a ‘remarkably pretty sitting room up stairs’ that she, imagining herself working upon the space, pictures ‘with modern furniture’ (p. 69). These are moments that, in one sense, bespeak a tradition of the presumed female marital right to preside over the interior decoration in the eighteenth century. Women’s desire to

imprint themselves through their taste upon the home reflects their looking forward to the new freedoms they expect to have in marriage. Vickery and Wall have each shed light on these expectations, drawing upon Austen's fiction as evidence in their work. '[T]he domestic interior space became a sort of palette, offering more elasticity of self-expression and an invitation to design' in this period, writes Wall.⁶² Vickery adds that it was specifically women who were 'arbiters of taste' indoors. Whilst men might have control over the architectural structure of the home 'women fabricated the home and built their houses from the inside'. Both Vickery and Wall use the example of Mary Crawford to show that 'The female drive to stamp personality on interiors is [...] automatic'.⁶³ Surveying *Mansfield Park* and determining that it 'want[s] only to be completely new furnished' (p. 46), she evidences women's presumption of power when it comes to the home interior.

While in terms of the ability to decorate and furnish the domestic interior is thought to have been a woman's domain, Austen focuses her female characters' attention and hopes on a single room. By repeatedly isolating an individual room Austen implies the necessary containment of women's creative energy in relation to the home and a limit to looked-for freedoms. Being drawn willingly towards one room, female characters demonstrate an awareness of having to establish a nook for themselves within the home. Certain rooms in the Georgian-era home had automatic association with women. Of particular social importance, scholars suggest, was the private closet to which Austen's predominantly gentry-class women would most likely each have access (with the exception, initially, of Fanny). Of the multiple meanings assigned to the closet, their sanctioned purpose appears to have been as sites of religious devotion. Yet, unofficially, while the bedroom could serve these purposes at night, the closet also acted as places of 'solitude and retreat' in which a woman could 'indulge her

⁶² Wall, p. 186.

⁶³ *Behind Closed Doors*, pp. 130, 256, 86. Wall writes that 'Mary Crawford, eyeing Tom Bertram's prospects (before she finds herself falling for the younger brother), simply wants what everyone these days is wanting: to completely new furnish a house' (p. 177).

feelings unobserved'. In summary, Vickery writes that these rooms held a 'secular importance' as spaces 'for reading, writing, reflection and the defence of the boundaries of the self'.⁶⁴ By allowing women such access to privacy, the closet inevitably provoked social anxiety, owing especially to their facilitating the secluded reading of novels. In spite of these fears, Lipsedge contends that we learn from their depiction in novels that a 'private closet is [...] a room in which the heroine's need for an architectural place of her own is not only respected, but also cherished'.⁶⁵

According to one of domestic fiction's most notorious representations of the closet in *Pamela*, the characterisation offered by Lipsedge was not always accurate.⁶⁶ In the novel, Richardson, studying the politics of power in the home, conducts an almost forensic examination of the role of designated female-only spaces. For Pamela, the closet in Lincolnshire does to a degree serve as the kind of refuge that Vickery and Lipsedge describe. In being given a closet as a space for letter-writing, she finds a means of self-expression and, as she is forced to share a bed with Mrs Jewkes, it also affords her a sole space of privacy. As well as the closet being a space of psychological escape, its window also provides a literal means for Pamela's failed bid for freedom. At the same time, owing to the memory of Mr B.'s eavesdropping and subsequent attack on Pamela after hiding in Mrs Jervis's closet, the spectre of the closet haunts Pamela throughout the novel. Revealing her continued anxiety, she informs Mrs Jewkes that 'ever since an Affair of the Closet at the other House' she needs to 'go to the two Closets' adjacent to her bedroom to check they are empty before going to sleep. Moreover, with the windows of her closet being 'double-barr'd' after her failed

⁶⁴ *Behind Closed Doors*, pp. 196, 204, 205.

⁶⁵ Lipsedge, pp. 90-91, 87.

⁶⁶ There was, moreover, historical precedent for the depiction of domestic space in *Pamela*: 'Court cases map out the extremes of patriarchal oppression, in which men can be seen exercising all-encompassing control over women's use of space: imprisoning them, blocking access to certain rooms, driving them from room to room in terror or locking them out altogether', *Behind Closed Doors*, p. 203.

escape,⁶⁷ and Mr B's invasion of the closet to look for her letters, this room, though ostensibly Pamela's refuge, bears overtones of oppression and entrapment. While the closet at Lincolnshire is nominally hers, ultimately it is only a space of sanctuary and privacy as far as Mr B. allows it to be. As Varey argues: 'privacy is not liberty'; 'privacy and imprisonment are divided by the narrowest of lines', depending upon who is in possession of a key.⁶⁸ Unfortunately for Pamela, while she has a key, so does Mr B.; her privacy is at best fragile and at worst entirely illusory.

In exploring female-only rooms in the home, Austen seems purposefully to steer away from the closets and bedchambers favoured as settings by Richardson.⁶⁹ The cultural associations with each it seems, but with the closet in particular, were too ingrained for Austen to be able meaningfully to establish women's independent psychological relationships with these rooms according to her purposes. While at the end of *Pamela* Richardson returns the closet to being a space of tranquillity,⁷⁰ this conclusion sits uncomfortably after he has throughout the novel questioned women's ability to have a true space of privacy within the male dominion of the household. Following on from Richardson, Austen shows that women must use their ingenuity within the home to find true sanctuary and a space that affords them the ability to express their true selves. In the examples already mentioned, Marianne and Catherine opt for a sitting room and drawing room respectively as possible rooms of their own. These spaces are social, moving away from the associations of imprisonment so well established in relation to the closet, and show that these women, while stamping their

⁶⁷ Richardson, pp. 201, 178.

⁶⁸ Varey, p. 192.

⁶⁹ Austen uses the closet as a setting twice in brief moments in the fiction. In *Sense and Sensibility* she describes how, waiting anxiously for her mother to arrive, 'Elinor [...] moved into the adjoining dressing-closet and opened a window-shutter, to be satisfied of the truth' (p. 295). And in *Northanger Abbey*, Austen describes mockingly the emotional state of Mrs Morland as Catherine leaves for Bath: 'A thousand alarming presentiments of evil to her beloved Catherine from this terrific separation must oppress her heart with sadness, and drown her in tears for the last day or two of their being together; and advice of the most important and applicable nature must of course flow from her wise lips in their parting conference in her closet' (p. 19).

⁷⁰ Pamela is relieved that she can now experience: 'Thankfulness, Prayer and Meditation, in my newly presented Closet', Richardson, p. 469.

independent tastes on part of the house, also want to occupy an area fully integrated with wider domestic life. The choice of these rooms mirrors the decision making regarding the situation of the room of Charlotte Lucas who, as I will discuss, chooses a sitting room strategically located to avoid Mr Collins. Marianne and Catherine (as detailed in Chapter 2) both express a strong affinity with the outdoors and, tellingly, each opt for rooms affording them a good view of surrounding nature, connecting them as far as possible from within household confines to outside space.⁷¹

Alternatively, as with the unclearly defined East room in *Mansfield Park*, or the similarly ambiguous bower in *Catharine, or the Bower* (composed c.1792), Austen also invents altogether new types of room, or space. This section, focusing on Catharine's bower, Fanny's East room and Charlotte's sitting room in turn, looks in depth at the significance of women's individual and variously inventive spaces. Having illustrated how house tours are often tests of whether women can conform to a certain type of domesticity, here I will continue to examine physical spaces as materializing ideology. I argue that in having a specific room upon which primarily they have influence, women are breaking free from ideological confines symbolised by the house at large. Harvey has noted that '[m]en's accounts [of domestic life] pertain to the coherence of the house as a sound and coherent physical unit'.⁷² In creating alternative spaces through which to impress themselves upon the home, women interrupt this coherence and metaphorically resist being defined within the limits of the domestic ideal. Though they have to work within the physical boundaries of the house and its grounds, each of the women I discuss manages to a degree to carve out room for themselves.

⁷¹ The room Marianne chooses looks out 'On one side [...] across the bowling-green, behind the house, to a beautiful hanging wood, and on the other you have a view of the church and village, and, beyond them, of those fine bold hills that we have so often admired (pp. 69-70). And Catherine's favourite room at Woodston has 'windows reaching to the ground, and the view from them pleasant, though only over green meadows' (p. 200).

⁷² Harvey, p. 109.

Remodelling the home or its grounds as an expression of the self was a prevalent idea in the period in the form of the contemporary fad for improvement. Situating her in a ‘long tradition of anti-improvement literature’, Duckworth famously views Austen’s attitude to improvement, as revealed in *Mansfield Park*, as a sign of her conservatism and aversion to radical change. Henry Crawford, he maintains, with his desire to overturn Sotherton and the disruption he causes at Mansfield Park, is emblematic in the novel of Humphry Repton. According to Duckworth, Repton was a ‘controversial’ figure in landscape gardening of whom Austen does not approve. While Duckworth aligns Crawford with the period’s best-known improver, he is dismissive of Mrs Norris despite her mentioning that she is ‘something of an improver herself’. ‘[W]hile Mrs. Norris says she has done a ‘vast deal’’, he writes, ‘Henry Crawford is the true expert in this matter’.⁷³ Yet it is Mrs Norris that shows most enthusiasm for the practice and stakes a claim for expertise, stating that if possible she ‘should be always planting and improving, for naturally I am excessively fond of it’ (p. 51). Crawford in contrast is initially reticent on the matter and downplays his efforts: ‘In extent, it is a mere nothing – you would be surprised at its insignificance; and as for improvement, there was very little for me to do’ (p. 58). In being dismissive of Mrs Norris’ efforts whilst aggrandising the position of Crawford, Duckworth recreates the automatic affiliation between men and improving prowess that Austen sends up in the novel.

With Crawford instantly becoming the expert to whom Rushworth will look for guidance in the alterations to Sotherton, and with talk of Henry Tilney’s ‘genius’ (p. 200) being poised to act at Woodston, Austen highlights the ready opportunity men have radically to alter domestic space and its environs. In contrast, despite being its chief occupant, in her desire to improve her cottage, not for aesthetic vanity but for the comforts of life, Mrs Dashwood meets resistance at every turn. While the structures of other houses and estates can

⁷³ Duckworth, pp. 44, 39, 41-42, 51-52, 40.

be manipulated seemingly at a whim by men in the fiction, for her the walls of Barton prove persistently unyielding.⁷⁴ Even Lady Catherine, possessing the right combination of wealth, class, and as a widow, marital status, that almost seem to eclipse her gendered limitations is kept at a distance by Austen from full association with the idea of improvement. Despite presiding over what is implied to be an extensively improved estate, it is the efforts of ‘Sir Lewis De Bourgh’ (p. 158) that come to mind when Sir William Lucas observes the vast number of windows at Rosings. Furthermore Mr Collins, though entirely subservient to Lady Catherine, asserts that it is he who is responsible for ‘the care and improvement of his dwelling’ (p. 99). His patron can only ‘approv[e] all the alterations he had been making’ and contribute modestly to the interior: she ‘vouchsafed to suggest some [alterations] herself,—some shelves in the closet up stairs’ (p. 65). Aside from Mrs Norris – who it is shown worked alongside Sir Thomas and is, too, inhibited by spatial restraints⁷⁵ – Austen overall rejects the unrealistic model of improvement for women as a means of forging spaces of comfort. Female characters on the whole, she shows, must work within the material fabric of home they are given, finding ingenious ways to establish spaces of resistance and psychological autonomy.

The titular central character of Austen’s early work *Catharine, or the Bower* comes the closest of Austen’s heroines to achieving the kind physical alteration to domestic property carried out by improvers. Much as the structure of the bower she builds is, Mrs Percival’s threats of destruction suggest, rudimentary, so too does Austen’s creation of the idea of the bower serve as an early blueprint mapping out Austen’s concerns regarding women and

⁷⁴ Even though ‘add and improve was a delight to her’, Austen makes clear from the outset that Mrs Dashwood, on ‘an income of five hundred a year’ (p. 31) lacks the financial means to do so. Later in the novel, Willoughby as I have shown also passionately protests against her ‘design of improving the cottage in the spring’ (p. 73).

⁷⁵ Mrs Norris says: ‘It would be too ridiculous for me to attempt anything where I am now, with my little half acre. It would be quite a burlesque. But if I had more room, I should take a prodigious delight in improving and planting. We did a vast deal in that way at the parsonage; we made it quite a different place from what it was when we first had it. You young ones do not remember much about it, perhaps. But if dear Sir Thomas were here, he could tell you what improvements we made’ (pp. 51-52).

domestic space. Like most of her satire in the juvenilia, *Catharine* is more explicit than Austen's later works in setting out its theme of rebellion. In the text, Catharine makes the symbolic gesture of rejecting the bedchamber as a place of leisure and reflection. Austen writes that 'Solitude and reflection might perhaps have had the same effect in her Bed Chamber, yet [...] [she] was firmly persuaded that her Bower alone could restore her to herself'.⁷⁶ The bedchamber, largely neglected as a setting throughout the fiction, is here passed over as part of an altogether too inflexible domestic interior for Catharine's self-reflective purposes. Instead, her place of solace is the bower which, being outdoors, is not only apart from the main house and the restrictive ideology it represents, but also takes advantage of the full extent of female freedom that runs to the edge of the grounds. As well as its positioning, this shelter is significant because it was built independently by three girls, Catharine and her childhood companions Cecilia and Mary, on the basis of their friendship. Owing to its origins, the fabric of the bower is, for Catharine, interlaced with memories and emotion. Catharine explains this significance of the bower: when her aunt asks 'Why cannot you fancy this room an Arbour?', she replies 'Had this room been built by Cecilia and Mary, I should have valued it equally, Ma'am, for it is not merely the name of an Arbour, which charms me' (p. 202). The bower, Austen makes clear, with its ability to 'restore her to herself', is integral to Catharine's being, so much so that the interchangeability suggested by the title might even be taken literally.

Whilst allowing Catharine room to be herself, the bower is at its most rebellious in acting as a microcosm of an alternative to traditional domestic space. There are several indicators of the bower's role as this alternative. To the distress of her aunt, Catharine is reluctant to undertake key aspects of her training as a young woman such as learning

⁷⁶ Jane Austen, *Catharine, or the Bower* (1792) in *Catharine and Other Writings* ed. by Margaret Anne Doody and Douglas Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 186-229 (p. 187). All subsequent references are to this edition.

accomplishments. The bower however permits her to repurpose accomplishments, and in particular reading, for her own fulfilment. Austen writes that ‘Kitty found herself much sooner tired of Reading, Working, or Drawing, in Mrs Percival’s parlour than in her own Arbour’ (p. 190). But most importantly, in its construction, and continued existence in memory of the friendship on which it was built, the bower serves to preserve a time before Catharine’s friends had to succumb to their respective domestic fates. It encapsulates the idealistic future in which these girls had alternatives to the unwanted marriage and undesirable role as a companion that await Cecilia and Mary, and could even imagine having a shared home of their own. Such is the power of this imagined ideal that, owing to Catharine’s rejection of the domestic interior in favour of the bower, her aunt foresees an end to national stability. She frets that ‘every thing is going to sixes and sevens and all order will soon be at an end throughout the Kingdom’ (p. 222). If, as the work of More and Burke implies, houses bore strong associations with the security of conservative England that rested on the foundation of women fulfilling their domestic role, then Catharine and her companions have built a troubling alternative. Significantly, while the bower in tune with Catharine’s rebelliousness is a frequent restorative to her, it makes the conservative Mrs Percival ill: she ‘sate down in it last May to rest [her]self, and [has] never been quite well since’ (p. 202).

Like Catharine, Fanny becomes emotionally entwined with a room set apart from the main household in *Mansfield Park*. As outlined in the previous chapter, Fanny’s East room is an absence in relation to the domestic space and life of Mansfield. Unlike ‘the little white Attic’ (p. 11), it is not a room to which she is banished, but a room that she pragmatically makes use of to protect herself from the corrupt ideas and practices that she sees to be slowly engulfing the rest of the household. In choosing the East room, Fanny chooses a former site of education: it is the place where the Miss Bertrams were taught the kind of learning by rote and various other forms of accomplishment that were designed to make them fulfil the

conduct-book ideal of femininity. Like the bower, then, it is a developmental space with a history of female companionship. Duckworth writes that '[i]n contrast to the movement of furniture that is taking place elsewhere, Fanny preserves the East room as it always was [...] Her room becomes the still point in a moving house'.⁷⁷ As Duckworth suggests, the East room is set up in antithesis to the scene of preparations for the performance of the play. If the estate, as he argues, symbolises the status quo,⁷⁸ then the movement of the furniture signals a disruption by the play of a stable genteel existence. This disturbance threatens even to spill over into the East room with Miss Crawford making it a temporary site for her rehearsals. As a synecdoche of the Mansfield Park estate and the conservation of its values, the East room, Duckworth asserts, remains the same under Fanny's watch. However, when Fanny begins her occupation of the room, she brings her possessions with her, forming them into a 'nest of comforts' (p. 141), giving the sense of her building the room anew. In adopting it as her space of work and reflection and filling it with her own books, work boxes and gifts, Fanny in fact adapts the room to become a more effective space of honing the feminine ideal, it having failed the Miss Bertrams.

More than just physically altering the space, Fanny also appears to work her identity into the room.⁷⁹

she could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it.—Every thing was a friend, or bore her thoughts to a friend; and though there had been sometimes much of suffering to her—though her motives had often been misunderstood, her feelings disregarded, and her comprehension under valued; though she had known the pains of tyranny, of ridicule, and neglect, yet almost every recurrence of either had led to something consolatory; [...] and the whole was now so blended together, so harmonized by distance, that every former affliction had its charm (pp. 140-41).

⁷⁷ Duckworth p. 74

⁷⁸ '[T]he estate [is] a metonym of an inherited culture endangered by forces from within and from without', Duckworth, p. 71.

⁷⁹ She is described as having 'so naturally and so artlessly worked herself into it' (p. 140).

Fanny's emotional history becomes part of the fabric of the room through the complex significances held by the objects with which she lines its walls. In this episode, Austen offers some of the most minutely detailed description of a domestic interior given in the fiction. In doing so, we see how Fanny's inner life, like Catharine with the more vaguely-drawn bower, comes to be metaphorically represented by a portion of the domestic interior at Mansfield. Here, in this altered, intensely personal part of the house, Fanny hones the qualities required to bring the changes needed to preserve domestic tranquillity at Mansfield. It is a place of solace for Fanny in which she draws 'mental strength' to be able to resist corruptive forces such as the Crawfords. Among the objects she surrounds herself with are 'present upon present that she had received from' her cousins (p. 142). In keeping examples of the Bertrams' rarely shown goodness, it is as if she is somehow curating in miniature the future qualities that will be required from the estate's inhabitants. While Catharine acts out presiding over an alternative to traditional domestic space outside the walls of the main house, Fanny is first 'mistress' (p. 139) of the East room in order to rehearse being mistress of the whole of Mansfield Park. By making the East room a space immune to disruption, Fanny's form of spatial rebellion is ironically to resist the rebellion that occurs at Mansfield. Rather than developing a space exempt from domestic ideology, she establishes a preparatory space to allow for this ideology to be reinstated, under her influence, in a stronger form.

Whilst Catharine and Fanny preside over complex alternative households in miniature, Austen's simplest and most subtly ingenious instance of rebellion and preservation of identity through use of domestic space comes through Charlotte Lucas. Charlotte in both her approach to romance and domestic space shows an ability to accept boundaries and pragmatically manoeuvre within the limitations of a situation. For her, courtship and married domestic life are all about strategic physical positioning. It is owing to her convenient proximity to Mr Collins whilst he stays at Longbourn that she is able to take the step to

emerge as a willing bride. Later, physical positioning becomes key to her survival in marriage. Austen makes it clear that the arrangement of rooms at Hunsford has been Charlotte's doing and draws our attention to one particular aspect of this:

the chief of the time between breakfast and dinner was now passed by [Mr Collins] either at work in the garden, or in reading and writing, and looking out of the window in his own book room, which fronted the road. The room in which the ladies sat was backwards. Elizabeth at first had rather wondered that Charlotte should not prefer the dining parlour for common use; it was a better sized room, and had a pleasanter aspect; but she soon saw that her friend had an excellent reason for what she did, for Mr. Collins would undoubtedly have been much less in his own apartment, had they sat in one equally lively; and she gave Charlotte credit for the arrangement.

From the drawing-room they could distinguish nothing in the lane, and were indebted to Mr. Collins for the knowledge of what carriages went along, and how often especially Miss De Bourgh drove by in her phaeton [...] (p. 164).

For Charlotte, the domestic lot she has been granted at Hunsford means an entire life spent in subservience to the superior inhabitants of Rosings. In choosing a room that faces away from the road that allows communication with Rosings, she removes herself from the eyeline of Mr Collins (and in turn removes Mr Collins from her line of sight), who is always looking outwards to the grander estate. In finding a part of the house, and making it her own, that can bear no relationship to Rosings, she detaches herself from the subservient culture of Hunsford cultivated by Mr Collins and Lady Catherine. In this way she manages to exist within her own physical and psychological space. Through this careful positioning, Charlotte as far as possible removes Mr Collins from her sphere of daily existence. In observing Charlotte's marital life at Hunsford, Elizabeth is surprised to find that 'there was really a great air of comfort throughout, and by Charlotte's evident enjoyment of it, Elizabeth supposed [Mr Collins] must be often forgotten'. Elizabeth has to 'meditate' and apply her 'lively imagination' to try and comprehend how Charlotte executes the feat of not merely achieving a 'degree of contentment' (p. 155), but through the near erasure of Mr Collins, the illusion of having a home of her own.

This chapter has sought to explain the seeming paradox within Austen's work that despite being 'the novelist of home', and basing almost all of her action within its walls, very little of the domestic interior is described in her writing. Departing stylistically from her predecessors in the field of domestic fiction, she allows domestic description to become in effect another silence characteristic of her work. While the material detail of the home can justifiably be categorised as an Austenian silence, the author does not recreate it as a silence in women's lives in the same way as with political matters or the body. The fabric of the household is a silence for women to the extent that they are not permitted as far as men to enter into discourses of improvement or decision-making on a grand scale. But its discussion does not hold the same controversy as explicit talk of sexuality or issues like slavery would. Instead, I have shown, the physicality of the home is understated in order to emphasise the symbolic purpose of the house as representative of domestic ideology. Austen's metaphoric treatment of the home is shown throughout the fiction in the recurring theme of the conflation of women and houses. To demonstrate the problematic extent to which women are solely prepared for a domestic life, Austen shows women being discussed in a manner that renders them almost interchangeable with the home. Going further, she describes the characters that most seem to accord with the domestic ideal as though they are merged with the fabric of the household. According to this figurative paradigm developed by Austen, any divergence from domestic ideology must manifest somehow in the physical structure of the home.

Consequently, characters such as Catharine, Fanny and Charlotte demonstrate their discord with the prevailing philosophy of the estates they inhabit in rebellions expressed through disruptions to the domestic interior. They take advantage of their limited abilities to decorate, furnish, or in Catharine's case build small structures outdoors. By doing so these characters protest, not only symbolically the limitations imposed on them in terms of behaviour, but

male control over the materiality of the home, a space of more daily importance to female lives.

The types of space chosen to be occupied by Catharine, Fanny and Charlotte might suggest that the answer to female domestic discontent is for women to live in female-only homes. With Catharine, who relies emotionally upon a shelter built by three girls for their sole occupancy, and Charlotte who chooses a female-only drawing room as her place of respite, in particular, Austen seems to give a utopian air to the idea of a women-only home. Yet when this type of home is depicted in the fiction, it bears association with dispossession, uncertainty and unhappiness. With the Dashwoods' occupancy being a result of being ousted from their family home, Barton cottage is far from utopian. Despite being a female head of the household, Mrs Dashwood is strangely disempowered. As a tenant and limited by funds, she cannot improve the house and as a consequence exhibits a restlessness in relation to the cottage which suggests it can never be truly her home, though long-term she will most likely be its sole occupant. Lady Catherine, too, living alone with her daughter Anne and her companion exists in a state of dissatisfaction. Although financially and socially independent, she appears to feel incomplete, constantly desiring additional company and living in a state of odd symbiosis with Mr Collins. Finally, for the Bates household, and Miss Bates and Jane Fairfax in particular, the female-only home is a torturous kind of purgatory. Miss Bates, as a spinster, and Jane, unclear as to whether she is soon to be married or employed, both exist in precarious and uncomfortable states socially.⁸⁰ Overall, Austen shows that for women having a home of their own alone creates only the mock semblance of independence. The Dashwoods remain financially dependent and the De Bourghs will always rely upon others

⁸⁰ In *Persuasion* Mrs Smith and her frequent companion Nurse Rooke similarly form a kind of makeshift female-only home. Though supported by Nurse Rooke Mrs Smith does learn a manner of living independently, she too has been dispossessed and struggles consequently with illness and near-poverty.

socially to sustain them. What is more, unlike the symbolic home created by Catharine, the real women-only homes are never created by choice, because this choice did not exist. In creating these problematic scenarios of women living together in groups, and so outside of the conventions taught within domestic ideology, Austen indicates that there are cultural obstacles for women that the proprietorship of domestic space alone cannot resolve.

Chapter 5

‘[W]oman’s destiny’: Marriage, endings and the inappropriateness of the domestic ideal

There was nothing in all this either to astonish or interest, and it caught Emma's attention only as it united with the subject which already engaged her mind. The contrast between Mrs. Churchill's importance in the world, and Jane Fairfax's, struck her; one was every thing, the other nothing—and she sat musing on the difference of woman's destiny [...].¹

Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815)

‘And now, my good friends,’ continued Lady Delacour, ‘shall I finish the novel for you?’ [...]

‘But I hope you will remember, dear Lady Delacour,’ said Belinda, ‘that there is nothing in which novelists are so apt to err as in hurrying things toward the conclusion: in not allowing time enough for that change of feeling, which change of situation cannot instantly produce.’

‘That’s right, my dear Belinda; true to your principles to the last gasp. Fear nothing – you shall have *time* enough to become accustomed to Clarence. Would you choose that I should draw out the story to five volumes more? With your advice and assistance, I can with the greatest ease, my dear. A declaration of love, you know, is only the beginning of things [...].’²

Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1801)

Previous chapters in this thesis have focused on subjects often thought to be absent or only subtly present in Austen’s fiction. It may seem counter-intuitive, therefore, to turn in this chapter to the subject of marriage which is of course resolutely present in each of the novels. Nonetheless, what I will argue in this chapter is that Austen’s portrayal of marriage is just as troubled as the more obviously contentious issues of women’s relationship to the body, or politics for instance. Indeed, marriage is intimately connected to the issues explored earlier in the thesis. Ending each of her novels in marriage, Austen asserts that entering into this state is

¹ Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815) (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 359. All subsequent references are to this edition.

² Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1801) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 477.

finite for women. Henceforward their leisure, bodies, politics, and the space they inhabit will all be finally determined within the framework of the marital family and household.

Emma (1815) in particular is a novel fixated upon the topic of ‘woman’s destiny’. In fact, the term ‘destiny’ appears more frequently than in the rest of the novels combined. As the above epigraph demonstrates, for most of the novel Emma considers herself as a woman whose fate is already decided. She does not wish to marry and so situates herself amongst her friends as a detached observer, able to comment on and orchestrate their fates at will. Just as Emma can only seek to determine women’s futures within the arena of marital matchmaking, the term ‘destiny’ is used almost exclusively in the novel concerning marriage. The Westons have ‘wishes [...] respecting Emma’s destiny’ or, in other words, want her to marry Frank Churchill. It is ironic that, upon noting the contrasting situations of Mrs Churchill and Jane Fairfax, Emma is preoccupied with ‘musing on the difference of woman's destiny’. Despite her own vast difference in character to Jane, Emma arrives at the same narrative conclusion as her by eventually marrying. The novel teases the potential for the two to fulfil vastly different ‘destinies’, with Emma as an unmarried estate proprietor and Jane a governess, only for these possibilities to give way to conventional marriages. What is more, Jane having been once perceived as so strikingly different to Mrs Churchill, by marrying Frank actually becomes a second ‘Mrs Churchill’. The suggestive broadness, then, of the phrase attributed to Emma’s thoughts belies the narrowness of the reality of most middle-class women’s destinies.

By ending each of her novels with the marriage of its heroine Austen adapts the major trope of the eighteenth-century courtship novel. Using marriage as the narrative destination for heroines, the courtship novel recreated the only realistic ‘happy ending’ for the middle-class woman under prevailing domestic ideology. However, authors such as Richardson, Frances Burney and Maria Edgeworth were also reacting to a transformation in the meaning

of marriage that took place over the course of the century. Lawrence Stone and Ruth Perry have drawn attention to two of the key innovations surrounding marriage in the period.³ In the influential *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (1977) Stone argues that in the eighteenth century there was shift away from economics-based unions to the ‘companionate marriage’ founded instead on love.⁴ This implied ‘freedom [...] to choose’, as Hazel Jones observes, pertained more to the middling ranks than to families with titles. Regardless of rank, a choice in marriage partner was also more likely to apply to sons rather than daughters.⁵ Perry has since developed upon this claim to show that this evolution in marriage happened in tandem with the increased importance of the marital unit: ‘the biologically given family into which one was born was gradually becoming secondary to the chosen family constructed by marriage’. Engaging with these changing ideas of marriage, Burney, for example, shows a clear preference for matches based on mutuality but, Perry points out, struggles to accept the decline of ‘consanguineal ties’ in favour of the conjugal family.⁶ Regardless of how we read authorial opinion on these changes, in light of its heightened cultural significance the marriage-ending was securely a fixture of novels by the time Austen was writing. Married life itself however was rarely considered a subject worthy of narrative space. Writers in the main chose to show, as Edgeworth parodies, ‘only the beginning of things’.⁷ Though like her forerunners she consistently concludes her plots with

³ Hazel Jones also notes that this was a period of ‘great change’ in societal attitudes towards marriage, Hazel Jones, *Jane Austen and Marriage* (London: Continuum, 2009), p. 1.

⁴ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), p. 326. Stone’s argument has been refined in important ways by subsequent scholarship, with several scholars disagreeing with his suggestion that affective marriage led to greater equality for women. Perry, for instance, writes: ‘Stone’s male-centred fantasy assumes that educating women to be companions for men was the best thing that ever happened to them. As Stone posits the new marriage bargain, women of the landed gentry geared their lives to ‘being there’ as attentive wives and loving mothers for their families in exchange for being less subordinated to patriarchal domination – if you can call that being less subordinated’, Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 195. See also, Susan Moller Okin, ‘Women and the Making of the Sentimental Family’, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 11 (1982), 65-88.

⁵ Jones, pp. 1-2.

⁶ Perry, pp. 2, 406.

⁷ Christine Roulston makes this observation: ‘In the courtship model, marriage is what closes narrative down; it is the ending beyond which there is no story’, Christine Roulston, *Narrating Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England and France* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), p. 1. Her work explores examples from the period of novels that go against this trend and explore marriage beyond weddings. Jennifer Golightly also shows how radical novels depicted married life; see, Jennifer

marriage, Austen goes against this trend of disinterest in the state of married life. She offers not just a tale of the heroine's courtship but, I will show, a community-based portrait of marriage as a female 'ending'.⁸

The marriage plot, and the narrative arc it forces characters to fulfil, has been read as a crucial sign of Austen's conservatism when it comes to gender relations. One such proponent of this view is Armstrong who argues that Austen 'concentrated on the finer points of conduct necessary to secure a good marriage' in her novels.⁹ While Armstrong believes that Austen did challenge convention when it came to class stratification, Tony Tanner more fully makes the case for Austen's commitment to the status quo. For Tanner, marriage is important to Austen on both a personal and societal level. Marriage acts to 'ground' and situate her heroines [...] and allow them more fully to live out their proper *telos* or end as women'. Austen 'believe[d] in the values of her society; but she saw that those values had to be authentically embodied and enacted if that society was to survive: '[t]he good marriage is [...] indispensable for the renewal of society'. Though Tanner sees Austen's novels as endorsements of marriage, he concedes that there is a degree of 'irony and covert inconclusiveness (and even overt uncertainty) in Jane Austen's novels and conclusions'. The endings, he suggests, show that her characters are 'not so easily or happily accommodated to 'social systems' as some critics assert'.¹⁰

The notion that there might be a contradictory message in Austen's ironic endings has been advanced by numerous scholars, perhaps most notably Karen Newman and Ashley

Golightly, *The Family, Marriage, and Radicalism in British Women's Novels of the 1790s: Public Affection and Private Affliction* (Lewisberg: Bucknell University Press, 2012).

⁸ While I look primarily at marriage in relation to female characters, Michael Kramp has highlighted the critical need to address the subject of men and marriage in the fiction. See, Michael Kramp, *Disciplining Love: Austen and the Modern Man* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2007).

⁹ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 141.

¹⁰ Tony Tanner, *Jane Austen* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), pp. 10, 11.

Tauchert. Both scholars observe that traditionally ‘feminist criticism has pointed out that the ‘fairy-tale’ heterosexual love endings of Austen’s novels are ‘politically suspect’, and fail to follow through the sharp critique of the real ‘social problems’ facing her heroines’.¹¹ Newman adds that these critics ‘complain that Austen's endings, her happily-ever-after marriages, represent a decline in her protagonists’; the originally subversive Elizabeth Bennet for instance is seen ‘to dwindle by degrees into a wife’. Critics who have put forward such arguments, however, seem to ignore the abrupt tonal shift in the narration that comes with Austen’s all-too-neat endings. Newman addresses this omission, arguing that Austen’s endings should not be taken as straight-forward summaries of the novels’ messages. In reading Austen’s endings, she argues, ‘we find an ironic self-consciousness that emphasizes the contradiction between the sentimentality of Austen's comic conclusions and the realism of her view of marriage and of women's plight’. For Newman, Austen in no way ‘succumbs uncritically to the ‘rewards’ her culture allotted women’ or, indeed, to the marriage plot itself.¹² More recently, Tauchert has also looked at the disjunction between the ‘unremitting realism’ of Austen’s plots and the ‘idealised marriages’ with which they end. Tauchert argues that with her novelistic resolutions Austen makes a powerful claim for female agency. She reminds us that in the novels it is usually owing to transformative moments of the heroine’s self-realisation that unlikely marriages can occur. Heroines’ ‘subjective enlightenment’ eventually allows for a ‘unity in apparently dichotomous possibilities: marriage that is economically and ethically perfect *is* romantic’. Dismissing the tendency to write off Austen’s ending as an ‘aesthetic cop-out, or ironic deflation of the highly credible realism otherwise claimed by the works’, she reads Austen’s fiction as defiantly optimistic about ‘the possibility of a happy ending’ for women of the period.¹³

¹¹ Ashley Tauchert, *Romancing Jane Austen: Narrative, Realism, and the Possibility of a Happy Ending* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 18.

¹² Karen Newman, ‘Jane Austen Makes Sense of an Ending’ *ELH*, 50 (1983), 693-710 (pp. 693, 694, 704, 695).

¹³ Tauchert, pp. 6, 158, 165, 167, 25, 164.

While Tauchert and Newman are both right in suggesting that Austen's endings should not be read as nullifying any of the social criticism that precedes them, certain aspects of their readings are problematic. Principally, I disagree with Tauchert that with the endings 'we are invited to shrug off the shadow of the inevitability of tragedy in the light of a final comedic narrative inversion'.¹⁴ We only have to look at the unsettling conclusion of *Persuasion* (1818), as I have previously explored, to expose the flaws in this reading. Instead I argue, like Newman, that the endings ought to be read 'not as statements of romantic harmony or escape, but in the context in which [Austen] placed them'. Newman suggests that Austen's endings create disunity in the novels: 'The happy ending of an Austen novel gives it an apparent unity that is false, for meaning is produced not so much by resolution, but by means of oppositions and contradictions'.¹⁵ While there may not be 'resolution' for heroines in the endings, as I have shown throughout this project, there is a clear unity of purpose in Austen's novels. The obvious irony of Austen's conclusions brings the critique of cultural restraints upon women that has been consistently woven through the narrative abruptly to the surface. In making this claim here, and rather than only seeking to 'mak[e] sense of [Austen's] ending[s]', I use the direction given by the clear message of the endings to understand more widely Austen's approach to marriage as the presumed path for all middle-class women. In doing so I will address not only the romantic conclusions of heroines but depictions of marriage more broadly. Departing from these scholars, I consider marriage as being but one of the ways women were confined alongside constraints placed upon their leisure time, bodies and political knowledge as part of Austen's wider critique of domestic ideology.

¹⁴ Tauchert, p. 167.

¹⁵ Newman, pp. 708, 699.

This chapter examines the persistent threat in Austen's novels of the thwarting of the domestic ideal, either through a failure to marry or the unsuitability of married life, and the potential for female crisis implicit in this. First, I look at a sample of the vast array of unmarried and already-married female characters with which Austen fills her novels. In depicting the anxiousness of unmarried women alongside the dissatisfaction of their married counterparts, Austen exposes the difficulties of marriage as a universal model. I will then revisit each of Austen's central female protagonists in light of these portraits of marriage amongst secondary characters. Revising the traditional view of Austen's courtship plots, I argue that Austen creates marital uncertainty in all of her novels in order to broach the subject of the societal danger for women in not marrying. Through difficulties caused by Emma's disinclination to marry, Fanny's poverty and Elizabeth's stubbornness, Austen establishes the narrative conditions for a critique of women's narrow options for their futures. Drawing mainly upon Austen's most patently ironic conclusions in *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Northanger Abbey* (1818) I will lastly turn to endings. In driving her narratives repeatedly towards marital unions Austen recreates the inevitability of marriage if women are to have a happy ending within the bounds of domestic ideology. Rather than simply bowing to convention Austen ends with the event of marriage to emphasise that for women marriage is, in effect, 'the end'. Women have made their most crucial decision of adult life and their futures are by and large sealed. Narrated with a tonal impatience that reveals the author's frustrations, Austen's endings enact a troubling final containment of each heroine within the domestic vision the author has relentlessly scrutinised.

Married and unmarried women: the universal problem with marriage

As the intense female preoccupation surrounding the issue of marriage in Austen's novels attests, there was little scope for women to form a socially-permissible identity outside of

marriage in the period. With the alternatives of work and life as an unmarried ‘spinster’ each seen as a failed deviation from the middle-class domestic ideal, marriage, as Austen reflects, represented women’s best chance for a contented adult life.¹⁶ As I explored in Chapter 1, a seemingly inevitable future as a wife was therefore one for which women of this class were exclusively – and, as Mary Wollstonecraft criticises in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), poorly – prepared through training in accomplishments. This part of the chapter seeks to re-examine some of Austen’s secondary female characters in light of this shared pressure of a narrow female destiny. To begin with I will look at various examples of unmarried women in Austen’s fiction. Characters such as Miss Bingley, Elizabeth Elliot and Anne Steele, although often ignored entirely or dismissed as comedic or villainous, crucially embody the stress of the possibility of non-fulfilment of the goal of matrimony. Then I will turn to the married women of Austen’s novels who are often similarly dismissed. Mrs Bennet and Mrs Palmer are each in effect would-be heroines of the pre-narrative past who have had already had their ‘endings’. As the situations of these women reveal, there can be just as much at stake personally post-marriage as there is in the uncertain life of a single woman. Finally, I will show that while vastly different in their manifest forms of unhappiness, illness is revealingly the thread that unites the unmarried and married women in the fiction.

Although too young to be considered a spinster, Miss Bingley nevertheless traces a clear map of the concerns of the unmarried genteel woman through her behaviour. For reasons that go beyond petty rivalry, she is accomplishment and body-obsessed. In discussion at Netherfield, she revealingly sets impossibly high standards for what should be deemed

¹⁶ Mary-Catherine Harrison notes that in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century there was an ‘increasing stigmatization of women who did not marry, as evidenced in the etymology of the term *spinster*. *Spinster* initially referred to the ‘laudable ‘industry of female manufacturers’ but became, with the diminished value of women’s labour in spinning, weaving, and other domestic industries, a term of opprobrium for unmarried women’, Mary-Catherine Harrison, ‘Reading the Marriage Plot’, *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6 (2014), 112-31 (p. 117). Perry also points out that ‘the strengthening of marriage as the foundational tie for kin relations meant that persons who remained outside marriage, especially widows or spinsters, experienced new levels of social isolation and impoverishment’, p. 36. On attitudes to women and work see, Jennie Batchelor, *Women’s Work: Labour, Gender and Authorship, 1750-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) and Armstrong, pp. 85-86.

‘accomplished’ in a young woman. Seeking to draw attention to her physique, she uses herself as a barometer when discussing height with Darcy and by ‘tak[ing] a turn about the room’ puts her figure intentionally on display.¹⁷ Her fixation with the body and skills of not only herself, but Elizabeth and Georgiana, betrays an anxiety that if she is not married not only will the purpose of her accomplishments go unfulfilled but so too will her physical attractions have failed. While, if she did not marry she would not be financially destitute as the Bennet sisters would, the life of a single woman living with a brother’s family would by no means be comfortable.¹⁸ Her sister Mrs Hurst shadows her throughout the novel both as a reminder of what is expected of her and of the type of husband she must avoid. Given the undesirability of Miss Bingley’s situation, it would not take much of a shift in the narrative perspective of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) to paint Elizabeth as the smug love rival and her as the unfortunate neglected long-term admirer of Darcy. Moments such as Miss Bingley’s failed bid to achieve a connection with Darcy by reading from the second volume of his book might be read, then, to be tragic rather than laughable. While it is a mistake to write Miss Bingley off as an unlikeable foil to the heroine, it is also paradoxically Austen’s intention that she should be read as such. In exposing the situation of unmarried women she recreates the disdain in her readers societally felt towards those who – however necessarily – manoeuvred, manipulated and deceived in order to achieve their only permissible life goal. As Deborah Ross observes, ‘[m]arriage in Austen’s novels is [...] the ‘career’ most real women of the time had to look forward to’.¹⁹ Miss Bingley understandably therefore approaches her relationship with Darcy with a career-like ruthlessness.

¹⁷ Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 38-39, 55. All subsequent references are to this edition.

¹⁸ On ‘[t]he mortification of spinsters in the households of kin’, see Amanda Vickery, *Behind Closed Doors: At Home in Georgian England* (London: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 188-92. See also the chapter on spinsters in Jones, pp. 173-92.

¹⁹ Deborah Ross, *The Excellence of Falsehood: Romance, Realism, and Woman’s Contribution to the Novel* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1991) p. 169.

More easily overlooked than Miss Bingley, *Sense and Sensibility*'s (1811) Anne Steele provides a commentary on the emotional state of a woman facing the reality of being unmarried beyond her prime. Possessing a manic talkativeness akin to that of Austen's later character Miss Bates, Miss Steele who is 'nothing to admire' being 'nearly thirty, with a very plain and not a sensible face', presents the unsuccessful alternative to her younger sister Lucy, 'a considerable beauty'. Her desire to generate gossip about herself shows a wish to align herself with Lucy and the Dashwoods and deny her very different situation. 'Miss Steele wanted only to be teased about Dr. Davies to be perfectly happy', however she is most often denied 'raillery on the subject', being left 'to bestow [it] on herself'. She wants to show that she is still part of the conversation regarding young women and their romantic prospects. Her relentless discussion of 'smart beaux' evidences in her desperation a lack of regard for social decorum that even her sister derides and seeks to quell: "Lord! Anne," cried her sister, 'you can talk of nothing but beaux'.²⁰ Amanda Vickery explains that it was improper for genteel women to be seen to be courting offers; they only had the 'right to refuse'. With her tales of multiple men and specific interest in their 'smart' appearances, Miss Steele is a long way from '[d]emure reticence'.²¹ She affects an almost libertine attitude that shows she has decided, with little choice, to take her marital – and so sexual – destiny into her own hands. Her obsession with men's looks shows a privileging of the body that echoes that of Marianne discussed in Chapter 2. With marriage the only permissible path to acting on female sexuality,²² there is a looming anxiety that her desire will never find a legitimate outlet. Tellingly, despite being recurrent throughout and having long portions of dialogue in the

²⁰ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) (London: Penguin Books, 2008), pp. 116, 219, 232, 119. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²¹ Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (1998) (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 56.

²² Harrison explains that '[f]or women, the idealization of marriage emerged alongside its twin ideology, the condemnation of sexuality outside of matrimony. [...] Women were increasingly defined as nonsexual, nondesiring, and nonsinful, with the attendant belief that women who did exhibit sexual desire or behaviour outside of marriage were 'fallen' and, as such, irredeemable', p. 118.

novel, Anne is invisible at the close of *Sense and Sensibility* which is primarily concerned with marriage. An irritant to the heroines and other characters alike, her ongoing status as a ‘redundant woman’ is cemented by the ending’s silence.²³

Far more self-consciously than even Miss Steele, Elizabeth Elliot at the age of ‘nine-and-twenty’ is said to be approaching ‘the years of danger’ in *Persuasion*. Though like Miss Bingley she is for much of the novel portrayed in a villainous light, the opening of the novel goes to great lengths to elicit our sympathy for her. While her sister Anne is to be pitied for nearing the age at which one might be termed a spinster and for past romantic disappointment, both of these misfortunes apply to a greater degree to Elizabeth. Austen emphasises how much her age weighs upon her mind with the repetition of ‘thirteen’, the number of years Elizabeth has dealt with the exposure of being the unwed female head of the household. Though her proposed marriage to Mr Elliot was to be one of convenience, she was hurt by the rejection because she ‘had liked the man for himself’. With ‘no habits of utility abroad, no talents or accomplishments for home’ she now exists in an excruciating state of increasing dejection and fixates on her sole option of ‘being properly solicited by baronet-blood’.²⁴ Coming before the narrator’s attentions shift to the heroine, the detailing of Elizabeth’s history and mind-set serves as an explanation for her characteristic meanness throughout the novel.²⁵ Perhaps most revealing about Elizabeth is her interaction with her father’s ‘book of books’ (p. 8). For Sir Walter, the Baronetage is the place he expects to record a union through which Elizabeth will uphold family reputation and secure its financial future. Contending with this lifelong expectation and an awareness of her age (about which her father seems to have forgotten), Elizabeth is repelled by a book that suggests that without

²³ ‘Along with *spinster* and *old maid*, the expression ‘redundant woman’ became common in the 19th century [...]. As the expression suggests, if a woman were not part of the marriage plot, she was viewed as superfluous’, Harrison, p. 117.

²⁴ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), pp. 8, 10. All subsequent references are to this edition.

²⁵ At the end of Chapter 1 Elizabeth ‘proposed these two branches of economy: to cut off some unnecessary charities, and to refrain from new-furnishing the drawing-room; to which expedients she afterwards added the happy thought of their taking no present down to Anne, as had been the usual yearly custom (p. 11).

marrying her life as a woman is incomplete. Mentioned as one of a list of ‘issue[s]’ only as ‘Elizabeth, born June 1, 1785’ (p. 5), in being a single woman she does not warrant an individual entry, or even a full name. Without marrying, she will be left in relative anonymity as one of a succession of ‘Marys and Elizabeths’ (p. 6), all but erased from her family’s history.

While the social unease of these characters owing to their single status is palpable, it is in fact the married Mrs Bennet who reveals the most about the critical yet fraught nature of a woman’s search for a husband. Despite being married with children and so having ostensibly fulfilled the requisite aims of the domestic ideal, marriage still occupies all of Mrs Bennet’s time and thoughts. Marriage, she shows, is not a problem that disappears for women. With a string of daughters all threatened with financial ruin and dispossession, her problem has in fact increased fivefold. Mrs Bennet is caught in the trap of knowing the difficult circumstances of an unmarried woman, and yet under the authority of her husband being inhibited in her ability to act on this understanding. As Jill Heydt-Stevenson notes ‘Mrs Bennet is the only character ‘with the slightest notion of the sheer desperation of the world’’. The dual weight of the knowledge of her daughters’ need to secure good husbands and the constraint under which she must operate manifests in inappropriate manic behaviour and incapacitating fits of ‘nerves’ (p. 7).²⁶ Critics struggle with what they see as Austen’s evident disdain towards Mrs Bennet and yet apparent mirroring of her behaviour through narratives similarly concerned with matchmaking.²⁷ However, as with Elizabeth and others, Austen

²⁶ Jill Heydt-Stevenson, *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 94. Though arguing that she does so in a knowingly rebellious fashion, Heydt-Stevenson similarly notes ‘Mrs. Bennet’s lack of financial and decision-making power and her subsequent displacement of her ensuing frustration into nervous fits’, p. 98.

²⁷ Harrison for example writes that ‘the only narrative machinations in the novel are Austen’s own; she is the one who ‘arranges’ for marriages for the girls that are both affectively and economically fulfilling. Having distanced herself from Mrs. Bennet throughout the novel, in its conclusion Austen performs an ideological sleight of hand. She endorses marriage for love and nonetheless retains wealthy husband as reward’, p. 122. And Perry notes that while ‘[w]e may laugh at Mrs. Bennet’s obsessive concern with marrying her daughters [...] Austen’s plot vindicates Mrs. Bennet’, p. 220.

paints a psychological picture that sympathetically illustrates why Mrs Bennet behaves as she does.

Mr. Bennet was so odd a mixture of quick parts, sarcastic humour, reserve, and caprice, that the experience of three and twenty years had been insufficient to make his wife understand his character. *Her* mind was less difficult to develop. She was a woman of mean understanding, little information, and uncertain temper. When she was discontented she fancied herself nervous. The business of her life was to get her daughters married [...] (p. 7).

Compared to Mr Bennet, his wife is described in relatively simple terms. With a poor education and a myopic concern with marriage driven by a desire to preserve her daughters and herself, she represents plainly the situation of the married middle-class woman. Reduced to this unlikeable role of acting according to a necessary monomania for marriage she exposes this female burden. Most often in the novel, it is simply because Mrs Bennet dares to speak and acts so openly to avoid the danger of a bad marriage or spinsterhood that she is maligned and mocked. Mrs Bennet, Austen suggests, requires our sympathy; laughter is to be directed instead at the ridiculousness of the dictates of the marriage marketplace that she is forced repeatedly to navigate.

Whilst Mrs Bennet embodies this absolute drive towards marriage for women, she also showcases the abject dissatisfaction marriage can bring. Sympathy has not traditionally gone the way of Mrs Bennet in observations regarding her marriage. In the *Critical Review* in 1813, the anonymous reviewer appears to sympathise with Mr Bennet who has married one of a chorus of '[m]any [...] silly women' in *Pride and Prejudice* and as a result feels 'the ill effects of an unequal marriage'. Having to suffer losing 'all real affection, confidence, and respect [...] towards his wife' he graciously 'contrives not to be out of temper with [her] follies'.²⁸ Likewise implicitly taking the side of Mr Bennet, Julia Kavanagh announces

²⁸ 'Pride and Prejudice, a Novel, in Three Vols', *The Critical review, or, Annals of literature*, 3 (1813), 318-24 (pp. 325, 319).

damningly: '[f]oolish Mrs. Bennet was born, and foolish she will die'.²⁹ While criticism of Austen has moved on since these early reviews, the characterisation of Mrs Bennet seems largely resistant to progress, with Marilyn Butler similarly declaring her to be 'foolish',³⁰ and Claudia Johnson dismissing her as 'ludicrous'.³¹ Uncomfortably, all of these comments on some level express contempt towards Mrs Bennet owing to her lack of intellect. The Bennets are a paradigmatic couple in terms of the gendered division of knowledge with which, as I showed earlier in the thesis, Austen was much concerned. It is Mr Bennet who through persistent mocking and apparent disinterest in 'enlarging the mind of his wife' makes Mrs Bennet appear so laughable or indeed 'foolish'. Exaggerating their intellectual difference, he holds his superior learning up against her lack of education and experience to expose her in cruel manner. The novel in fact appears to condemn Mr Bennet who, in finding 'amusement' in his wife's 'ignorance and folly', is thought even by his admiring daughter Elizabeth to enact a 'continual breach of conjugal obligation and decorum' (p. 228).

Though he acts as though he is punishing Mrs Bennet for their shared discontent, it was Mr Bennet who in accordance with custom was the principle agent in their decision to marry. Having been 'captivated by youth and beauty, and that appearance of good humour, which youth and beauty generally give', he 'married a woman whose weak understanding and illiberal mind, had very early in their marriage put an end to all real affection for her'. Mr Bennet valued Mrs Bennet only for her looks, then ceased to value her when her appearance was no longer sufficient to sustain his interest. We do not discover what Mrs Bennet had liked about her husband personally, if anything, presumably because it did not matter. Although we learn most about Mr Bennet's marital regret, it is he that possesses the ability to escape his marriage as far as possible. Mr Bennet is able to distance himself physically and

²⁹ Julia Kavanagh, *English Women of Letters: Biographical Sketches* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1862), p. 259.

³⁰ Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 217.

³¹ Claudia L. Johnson, *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 88.

mentally: '[h]e was fond of the country and of books; and from these tastes had arisen his principal enjoyments' (p. 228). Apparently keen to avoid any more decisions in this area, he leaves his wife to perpetuate the cycle of marriage through her daughters. Tanner argues that 'Mrs Bennet, incapable of reflection' is '*only* aware of [...] marriage, not as a meeting of true minds but as a disposing of redundant daughters'.³² Far from being redundant, her daughters hold the key to her future livelihood and shelter. Although caught in the frenzy of this desperation there are hints that Mrs Bennet, all too aware of the realities of marriage without a meeting of minds, has learned from her own misfortune. Being charmed by Wickham, Mr Collins and Bingley, but holding a grudge against Darcy for slighting Elizabeth, she has learnt (albeit somewhat misguidedly) to apply a degree of care regarding personality when choosing a partner.

The backgrounds of the novels are rich with examples that seem to echo the warning the Bennets set forth. In this same novel, Mrs Hurst has 'married a man of [...] fashion' (p. 18) 'who lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards' (p. 35). She tellingly has no objection to waking him up when the party wish to play music, there is no narrated interaction between them in the novel, and they clearly do not wish to live independently together and extract themselves from the Bingley family circle. Numerous others including Sir John and Lady Middleton, Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram, and of course Charlotte and Mr Collins all feature on the spectrum of marital unhappiness or unsuitability created by Austen. The brief attention they are paid is not to be read as authorial disinterest or dismissiveness, but rather suggests the commonplace nature of such relationships.

The most disturbing example of this kind of marriage is that of the Palmers. With Mr Palmer's 'bias in favour of beauty' leading him to become 'the husband of a very silly

³² Tanner, p. 124.

woman', they darkly mirror the Bennets' relationship. Like Mr Bennet or Sir Thomas, Mr Palmer sidelines his wife, choosing, by reading the newspaper, to escape to a world of political knowledge from which she is largely excluded. Rather than responding mockingly to his wife, or acceding to her wishes eventually, as Mr Bennet at least does, Mr Palmer prefers ignoring her entirely. In the face of her husband's 'studied indifference, insolence, and discontent' (p. 109) Mrs Palmer is left in reaction to fill the silence with inappropriate laughter: "Mr. Palmer does not hear me," said she, laughing, "he never does sometimes. It is so ridiculous!" (p. 104). In one of the few critical accounts of Mrs Palmer, Heydt-Stevenson rightly observes that '*her* insensate reactions [are] worrisome'. She goes on to argue that 'Mrs. Palmer maintains a lot of power by laughing' and that like Austen, her 'aggressive comedy displaces patriarchal control over women's lives'. If Mrs Palmer is seeking to unsettle and provoke her husband, her lack of success makes it difficult to accept that she 'holds a certain authority over' him.³³ Her nonsensical eruptions instead show her to be as the novel states 'thoroughly goodnatured' and 'determined to be happy' (p. 109). Suggesting that the Palmers might have quite a different relationship in private, for most of the novel Mrs Palmer, like Mrs Bennet in the early years of her marriage, is pregnant. As a rare explicitly pregnant character in the fiction, Mrs Palmer provides a stark comment on the female body and the role of sex in marriage. The materiality of the body, as I have previously shown, is mentally obscured for women in the years leading up to marriage through schooling in femininity. Upon marriage, Mrs Palmer has become, under the authority of her husband, abruptly all body. To him, she is a sexual body and producer of heirs (their child is notably a boy) but intolerable and erased as far as possible where her mind is concerned.

As the examples of Mrs Palmer and Mrs Bennet testify marital happiness seems to figure little in the decision to have children in Austen's fiction. After marriage, motherhood

³³ Heydt-Stevenson, pp. 63, 64.

was the almost certain next step for women in fulfilling the domestic ideal.³⁴ Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to go into the issue in depth, broadly Austen presents an ambivalent picture of this near certainty of motherhood. Lady Middleton, on the one hand, finds solace and a purpose in caring for her children. Embarrassed by the ‘boisterous mirth’ of Sir John and finding no pleasure in the company of other adults, she is ‘roused to enjoyment only by the entrance of her four noisy children’ (p. 36). Mary Musgrove is of the opposite view and pays the full price of unsuitable female destiny in being in an unsatisfactory marriage and having a complete disinterest in parenthood. Mary Margaret Benson argues that Austen’s novels gear their central characters towards happy marriages and motherhood, preparing them throughout to go on to correct their parents’ mistakes.³⁵ Yet the fiction presents a view of maternity that is far more complex than Benson’s claim. The reactions of the Dashwood sisters towards Lady Middleton’s children, for instance, suggest the feelings shown by Mary might extend further afield. By no means as ‘distractedly fond of children’ as the Steeles apparently are, Elinor confesses that she ‘never think[s] of tame and quiet children with any abhorrence’ (p. 118). Furthermore, Emma’s initial desire not to marry precludes the possibility of having any legitimate children and implies a similar disinclination towards motherhood. Undoubtedly, the trope of problematically absent mothers in Austen’s fiction, as noted by Benson and others,³⁶ suggests that Austen places great value on the role of the mother. But the examples of bad mothers, or women such as Mrs Price or Mrs Morland unable to cope with an abundance of offspring, suggests prescribed motherhood was unsuitable as a universal model for women’s lives.

³⁴ According to Perry: ‘[t]he economic pressures on women to marry [...] undercut women’s independence, directing them towards marriage and motherhood’. She also notes the importance of motherhood which was ‘increasingly sentimentalized’ in the period; ‘maternal feeling was assumed to be powerful and instantaneous’, pp. 334-35, 340. Vickery’s research shows that genteel women’s ‘lives resembled a stately progress through recognized stations – maid, wife, mother’, *Gentleman’s Daughter*, p. 8.

³⁵ Mary Margaret Benson, ‘Mothers, Substitute Mothers, and Daughters in the Novels of Jane Austen’, *Persuasions*, 11 (1989), 112-24.

³⁶ See for instance, Perry, p. 347.

Illness acts as an index of personal crisis in the novels relating to the narrowness of this expected fate for women to become a wife and mother. In varied forms, illness besets unmarried women. This sickly Anne De Bourgh, for example, faces the responsibility as Lady Catherine's only child of continuing family lineage. Moreover the spinster Miss Bates in her nervous garrulity and Jane Fairfax, uncertain about her future, also present signs of illness. These characters are united with married women such as the constantly-afflicted Mary Musgrove, the nerve-stricken Mrs Bennet and the near-hysterical Mrs Palmer all of whom believe themselves to be or could be perceived as unwell. As much as the latter group especially might be viewed merely as humorous, in confronting readers with the notion of illness Austen forces us not to dismiss them. Of these characters, those who do appear to be physically ill, such as Jane or Anne, seem to manifest internally the strains of an uncertain future in which they are at risk of not marrying and so falling outside of the domestic ideal. For Austen's married women the authenticity of their illnesses are however less clear. Nervous disorders, of which Mrs Bennet complains explicitly, but the symptoms of which are also characteristic of Mary Musgrove,³⁷ were seen in their nature to be ambiguous. These disorders were viewed as "functional" conditions, a term which is sometimes used [...] to designate disorders which have behavioural, and therefore 'real' symptoms, but for which no organic cause can be discovered'. Regarding the veracity of a nervous patient's illness, Wiltshire makes the point about Mr Woodhouse that if his nervous symptoms are imagined, he suffers from extreme hypochondria and so would be diagnosed today as mentally ill.³⁸ While we have to be careful using modern diagnoses, this manner of perceiving Mr Woodhouse is nonetheless useful. Whether these characters are genuinely ill or not, they are

³⁷ An 1807 medical account of nervous disorders, moreover, describes the symptoms thus: 'An inaptitude to muscular action, or some pain in exerting it; an irksomeness, or dislike to attend to business and the common affairs of life; a selfish desire of engrossing the sympathy and attention of others to the narration of their own sufferings; with fickleness and unsteadiness of temper [...]', Wiltshire, p. 118.

³⁸ Wiltshire, pp. 119-20, 125.

by no means 'well'. With all of the characters I have mentioned, their symptoms, whether imagined or real, can invariably be traced to the limits imposed upon them in terms of acceptable life choices. Austen uses the trope of vague real/unreal illnesses repeatedly to signal in the clearest way possible that so often the selfhood of women is endangered by culture.

Ultimately for Austen, illness is used to signal women experiencing a crisis of identity. Tauchert claims that Austen presents a form of inversion of the Wollstonecraftian view of marriage and identity. For Wollstonecraft, 'women's 'true' identity is precisely 'lost' in heterosexual marriage and the subordination of feminine will this involves'. Austen, Tauchert argues, 'offers an alternative account [...] that recasts 'subjection' itself as a salvational femininity'. For Austen, she suggests, 'identity [that] is already complete, but forgotten' is found in marriage.³⁹ As I explored in Chapter 2, several heroines do indeed experience various forms of rediscovery or reassessment of self in the novels. Yet what Austen makes clear is that marriage does not hold the key to self-knowledge and instead can have a halting or even retrograde effect upon female development. In the majority of instances the relationship between marriage and identity is far more akin to the formula attributed to Wollstonecraft. If even the idea of matrimony is harmful to the self, leaving Elizabeth Elliot bereft and Miss Bates in an eternity of paranoid inutility, the reality is often far worse. Looking at already-married characters we see that rather than marriage being a step towards self-realisation, in taking on the feminine roles that come with marriage women are often prevented from ever finding their true identities. As their relative simplicity and nonsensical behaviour indicates, characters such as Mary Musgrove, Mrs Bennet and Mrs Palmer are caught in stages of personal non-development. Let down by the promise of the domestic ideal they are unhappy wives and dissatisfied as mothers; they have not fulfilled

³⁹ Tauchert, pp. 95, 96.

their potential as individuals in these roles as culture taught them to expect. Though we might laugh at the absurdities of Mary Musgrove or Mrs Bennet, those laughs, we are shown, ought to be as hollow as Mrs Palmer's rueful eruptions.

‘[B]orn to be a heroine’?: Rethinking the heroines and marriage

So far in this chapter I have shown that, in order fully to understand their purpose in the novel, many of Austen's secondary female characters require a sympathetic reassessment in light of social pressure to marry. In view of these characters' stories and what they reveal about marriage the heroines also need to be readdressed. Though critics have acknowledged the unhappy portraits of marriage in the fiction's background, rarely do they seem to make the connection between these and the heroines' lives.⁴⁰ The female characters I have been examining are not simply decorative backdrops to the heroines, they provide important context: a showcase of female experience against which we need to view the central protagonists. Austen offers her strongest hints towards the connections we should make in the suggestive pre-narrative histories of Mrs Bennet and Lady Bertram. Mrs Bennet, I have already shown, was in her youth valued and then married by Mr Bennet simply for her looks. In providing at the start of *Pride and Prejudice* an excerpt of the couple's conversation in which Mrs Bennet is ignored and misunderstood, Austen asks us to bear in mind this model of a relationship in reading the novel. *Mansfield Park* too begins by giving details about the marriage of the novel's key matriarch. Although ostensibly not a novel quite as fixated with the marriage market as *Pride and Prejudice*, we are granted a brief history of Lady Bertram

⁴⁰ Although Harrison acknowledges that 'marital subplots offer an important counterpoint to the central courtship narrative in Austen's novels', she argues that 'unhappy marriages of minor characters [...] either offer comedic relief or 'fall to the side' in the triumphant finale', p. 122. Tanner, too, only somewhat dismissively notes that '[w]hile it is true that [Austen's] novels depict many ill-suited couples and marriages which are prisons of *ennui* if not torment – machines for the 'production' of misery – this is all the more reason why it is so imperative for her heroine to struggle for the right kind of marriage, which is so central to society', p. 10.

and her sisters' relative degrees of success in this arena. 'About thirty years ago' we are told, Lady Bertram, formerly

Miss Maria Ward, of Huntingdon, with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady, with all the comforts and consequences of an handsome house and large income.⁴¹

Introduced with a story with which we might compare that of Elizabeth Bennet, or Catherine Morland, Lady Bertram like all the women in the fiction was once a potential heroine. Her married life in which she finds sole comfort from her pet pug and from which by and large she has chosen mentally to absent herself, is a fate which could befall any of Austen's central young women.

If we are to take the lives of Mrs Bennet and Lady Bertram as pre-existing heroine trajectories this bears worrying implications for the main protagonists of the fiction. Alongside showing us these foreboding examples, Austen offers us further hints of the difficulties her heroines might face by rendering each of them uniquely ineligible for marriage. For more than purposes of dramatic tension the novel plots all hinge around the risk that their heroines will not be wed. Not only might marriage not be suitable for some of these women the author suggests, but owing to various narrative obstacles it could be impossible to achieve. As a result each of the heroines lives in a state of heightened female danger throughout the novels. While a future as a wife might be undesirable or difficult to attain, it was the only social identity which for genteel women was culturally viable. As I explore by revisiting each heroine this constant state of marital uncertainty is used to create the narrative conditions for the author's critique of a compulsory path towards the domestic ideal.

⁴¹ Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814) (London: Penguin Books, 2011). All subsequent references are to this edition.

In terms of their personalities, Fanny and Elinor are perhaps the most suited of the heroines for marriage, but Austen nevertheless places them in situations in which achieving this state seems unlikely. Each of these women has decided upon one particular suitor from very early in the novel and it is implied, or shown in the case of Fanny and Henry Crawford, would refuse to marry anyone else. Yet the objects of these heroines' romantic interest, Edmund and Edward, want to marry or are engaged to other women respectively. Adding further difficulty, Fanny and Elinor are characterised socially by a level of reserve that means their desire is not explicitly registered. While Elinor only tentatively admits to her sister that she 'greatly esteem[s]' (p. 23) Edward, Fanny, is entirely consumed by silence in *Mansfield Park*. They are, furthermore, deemed ineligible romantically owing to their family connections to Edmund and Edward. For Fanny this link is more intimate with her being viewed as a sister to Edmund for all but a few pages of the novel. Elinor lives temporarily with Edward and his sister (Elinor's sister-in-law) Fanny Dashwood who notices the attraction between the pair and acts to quash it. She unsubtly reminds Elinor's mother 'of Mrs. Ferrars's resolution that both her sons should marry well, and of the danger attending any young woman who attempted to *draw* [Edward] *in*' (p. 24). Elinor is undesirable as a wife owing to her recent decline in fortune upon losing her father and his inheritance. Fanny likewise is a non-option as far as Edmund is concerned because of her position much further down the socio-economic scale.⁴² But the main tragedy in the threat of non-marriage for both Elinor and Fanny is that they each (aside perhaps from Elinor's implied distaste for children) operate in line with domestic ideology and appear primed for married life. If a heroine is a woman destined for marriage and the fulfilment of the domestic ideal, they are each 'born to be' one.

⁴² So extreme is her difference, however, that the situation regarding marriage is also less desperate for Fanny. As her sister Susan shows in needing to replace her at the end of the novel, Fanny is in fact expected to remain 'working' at Mansfield as Lady Bertram's companion. As the daughter of a landowner, for Elinor employment is a less viable option.

Though, like Fanny or Elinor, Anne Elliot seems particularly formed for the domestic ideal,⁴³ she and Emma Woodhouse are each placed in unique positions early in their narratives that establish the unlikelihood of their marrying. Emma is the mistress of an estate and professes openly that she does not want to marry. The controlling manipulations of her valetudinarian father aside, her class and being the sole woman of the house permits her a degree of social power unable to be wielded by the other protagonists. As we have seen, she even mimics the role of an already-married woman such as Mrs Jennings or Mrs Bennet in matchmaking. Although Austen establishes that marriage is both financially and personally unnecessary for Emma, pressures of gender overpower the freedom of class and her own innate progressiveness. Whilst continuing matchmaking, she is drawn reluctantly into own romantic arc and into thinking for a time that she may be in love with Frank Churchill. She muses that ‘she *must* be a little in love with him, in spite of every previous determination against it’ (p. 244). Even when Emma does succumb to a version of the courtship plot, Frank’s engagement is an underlying threat to her illusion all along. Though Emma is the one to resist marriage outright, Anne’s situation is more resistant still to the possibility of marriage. Her days of romantic eligibility are, we are assured by her father’s attitude, set in *Persuasion*’s pre-narrative past. Anne’s brief history tells us further that she is post-romance, post-marriage proposal, and so it follows post-life as heroine. Austen emphasises her unlikely-heroine status by making her initially a background character until being brought psychologically to fore from Chapter 4 onwards. Her family’s financial troubles, when teamed with her older sister’s fears and hopelessness in terms of finding a husband, mean Anne’s withdrawal from the marriage market is an acute point of tension in *Persuasion*.

⁴³ Lady Russell believes that marriage is ‘a state for which [Anne is] peculiarly fitted by her warm affections and domestic habits’ (p. 29).

Most radically of all, the personalities of Elizabeth, Catherine and Marianne render them predisposed to resist the role of the ideal wife under domestic ideology. They each, as discussed in Chapter 2, embrace the life of the body in a way that was decidedly unfeminine. Refusing to repress their physicality in line with female conditioning, all three women enjoy exercise and freedom of movement to the point of rebellion. The most actively resistant to marriage is Elizabeth who as Armstrong writes, is in 'direct violation of the female ideal'.⁴⁴ Over the course of *Pride and Prejudice*, she rejects two proposals, more than any other heroine. She makes these refusals in spite of the desperation of female circumstance in the novel owing to the entailment of her family's estate. With Jane's disappointment by Bingley only reversed towards the end, the situation for the Bennet women hangs in the balance throughout the novel. Catherine like Elizabeth is unsuited to a life confined within the bounds of the domestic ideal. In addition to her fondness for the outdoors and 'dangerous' reading, she lacks the traditional conduct-book allurements required to attract a suitor. While Catherine does ultimately follow somewhat the course of a heroine, Marianne takes a less conventional route to marriage. Resisting the restraints of culture, she threatens her reputation through possible sexual indiscretion and is determined throughout to marry an unsuitable partner. In their unwitting (Catherine) or wilful (Marianne and Elizabeth) resistance, these heroines appear the most unlikely to fulfil the typical fate of the middle-class woman. However in being from some the most precariously-situated of the fiction's central families, they are also the heroines most in need of successful marriages. By creating rebellious heroines, therefore, Austen exposes the stakes of marriage at their most heightened. But with their evident independence of mind and love of freedom, these characters also have the most at risk personally in marrying, as Marianne's stifling of selfhood eventually shows.

⁴⁴ Armstrong, p. 51.

‘I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can’: Austen’s ‘happy’ endings

Having made the case early in each novel for the unlikelihood of her heroines entering married life, Austen nevertheless gears her narratives unrelentingly towards romantic unions. By ending all of her novels with a hurried notice that her heroine is to be wed in spite of all of the examples of why marriage might be difficult to achieve, unsuitable, or cause unhappiness, Austen establishes an odd inevitability of marriage. How Austen’s endings are read, as we have seen, has come to define how her gender politics are perceived more broadly. My contention is that endings are the clearest signs in Austen’s novels that she is not conservative, or seriously promoting the progress mapped out by her courtship plots for women. Rather, Austen repurposes the courtship plot to expose the issues with marriage being the only desirable destination for women. With a sardonic narrative voice regularly presiding over the final pages of the novels, her endings serve retroactively to set the tone for which marriage as a product of the domestic ideal should be read throughout her fiction.

The role of Austen’s novel endings is to help us understand the narrowness of middle-class female destiny. Austen shows us that if she is to leave her heroines in relative contentment and security, marriage is as unavoidable as ending her novel. What is more, as her disinterest in the lives of her central protagonists beyond marriage suggests, marriage *is* in effect itself an ending. Women have made their most major decision and determined their lot in life; there is little further room, unfortunate characters like Mrs Bennet and Mrs Palmer show, for development or progress. In what Frank Kermode calls her ‘anti-novels’ Austen reimagines the convention of ending a domestic novel with marriage.⁴⁵ The self-conscious literariness of her endings makes clear her engagement with the paradigms for concluding courtship plots established by her forerunners and contemporaries in fiction. While Austen

⁴⁵ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of An Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 129.

accepts the narrative arc popularised by Richardson, she draws more upon the brevity and detachment of Burney and, though ending differently, the treatment of marriage in the radical novels of Wollstonecraft and Hays. But her endings bear most in common with the parodic overt contrivance of Edgeworth's manner of ending in *Belinda*. By examining the closing moments of *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, I will elucidate the unique manner in which Austen uses her endings to crystallise the messages regarding female fate she has subtly interwoven throughout the body of her novels.

Austen's decision to end each of her novels in marriage was of course not new, but reflected the established trajectory of the domestic novel. Richardson's *Pamela* sets out the conventional narrative journey often associated with Austen in which a young woman's behaviour is ultimately 'rewarded' with marriage. Setting him apart in the main from his successors including Frances Burney, Edgeworth and Austen, he dedicates the final quarter of *Pamela* to disclosing the early stages of his heroine's married life. The newly-married Pamela has to contend with the non-acceptance of her sister-in-law, Lady Davers, and the discovery of her husband's illegitimate daughter. Richardson includes this necessary adjustment period in order to make the ending in which he establishes them as a pattern married couple whose happiness extends long into the future as believable as possible. When Pamela's letters end, the editor steps in to inform us that their perfection was such that 'they charm'd every one within the Circle of their Acquaintance, by the Sweetness of their Manners, the regular Order and Oeconomy of their Household; by their cheerful Hospitality, and by diffusive Charity to all worthy Objects'.⁴⁶ Setting a precedent for the neat happy endings Austen parodies, marriage, Richardson implies, is a state through which all difficulties dissolve.

⁴⁶ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 499.

While Burney makes repeated use of this Richardsonian framework, her novels as Perry indicates are unfashionably more concerned with the biological family than with marriage. With the hero's romantic interest registered relatively early on, the dramatic tension in her plots usually revolves around family ties rather than marriage. In *Evelina* (1778), the final chapters focus on achieving a father-daughter reunion and show little interest in the heroine's wedding. In her last brief letter to Villars she announces that 'the fate of your Evelina is decided!' before describing the event of the marriage in only one sentence.⁴⁷ The wedding is there seemingly because it is accepted as a female ending; all we need to know of Evelina's future is that she is married. While Burney's endings enact a dual placement of the heroine in the patriarchal institutions of marriage and the biological family, her novels are far from a straightforward endorsement of the gendered status quo. As numerous scholars elucidate, and as I discussed in previous chapters, in using the theme of female illegitimacy especially the novels problematise increasingly the patriarchal fabric of society.⁴⁸ Having followed the heroine's doomed struggle to exist independently, Burney's brevity in concluding, while not deploying the overt tools of satire as Austen or Edgeworth do, reveals her marriage-endings to be at best reluctant pragmatism.

Radical female writers such as Mary Hays and Wollstonecraft defied the trend established by authors like Richardson and Burney of ending novels in marriage. As Jennifer Golightly elucidates:

While many female novels of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries thus close with the heroines either trembling on the brink of matrimony or entering upon newlywed bliss, in the female radical novels, the opposite is true. The radical heroines marry early in the novel and frequently become mothers before the narrative concludes. It is the

⁴⁷ Frances Burney, *Evelina; or, The History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 406.

⁴⁸ On Evelina's namelessness/illegitimacy, see: Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 40 and Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), p. 104.

consequences, not the hopes, of marriage that the female radical novels explore throughout the bulk of the narrative.

By depicting married life, and its eventual failure, radical authors sought to show that it was not realistic for men and women to achieve a relationship on the equal terms they desired. Patriarchal laws that governed marriage, sexuality, parental rights, and property would always favour men and lead to the oppressive treatment of women.⁴⁹ In Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman; or, Maria* (1798), for example, the heroine is married before the start of the novel and the story details the results of her husband's cruel exertion of power over her. Towards the end of Hays' *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Emma, Golightly writes, 'surrender[s] her romantic sensibilities for a more 'sensible' marriage choice—the type of secure, prudent choice Jane Austen would promote'. But a rational marriage 'brings Emma nothing but harm' and Hays details the dire consequences of this choice in the final part of the novel.⁵⁰ Though ending on the cusp of marriage rather than with its outcomes, Austen like Hays is far from promoting prudence in marital choices over feeling. As discussed earlier in the thesis, Austen implies a devastating surrender of selfhood in the illness-based rational marriages of passionate characters such as Marianne and Louisa Musgrove. Albeit less centrally than in the fiction of Hays or Wollstonecraft, as I have been showing the consequences of marriage – and equally its alternative, non-marriage – do figure in Austen's fiction. Rather than simply leaving her heroines 'trembling on the brink of matrimony' Austen's endings reveal she had far more in common with these radical authors than Golightly suggests.

Nonetheless, it is the way in which Edgeworth ends her novel *Belinda* that most resembles the strategies used by Austen in her conclusions. Stepping into the role of author, Lady Delacour quite literally stages the ending by directing characters to move into positions

⁴⁹ Golightly, pp. 87, 2-3.

⁵⁰ Golightly, p. 78.

representative of their resolved relationships. In a departure from earlier writers such as Richardson, Edgeworth reminds the reader that what they are reading is fictional and in doing so provides ‘a critique of conventional novel endings’ in which young women are conveniently married off.⁵¹ Lady Delacour even implies the contrived nature of Belinda’s marriage by comparing it to that of Pamela and Mr B., one of fiction’s most unlikely unions: ‘we have all of us seen *Pamela married* – let us now see *Belinda in love*’.⁵² Furthermore, while Clarence declares his love in the final chapter, we hear little from Belinda and it is hinted suggestively that she resists holding his hand. Lisa L. Moore argues that ultimately the ‘[n]ovel fails to contain its subversive implications’ by ending with ‘a conventional heterosexual union’.⁵³ However the ending is, I would argue, intentionally an empty gesture; in a self-aware fashion, it makes a show of its ‘failure’ to contain the novel’s subversive content. Throughout, *Belinda* grants space to controversial characters such as Lady Delacour, Mr Vincent and Harriet Freke and tackles themes ranging from colonialism to the rights of women. With her take on a traditional ending, Edgeworth knowingly belies the complexity of her novel, especially with its all-consuming moral (which she negates by not actually giving one).⁵⁴ Anticipating a particular Austenian concern, the forced simplicity of the marriage unions and reunions she ends with knowingly elides the complicated nature of women’s lives and characters.

While perhaps not tackling the subject as overtly as Edgeworth, it is in *Northanger Abbey* that Austen creates her most obvious signs of being coerced by literary convention. Stating her engagement with prior and contemporary novelists right from the beginning of the novel, Austen opens by self-reflexively addressing the suitability or otherwise of Catherine

⁵¹ Lisa L. Moore, *Dangerous Intimacies: Toward a Sapphic History of the British Novel* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 103.

⁵² Edgeworth, p. 472.

⁵³ Moore, p. 107.

⁵⁴ The moral given by Lady Delacour is: ‘Our *tale* contained a *moral*, and, no doubt, | You all have wit enough to find it out’, Edgeworth, p. 478.

for the role of heroine. In expressing the manifold reasons for which ‘[n]o one [...] would have supposed her born to be a heroine’ (p. 15) we are given both the sense of Catherine being coerced into this role, and of Austen in turn to write this kind of novel. Through Catherine, Austen merges issues of genre with issues of female identity. Catherine’s being forced despite her unsuitability to follow the conventional path of the domestic novel – from training in accomplishments, to entrance into society, to marriage – is a comment on the genre but more importantly on the lives of women. Overt at the beginning as Catherine embarks on her narrative journey, these arguments resurface once more as she and the novel reach their endings.

In her brevity and in the narrator’s detachment from the events that comprise the denouement, Austen creates an intentionally unsatisfying ending to *Northanger Abbey*. The first suggestion of the ironic disinterest that will dominate the final chapter comes in the penultimate chapter in which Henry proposes to Catherine. In what is meant to be the romantic climax of the story, Austen informs us simply that: ‘She was assured of his affection; and that heart in return was solicited’.⁵⁵ Austen proceeds only to give us perfunctory details of the events leading to the hero and heroine’s marriage. She frequently forgoes description, stating that it is enough to say that Miss Tilney’s husband is ‘the most charming young man in the world’ because in so doing ‘the most charming young man in the world is instantly before the imagination of us all’ (p. 234). These techniques are not for the ends of empowering the reader’s imagination, but to make the ending seem purposefully unrealistic. As with Edgeworth, Austen is simply putting characters in place and tying up loose plot ends because doing so is necessitated by the expectations of genre. Like her contemporary, she seeks to make this obligation and her disdain towards these conventions

⁵⁵ Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 227. All subsequent references are to this edition.

evident through a self-conscious literariness. The narrator notes that while Catherine and Henry might have fears concerning the certainty of their marriage, readers can be certain owing to ‘the tell-tale compression of the pages before them’. It has been suggested that here, Austen continues her parody of the Gothic novel with a pastiche of its speedy conclusions.⁵⁶ Yet as I will show, this is not the only one of Austen’s novels to be quickly, neatly and ironically resolved. In following ‘the rules of composition’ (p. 234) as Austen does openly here, mocking her own convenient coincidences as they arise, happy endings, she suggests, are inevitable. At the very close Austen gives a vague moral, leaving it to the reader to decide ‘whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or rewards filial disobedience’ (p. 235). Like Edgeworth, Austen undercuts the meaning of her work with a traditional moralistic ending. In doing so, she signals that to understand its true message we need to look beyond her knowing concessions to convention.

Austen makes this ending unsatisfying in order to reflect that such endings for women *are* frequently unsatisfactory. She places the relationship between Catherine and Henry on uncomfortable grounds early on in the novel when in a discussion on marriage he says: ‘the woman is to make the home agreeable to the man; he is to purvey, and she is to smile’ (p. 55). While Catherine’s love of activity and intrepidity makes her unsuited to the role, Henry goes on to prove he wants little more than this ‘smiling’ passivity from her. As I showed in Chapter 3, he revels in his ability to showcase their relative difference in knowledge to such a degree that they look set to re-enact the marriages of the Palmers or Bennets. Austen moreover openly acknowledges that he wishes to marry her based on ‘nothing better than gratitude, or, in other words, [...] a persuasion of her partiality for him’. Placing convention momentarily aside, this is a harsh reality Austen states that she wishes to portray: ‘It is a new

⁵⁶ Claudia L. Johnson, ‘Explanatory Notes’ in Jane Austen, *Northanger Abbey, Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*, ed. by James Kinsley and John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 357-79 (p. 372).

circumstance in romance, I acknowledge, and dreadfully derogatory of an 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' (p. 227). Adding to these less than auspicious circumstances, Catherine in many ways has changed little since the start of the novel. In a fleeting yet revealing moment, Mrs Morland fears her daughter 'would make a sad heedless young house-keeper' before consoling herself with the thought that there is 'nothing like practice' (p. 232). While Catherine remains unsuited to domestic life, she will be conditioned through necessity. We are reminded in the ending that less than a year has passed from the time Henry first meet Catherine and that she is 18 and he is 26. Along with the rushed nature of the conclusion, their ages suggest that the marriage is perhaps premature. Without the declarative moment of self-knowledge experienced by other heroines, Catherine risks marrying before she has fully developed an identity. Ironically summarising their 'perfect happiness', Austen writes: 'Henry and Catherine were married, the bells rang and every body smiled' (pp. 234-35). Painting Catherine's ending with a broad brush, she replicates the broad manner in which society treats young women in offering them such limited choices.

While *Northanger Abbey* frequently comments upon its status as a novel, in *Mansfield Park* Austen abruptly adopts a self-reflexive mode of narration near the end. In an acerbic announcement intended to linger over what is to follow, Austen famously writes: 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore every body, not greatly in fault themselves, to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest' (p. 428). As with Edgeworth, her confessed 'impatien[ce]' reveals her dissatisfaction with conventional novel endings and the process through which she must end things neatly. The conclusion is not, she informs us, a triumphant celebration of marriage and justly resolved female destiny. Instead with an air of reluctance we are told only that her least reprehensible characters, those 'not greatly at fault', will be left moderately satisfied. More

thoroughly than in *Belinda* or *Northanger Abbey* Austen conducts a self-conscious positioning of her characters. In doing so she dedicates much of the closing chapter's space to disclosing the fate of the 'fallen woman', Maria. Leaving little space to bring together the hero and heroine, Austen once more fulfils the sin of authorship against which *Belinda* warns: 'hurrying things toward the conclusion: in not allowing *time* enough for that change of feeling'. Again, we are given no dialogue surrounding the proposal. In place of a scene of confession of love, we are to make do with a narrated wish from Edmund that Fanny's 'warm and sisterly regard for him would be foundation enough for wedded love' (p. 436). Making it clear Austen is fulfilling novelistic convention, she emphasises that no dramatic tropes will arise to block the path to marriage: 'Their own inclinations ascertained, there were no difficulties behind, no drawback of poverty or parent' (p. 437). We are told quite simply that 'when it was quite natural that it should be so, and not a week earlier, Edmund did cease to care about Miss Crawford, and became as anxious to marry Fanny as Fanny herself could desire' (p. 436). Of course, Austen telling us rather than showing how this might be natural ensures that it does not appear so.

By making her manoeuvring apparent and so forcing reader detachment, Austen steers us away from reading the conclusion of *Mansfield Park* simply as a happy ending. The terms 'happy' and 'happiness' recur in the final chapter to a parodic degree. Though Austen has ostensibly side-lined 'guilt and misery' these topics are present to an extent that jars with the pronouncements of happiness. While she does not detail the fates of women who have deviated from the feminine ideal as far as 'the pens' of Hays or Wollstonecraft do, she offers us enough detail to make sure that the costs of Fanny's ascendancy at the expense of these women – Julia, Maria, Mary, and Mrs Norris – are clear. As with Henry and Catherine, then, the final coupling of Edmund and Fanny is built on grounds which are far from unproblematic. In one sense Fanny and Edmund's relationship seems to bear many of the

traits of an ideal Wollstonecraftian union. Their marriage is decidedly rational, being built on shared respect and companionship; they are described as the ‘two young friends’ rather than as lovers (p. 437). Yet far from seeing Fanny as his equal, Edmund is ‘endear[ed] [by her] claims of innocence and helplessness’ (p. 436). While Edmund must suppress his desire for Mary, Fanny, the subject of Austen’s most fully-realised study of the feminine ideal, seemingly remains free from desire. She is able therefore to listen to Edmund’s longing for Mary and finally accept his sisterly regard as the basis for their marriage. More than just her sexuality, Fanny has not realised her own identity in the manner of other heroines. While other characters may have to surrender an element of selfhood in agreeing to final marriages, Fanny did this long ago. Her narrative journey is to wait for the family to need her to the extent that she is fully subsumed into the household through marriage. However much her position is nominally elevated, she remains the servant of Mansfield Park. In turning to Sir Thomas at the start and end of the final chapter, Austen traces the journey of the conclusion that has worked to ensure Sir Thomas’s happiness, taking him from ‘suffer[ing]’ (p. 428) to ‘rejoic[ing]’ (p. 439). Re-enacting the work done in contemporary society by marriage as an institution, Austen’s ending is about consolidating the family as a patriarchal unit.

Conclusion

In the later eighteenth century, middle-class women’s identities were culturally determined by the domestic ideal, of which marriage is a crucial stage. Austen’s novels, however, underscore the difference between the full development of selfhood and fulfilling the requisites of the domestic ideal. The novel endings, alongside the glimpses of former ‘heroines’ who already have their endings, in particular reveal this distinction. While the protagonists at each novel’s end are on the brink of seeming triumph in achieving a romantic union with the object of their desire, Austen makes her endings intentionally unsettling in a

way that contradicts their brisk tone of neat reconciliation. As characters such as Mary Musgrove or Mrs Bennet forewarn, marriage is by no means the end of female difficulties or struggle. Austen implies the likelihood of future problems for the heroines owing, for instance, to the fact that neither Henry nor Edmund truly love Catherine and Fanny, or view them entirely as equals. Marriage, nevertheless, is the point at which these heroines' futures are determined and so the author makes it decidedly 'the end'. The development of self, as the troublingly suspended states of Mrs Palmer and Mrs Bennet suggest, is halted as women transfer from one domestic authority to another. These characters no longer have the possibility of where or with whom they might end up. To return to the subjects of previous chapters, their leisure time is now determined: forgoing, for the most part, any accomplishments, they must fulfil the duties of a wife as a housekeeper and eventually mother. Married women's bodies will now also be defined sexually and maternally within the framework of the new family. Their politics, too, will implicitly mirror that of their husbands. Finally, their main space of orbit is, of course, now fixed to the marital home. Marriage is finite for women in all of these ways; it is an appropriate ending for Austen not merely because of convention or disinterest in depicting the married state, but to emphasise this as a point of no return.

Though Austen hints constantly at the inappropriateness of the domestic ideal as a model, she uses the path towards it repeatedly to structure her novels in order to highlight its unavoidability both for her and her characters. As the anxiety of single women from Jane Fairfax to Elizabeth Elliot reveals, women are confronted with a failure/success dichotomy with regards to marriage that can be harmful to the point of illness. While Austen concedes, then, that marriage is realistically the best option for women, it is by no means uncritically. In using what is essentially the same conclusion to each of her novels, she re-enacts the way in which culture homogenises women by offering them uniform destinies. Although her central

female characters are vastly different individuals, they are all driven unstoppably towards the same fate. Her endings usually adopt a detached, more impersonal narrative perspective, adding a universality to her final message: she is writing not just about a single heroine, but about conditions for middle-class women. Creating a sense of circularity, moreover, within her narratives, her central characters are usually one of a long line of sisters. Alternatively, there are other implied background heroines on whom the central narrative could easily have focused, such as Jane Fairfax or Harriet in *Emma*. As *Northanger Abbey* posits from the outset, anyone can be a heroine as all women by and large are made to follow the same path.

It is Austen's tone of narration in the final pages of her novels that most clearly signals that she does not simply recreate the courtship plot in order to endorse it. Whilst the author's dissatisfaction is most evident in *Northanger Abbey* and *Mansfield Park*, her impatience with the joint limitations upon women and the form in which she writes is palpable in all of her hurried, problematic endings. At the end of each novel, Austen imposes a tidy ending upon her characters regardless of any issues that have been uncovered throughout. Narrating final reconciliatory events in a knowingly artificial manner, she demonstrably repurposes the trope of ending with a wedding to leave a note of lingering discomfort around the idea of marriage as an unquestioned destination for women. Like the female silence surrounding the body, or politics, marriage should be viewed as a crucial aspect of domestic life Austen recreates in order to expose. Furthermore, by re-treading a trajectory established within the field of domestic fiction in a self-referential fashion, she unearths the role played by the novel culturally in reinforcing boundaries and set paths for women. Her conclusions in which the narrator's voice is so strongly and sardonically present are revealing afterwords. More than just exhibiting her wry comedy, they are to be taken seriously as part of the unified message of the novels. Abruptly disposing of her heroines,

regardless of what has come before, she reflects what society – and by extension domestic fiction – does with women.

Conclusion

I am fully sensible that an Historical Romance, founded on the House of Saxe Cobourg might be much more to the purpose of Profit or Popularity, than such pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages as I deal in – but I could no more write a Romance than an Epic Poem. [...] No – I must keep to my own style & go on in my own Way; And though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other.

Jane Austen to James Stanier Clarke, 1816¹

Austen was frequently clear in marking herself as an authority on domesticity in references to her own work in her correspondence. This declaration to James Stanier Clarke along with her comment to one of her nieces that ‘3 or 4 families in a Country Village is the very thing to work on’,² have long been read as Austen conceding her work to be feminine, homely and unimportant. The counter-argument to this view has often been to claim that such statements are ironically dismissive, masking the fact that Austen’s fiction is about matters far weightier than the home. I have argued that Austen’s intentions lie somewhere in between these interpretations. Careful reading of the above quotation reveals a mission statement for Austen’s authorship in which she confidently and unapologetically claims the domestic for her subject matter, one which she was determined, despite even the wishes of royalty, to pursue. In this letter Austen states that she creates ‘pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages’ but does so, she insists, in her ‘own style’ and ‘own Way’. The key to her originality lies, we are told suggestively, not in her choice of topic but in how she addresses it. My examination of the fiction has revealed that Austen’s ‘own Way’ was to use her exactitude in creating ‘pictures of domestic Life in Country Villages’ to conduct an ongoing theorisation of domesticity. As Austen envisions it, domesticity is psychologically stifling, designed to ensure that women in particular are forced into a mould of existence set by

¹ Jane Austen, *Jane Austen’s Letters*, ed. by Deirdre Le Faye (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 312.

² *Letters*, p. 275.

conservative ideology. Contemporaries such as Mary Hays and Frances Burney, as we have seen, also conveyed subversive messages in their fiction. However, Austen's true innovation was in her fidelity to the mode of middle-class existence she sought to condemn. Using silence as her main weapon of critique, Austen recreates the insularity of life at home from a female perspective in order to showcase and challenge its harmful effects.

Previous chapters have delineated the ways in which the novels reveal home life to be disadvantageous to women. In portraying its problems, Austen also theorises how domesticity might not be a wholly negative proposition, suggesting ways in which women's situation might be ameliorated. While Austen is critical of female leisure pursuits and their role in inculcating femininity, she also makes the case for women to be able to define themselves as individuals through their activity. Greater freedom of activity both in terms of what are designated as accomplishments, and movement and exercise more generally, could lead to a better understanding for women of their physicality, she shows. Only in better understanding the body can women move closer to achieving the crucial aim in the novels of self-knowledge. As well as being denied understanding of their corporeality owing to cultural restraints, women were limited in their direct access to knowledge of the wider world. Documenting female exclusion from political matters, Austen shows the need for women to be permitted the right to become active agents in history. Alongside protesting the daily restraints women faced, Austen more broadly tackles the restrictive moulds into which their lives must fit. The physical household, for Austen, symbolises the domestic ideal to which they are taught to aspire. For female characters, the rearrangement of home interiors, or claiming spaces of their own, represents a hint of optimism and rebellion against ideological confinement. Catharine, in escaping to her bower, provides perhaps the most overt example of this rebellion. Marriage, in particular, as an expected female fate is treated disdainfully and

as a perfunctory given by Austen. The novel endings reveal an embittered weariness from the author and the desire for women to be able to determine their own futures.

These facets of domestic oppression studied by Austen relate to several overarching concerns conveyed throughout the fiction. On a personal level, Austen is troubled by the manner in which domestic ideology inhibits the formation of female identity. As shown in each chapter, strict expectations regarding behaviour, modes of thinking and life choices meant that women were defined according to their adherence to or defiance of femininity and not truly able to become individuals. Stemming from these personal restraints, women were on a broader level prevented from being public citizens. As Chapters 1 and 3 particularly highlight in terms of the limits placed on female talent and knowledge, women were not taught to be citizens of the world, but rather of home. Aligning herself with Wollstonecraftian thought, Austen suggests that in pursuing a false ideal of femininity and uniform plans for their lives, rather than self-knowledge and their own desires, women were ultimately rendered incapable of contributing at a societal level. In making these points in her novels Austen presents a challenge not only to ways of life for women, but also the collusion between the novel and domestic ideology. As with domestic life, Austen recreates in order to expose conventional novel tropes and their reassertion of the status quo. With her ongoing commentary on the novel and satiric adaptation of traditional endings, Austen signals her own re-imagination of the novel and a decisive break from the conventional purpose of the genre.

This project has advocated for the need to recognise the subversive work done by the fiction in a manner that fully accounts for its silences regarding matters beyond domesticity. Austen can be both ‘the novelist of home’ and a non-conservative writer, my research shows. This original reading that reconciles what have tended to be two strands of Austen criticism could be used to illuminate further study of Austen’s fiction in a number of important ways.

The interpretive model I present reveals silence to be a tool to recreate domestic conditions for women from a critical stand point. First of all, this model could be adapted and used more widely in exploring the complex and varied depiction of female middle-class life in the novels. Chapter 3 mainly drew upon *Mansfield Park* (1814) and the slave trade in terms of women's political silence, but the almost absence of the Napoleonic wars in the novels is an area in which this framework could also be used profitably. The notion that the Bennet girls might relate to the war entirely through their flirtation with the militia or Anne Elliot's viewing the conflict entirely through Wentworth's presence or absence are just two examples of female removal from the war. These instances warrant further investigation as avenues through which *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and *Persuasion* (1818) might be entirely reinterpreted as providing commentary on women's political exclusion.

These ideas regarding silence and the oppressiveness of conservative ideology are also relevant to the study of men in Austen's fiction. Though perhaps not as prolifically, norms of masculinity were reinforced and policed in conduct literature of the period and elsewhere. Men, like women, were governed by expectations regarding the body, behaviour and their role in society. Using the interpretive paradigm implemented in Chapter 2, the relationship between men, the body and domesticity in the novels would provide ample grounds for investigation. The already-mentioned examples of Harville and his belief in superior male strength, Sir Walter Elliot and his vanity and Mr Woodhouse's illness could be explored as evidence of a male disconnection between the mind and body different to, but no less harmful than that established amongst women. Equally, the notion of limited possibilities to create an identity outside of pre-determined boundaries examined in this project is relevant to a multitude of non-conformist male characters. *Sense and Sensibility's* (1811) Edward's lack of career motivation and the much-maligned Dick Musgrove in *Persuasion* who was

‘hopeless’³ in the military are examples of those who fall outside of societal expectations of their gender and suffer as a result. Using these methods in re-visiting the novels could contribute both to the under-explored topic of masculinity in Austen’s fiction and more broadly to the burgeoning field of study of masculinity and its relationship to domesticity in the long eighteenth century.

Finally, in light of my arguments, Austen’s contribution to the novel form also needs further interrogation. In showing that Austen writes from the position of a theorist of domesticity, I have demonstrated that she reinvents the novel in ways formerly not imagined. Austen has often been only permitted into canons of English literature in spite of her subject matter. This study has shown that Austen is ‘the novelist of home’ because she is an authority on the domestic, and not because it traps her and confines her mode of authorship. Her contribution to the form needs to be understood at a level that considers not only her innovations in terms of narrative style, but also her reimagining of the novel’s purpose. Going beyond literary history, Austen’s fiction is moreover an underused asset in histories of domesticity. Her works are serious studies of the complex psychological impact of domesticity upon women and would be invaluable to future research undertaken in this field.⁴

Continuing to challenge broader conceptions of Austen’s conservatism and reinvigorate the drive fully to comprehend the fiction is especially important at this critical moment of celebration of the author in 2017. Just why we should value Austen so highly, particularly as a symbol of home and nation, is crucial to understand as she is in the process of being further ingrained as an institution. It is not sufficient to say, as early memoirs by Austen family members suggested, that Austen writes about the home because it is a topic

³ Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (1818) (London: Penguin Books, 2011), p. 48.

⁴ Melissa Sodeman also makes the point that Austen’s treatment of the domestic requires us to re-evaluate our understanding of domesticity in the period, Melissa Sodeman, ‘Domestic Mobility in *Persuasion* and *Sanditon*’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 45 (2005), 787-812 (p. 808).

continuous with her contentedly homebound nature. Nor does it do justice to her originality to position her within a wider literary project to define the emerging middle class through domestic life as Nancy Armstrong does. Austen's was a uniquely probing voice in a field of novelists writing about women's lives in the home. Her novels are interrogative hubs in which she deploys ingenious and subtle methods to expose the workings of politicised domesticity. It is right that we continue to view Austen as intimately connected to the home, but we must radically revise how we view this relationship. In the year of her bicentenary, this study allows us to consider her privileged status in culture in a different (though no less reverential) light.

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