Conforming to Conventions in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice,* and *Emma*

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Chapter 1: Introduction:

Jane Austen has not only attained the status of a classic author, she has also found her way into the hearts and interests of readers who range from severe critics to avid fans. Austen has proven herself a versatile author by the fact that her six complete novels appeal to a diverse groups of readers, and the way in which she presents the themes in the novels transcends the culture of Regency period England as well as offers an interesting study in that period for readers and critics alike. The aspects of Austen's novels which have captured the attention of readers and critics are both diverse and extensive, ranging in focus from the cultural backdrop of Austen's novels to the person of Austen herself in relation to her works. This study examines the manifestation of conventionality and marginalization, as well as the interplay between these two key concepts in Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Emma*. Examining conventionality and marginalization in these two novels will include an exploration of Regency culture in order to determine what cultural conventions were the norm for that society. Such an examination will also include an exploration of Austen as an individual and a writer. Adopting a specific focus on these two topics of conventionality and marginalization serves to provide a particular inroad for new insights on Austen and the three novels.

Conventionality and marginalization are complex and intricate topics on which to base an examination of these three Austen works. The two terms are also inter-related which complicates things further. Whether Austen characters conform to current social conventions concerning financial issues, social status, and gender roles or not is often a

measure of how marginal a character they will be in both the novel and the society in which they lived. A study of the concepts of conventionality and marginalization as applied to Austen allows one to attain a more thorough understanding of both the novels and Austen herself because the novels are a kind of extension of her own world. In addition to this, these two concepts are ones which have not been delved into deeply in Austen studies, and a thorough examination into their implications for the understanding of Austen and her works will benefit readers and critics alike.

The character of Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* illustrates the questions which a study of conventionality and marginalization in Austen raises. Isabella is, for a number of chapters of the novel, a main character as a bosom friend of the acknowledged heroine, Catherine Morland. However, as the plot progresses, it is revealed to a greater degree that Isabella's sole motive in befriending Catherine is to procure for herself a suitable marriage partner in the person of James Morland, Catherine's brother. From this point in the story (when Isabella's true motives are exposed to the heroine), Isabella begins to fade from the foreground of the story. Her conformity to the prevailing social conventions, as seen in the choices she makes, provides an explanation for her marginalization in the story. First, it is important to recognize that when Isabella snatches at all means available to her to secure a profitable marriage partner, she is engaging in the convention society has established for young girls of the lower middle class. During this time period in Regency England it became something of a profession for young girls to do all within their power to marry well, especially in regard to money and social standing. Therefore, when Isabella rejects James Morland in favor of the wealthier and higher ranked Captain Frederick Tilney, she is merely conforming to what her society in

general would have endorsed. Through her portrayal of Isabella's devious pursuit of an advantageous marriage, Austen reveals that Isabella is acting in accordance with what societal conventions encouraged regarding marriage and the proper objective of a young girl of her social class and fortune. Furthermore, after the point at which Isabella's ulterior motives are revealed to Catherine, Isabella then fades from the forefront of the story. In putting these two things (the portrayal of Isabella's devious behavior and the minor place she afterwards assumes in the story) together we can conclude that when Austen marginalizes a character within the novel, she is making a judgment on that character's behavior, choices, and values. This, by extension, is a judgment upon the society which condoned such behavior, choices, and values. So we see that this, in turn, serves to elucidate Austen's own personal views.

This example reveals that there is a complex, though implicit, interaction of culturally relevant ideas underlying the literal plots of Austen's novels. In this interaction, the interplay between conventionality and marginalization play key roles. A number of questions arise from this brief plot summary. For example, is Austen condemning the established social conventions of her society? Christina Neckles asserts that "Austen scholars agree that dear Jane's novels are biting social commentaries" (n.p.). But if this is indeed the case—that Austen was critiquing her society through her novels—then why does she conform to so many cultural clichés for a woman of her class and wealth in her own life? As this study will reveal, the heroes or heroines of these three Austen novels are those who did not conform to the conventions established and condoned by society. However, at the same time, Austen's novels do not easily lend themselves to what might be labeled as a simplistic polarization in which characters either fit into one category or

another. Even the heroes or heroines generally are involved in a growth process which entails the evolution of their views, often from a more conventional view to a more individualistic view. This raises the question of whether Austen was lauding nonconformity and condemning the precedents set by her society, or if she was using her novels to live vicariously in another world where breaking the mold of society's conventions would make one a hero or heroine rather than condemn one to a marginal existence. Also, the question of on what grounds—moral or otherwise—Austen marginalizes a character such as Isabella Thorpe needs to be explored. All of these questions open up a new side of Austen. But in order to continue with this study, it is essential to clearly define the two relevant terms of conventionality and marginalization so that how they function in Austen's novels can be understood.

In the example above, Isabella Thorpe is presented as a marginal character because she conforms to convention through her choices. Analyzing examples of characters who conform to convention is a helpful way to define what a marginal character is for the purpose of this study, but it will also be necessary to present a summary definition of what a marginal character looks like in broader terms. Such a character, is, of course, not the central focus of the novel; he/she is a supporting character, and more than that, most often either viewed by readers with benevolent condescension because of his/her ridiculousness, or with decided distaste because of his/her mendacity, unscrupulous schemes, and/or high-mindedness. In a thought-provoking reversal, it can be stated that characters who have the least approval of the author (the most marginal characters in the novel) are those who lived lives most consistent with the accepted standards of the majority of society, while those whom the

author presents in the most positive light are those whose behavior or standards are marginalized by the majority of people in society. Like any other author, Austen condones her characters when they believe what she herself believed or act like she herself would act. But unlike many other authors, Austen does not directly vilify the characters she creates who have divergent views from her own. Instead, she most often allows them to continue with their status quo lives (Charlotte Lucas, for example), which she shows are different from the kind of lives the heroines ultimately achieve.

Once again, this is not a simplistic polarization; however, it is the case consistently enough in Austen so that a study can be undertaken based on these definitions. Juliet McMaster illustrates the interrelatedness of character marginalization and Austen's own views in terms of Sir Walter Eliot's opinion of the navy in *Persuasion*: "Sir Walter's disapproval signals Austen's approval" (120). Therefore, it becomes clear that there are two forms of marginalization at work here. The first is the process of marginalization occurring as the non-heroes or heroines are gradually presented in an increasingly less positive way (characters themselves are being marginalized by the author through the story). The second is a marginalization which is already present in the world in which Austen places her stories, and that is the acknowledged marginalization (by society in general) of the often morally superior and nonconformist choices made by the characters who are the heroes or heroines of the novels. In addition, there is the marginalization of women which occurs in Regency period England. This marginalization, however, falls under the second form of marginalization because many of the social conventions of the day encouraged the marginalization of women. In the midst of this polarity and interaction between two different forms of marginalization,

social convention is the fulcrum on which these two categories of characters emerge. Whether a character conforms to the prevailing social conventions is one determining factor in that character's status as either hero/heroine or marginal character (marginalized within the action of the novel, not necessarily within that character's society).

It must also be noted that conventionality in and of itself is not necessarily a bad thing in Austen. Austen understood that social conventions are an important part of human culture, which is one of the reasons why the novels work so well—Austen expertly portrays how humans live immersed in culture and social conventions, and what occurs when people act contrary to the accepted conventions. Austen's novels illustrate that when societal conventions are viewed as permanent bedrocks which cannot be questioned, it often encourages people to adopt a number of misguided attitudes regarding what behavior is appropriate. After all, if adherence to social convention is given an inordinate amount of importance, it is easy to allow social convention—something that fluctuates through generations—to become almost synonymous with moral rightness—something that differs from social convention in that it is not as subjective, situational, and cultural. In this study I explore how Austen exhibits her self-awareness of societal conventions, their import for those who adhere to them, and the result of both the particular conventions themselves as well as of the culture created and fostered by adherents of the social conventions.

There is a strong dichotomy between the characters whom Austen marginalizes in the novels and the characters whom the society of Regency period England marginalizes (which Austen is realistically portraying through the novels, in regard to an accurate reflection of her own culture and society). The two categories of marginalized characters

are being marginalized by different entities. Some characters are being marginalized by society (within the novels, but perhaps as a reflection of the society Austen actually lived in) for failing to conform to social conventions (and often choosing to take a higher road as concerns morality). Other characters are being marginalized by Austen herself *because* they conformed to society's conventions. If the positive or negative outcomes of different characters' choices are considered a reflection of Austen's own beliefs, it can be concluded that Austen is making a value judgment on the social conventions of her society, by presenting the cause and effect of certain behaviors and the beliefs from which they originate. Looking at the issue of marginalization and social convention in this way, with Austen's own intent as an author in the middle of the analysis, from the starting place of the three texts, we can begin to examine which views Austen herself opposed or aligned herself with.

In order to analyze the choices of the characters in these three novels and in order to make a judgment on whether or not they conformed to social conventions, we must first have a sufficient understanding of what those conventions were. The three aspects of culture which are relevant for this study concern the social convention of Regency England as applied to monetary issues, gender roles, and social standing, and more specifically how these three issues affected women.

Regency England was not like the United States where ingenuity and ambition can aid one in climbing the social ladder to wealth and prestige. One's birth generally determined the kind of life one was destined to live. Females of the middle class landed gentry (the class which most of Austen's female characters inhabit) were economically marginalized in a number of ways. English society at this period was dominated by

males. Males were the ones who normally owned property (including a wife, whose identity, at least as far as legality was concerned, was subsumed into her husband's upon marriage). Men could go to court and had more favor under the law than did women. The law allowed men to divorce or separate from a wife (although this was rarely done). The laws of England also made it possible for men to pursue a vocation while women were not allowed the same freedom. Also, the property law of primogeniture which said that land would be passed on to the eldest son of a family added to the limited rights of females in English society at this period. Entailment which "legally formalizes this customary practice of inheritance [primogeniture]" (McMaster 119) also was a factor (focused on in *Pride and Prejudice*), and served to keep property in the paternal line, but often excluded daughters from inheriting land and being provided for. Land was extremely important at this period, and like many other financial assets, women were often denied the possession of it, unless they were also women of power and social standing such as Lady Catherine or Emma Woodhouse (the latter was allowed to maintain control of her estate because she was the only child still at home with no brothers). On the other hand, though, women were denied monetary benefits, as Edward Copeland states, "In a frustrating social irony, the pseudo-gentry [what Copeland earlier defines as a group below the landed gentry: 'a group of upper professional families living in the country'] woman finds herself responsible for the management of the household, but prevented by law and custom from exercising any significant control over the management of the family's income, a male prerogative" (Copeland 137). As far as financial issues were concerned, women at this period were caught in a web woven by men. It was extremely difficult for women to gain any semblance of independence when

they were often themselves entrenched in the belief that, because males were the ones who controlled monetary assets as well as made the laws for financial issues, that this was synonymous with deserving control of monetary issues. For example, in *Pride and Prejudice* the female Bennets (particularly Mrs. Bennet) bemoan the fact that Mr. Collins will inherit Longbourne, but they do not question the rightness of how the law entitled him to possess it upon Mr. Bennet's decease.

Jane Austen was particularly perceptive of the inequality fostered by the prevailing views of her culture when she allows some of her female heroines to question the unmitigated authority males had over money. In fact, Austen often creates characters whose values regarding financial assets present a contrast with the values of other characters. For example, on the most simplistic level, Charlotte Lucas is the polar opposite of Elizabeth Bennet, Catherine Morland is the polar opposite of Isabella Thorpe, and Emma Woodhouse is the polar opposite of Mrs. Elton. The first group of these women subtly suggest the need for more financial independence for their sex (Elizabeth refuses two offers of marriage which would have been prudent on a merely financial level, Catherine does not "flirt around" like Isabella, but has her hopes set on Henry Tilney apart from financial allurement, and Emma asserts that she doesn't need to marry, but is content to remain an independent woman, with the rare privilege of managing the financial concerns of her own home), while the second group of women, through their actions, tacitly state their concurrence with the prevailing societal views regarding women and financial concerns (Charlotte marries the arrogant, sycophantic Mr. Collins solely because he provides a home for her, Isabella abruptly shifts her allegiance from James Morland to Frederick Tilney when she discovers Frederick has a larger fortune,

and Mrs. Elton is so enamored with her emblems of financial and social status that she becomes, in a sense, a slave of what those who were powerful enough to dictate what would become the accepted standards of society [mostly males] have prescribed.

Noble birth and wealth were large factors in contributing to a person's overall lot in life. Someone from the landed gentry did not normally associate closely with someone of working class, and vice-versa. Social standing and wealth greatly determined what kind of reverence one was to be paid, what kind of partner one should seek in marriage, what kind of house one would live in, and what one could hope to achieve in life. This was a key reason why an advantageous marriage with someone who was wealthier and from a higher social class was often zealously pursued by young women from the middle class gentry. In this way, if one increased one's wealth upon marrying into a wealthier family, one's own social standing would increase and more opportunities would open up for a better life. As Debra Teachman states, "A woman . . . generally held the social position of her father, to be replaced by that of her husband if she married" (3). Marriage, then, was almost always a key to monetary security. Because this was the case, it is easy to see how marriage was so often the consuming passion and only goal of women like Mrs. Bennet, the younger Bennet sisters, Isabella Thorpe, or Harriet Smith. Because of the advantages it offered (a large one being financial provision), marriage often became a means to an end. Society was structured such that young girls had incentive to use whatever means (often these bordered on slightly deceptive if not completely immoral) in order to "catch" the young man who would bring them wealth and position. Such is the case with many of the female characters whom Austen marginalizes (those who conformed to the social conventions of the time and acted in accordance with what

society would expect and even condone). As this study progresses I will examine such cases personified in a number of Austen characters.

The study of monetary laws and incentives in Regency England leads into a study of gender roles within that society. The facts of what the laws dictated regarding money in turn influenced the way gender roles were partitioned. Because Regency England was a male-dominated society, women who merely accepted the standards set before them naturally took their allotted place dependent on or subservient to men. This usually took one of two forms. The first is that a young woman would become an excessive flirt and coquette in order to win the attention of the male sex. Interestingly, while the initial reason that a young woman would be encouraged to make a good match was because of what has already been discussed—financial security and social position—this stated end often became lost in the complexities of human relationships and flirting for its own sake often obscured the more pragmatic reasons of why it would have been encouraged in the first place (such is the case with Lydia Bennet). Jane Austen's own letters of correspondence, particularly with her sister, reveal that she herself was not exempt from flirting with handsome young gentlemen. In a letter to her sister dated the fifteenth of January, 1796, Austen writes, 'At length the Day is come on which I am to flirt my last with Tom Lefroy, & when you receive this it will be over—My tears flow as I write, at the melancholy idea' (4). It is interesting here to also note that this statement seems a trifle melodramatic for the typical Austenian tone common to her novels, so perhaps even in her personal correspondence Austen was not immune to irony and to hinting at the obsessive pursuit of coquetry practiced by many of her contemporaries. Austen was able to distance herself, at least to an extent, from the time period in which she lived, because

her novels attest to the fact that she was self-aware enough to recognize that one's views of the opposite sex and one's behavior toward them, even if those views and behavior were condoned by society in general, had consequences that were not always ideal or even palatable.

The second reason that a young woman became enamored with pursuing the role of a wife and mother (essentially the only acceptable role prescribed for respectable women at this period) is that, ultimately, there were few other vocations in this society in which a woman was conditioned to find purpose. Therefore, for a woman writer like Austen herself—especially one who never married—it would have been a constant struggle to maintain one's sense of purpose amid the nearly deafening voice of society which explicitly and implicitly repeated the refrain that a woman's place was a domestic one, concerned with marriage, the home, children, and petty tasks, at the exclusion of more robust pursuits. This is ironic given the fact that the pursuit of a suitable marriage partner for a young woman became almost an industry in its own right, a goal which was chased often with feminine ferociousness (e.g., Isabella Thorpe, Caroline Bingley, or, more subtly, Charlotte Lucas), which was encouraged by society. Austen, however, marginalizes the characters who make the pursuit of marriage such an industry, while she condones the characters like Elizabeth Bennet who refuse marriages which she believes could never bring her or her potential partner happiness, although they would have brought her financial stability.

The third aspect of Regency culture which is relevant to this study is the issue of social standing. This has been touched upon within the discussion of the first two issues, but a few more things may be said. In Regency England, social standing was an integral

part of one's identity. And not only was one's social position integral to one's identity, whatever that social position happened to be was determined by one's birth and rarely changed over the course of one's life (although a couple generations of amassing wealth could propel a family into a higher class [Le Faye 73]), unless due to an advantageous marriage, which has already been discussed.

English society during this time period was undoubtedly hierarchical. Diedre Le Faye gives a helpful summary of the various classes of English society during the Regency period. The ranking of society began with the King and then included dukes, earls, barons, and the like. Next were the baronets, then the knights, then the landed gentry who were themselves split up into high, middle, and lower classes. Beneath the landed gentry were farmers and tradesmen who were often looked down upon. Austen herself was a part of the middle class landed gentry and it is this social class which she bestows upon most of her characters. Edward Copeland examines the fact that in *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet, from the lower landed gentry, without a respectable sum for a dowry, comes into 10,000 pounds a year upon marrying Mr. Darcy. Copeland states, "it is a telling triumph of Austen's economic ideology to turn so fabulous a landed-gentry income into the earnest, cash-conscious programme of her own rank" (138). Through her portrayal of Elizabeth as an intelligent young woman with an independent turn of mind, Austen communicates that Elizabeth (and thus the lower class to which she belonged) had something to offer in terms of views on money to someone of Darcy's standing. Because Elizabeth would have been used to a penny-pinching way of managing finances (in turn due to the social class to which she belonged), she could offer Darcy and those of his social class a new view on the financial and thus social privileges he and they often

took for granted. Since Austen herself had to live on a small income, shared with her mother and sister upon her father's decease, she knew from firsthand experience what it was like to be a member of the "pseudo-gentry" and to be "cash-conscious" while those of the upper classes never had to think of such financial concerns.

This brief summary of how English society was divided up is helpful for a close study of Austen characters, because once an understanding of the various classes in Regency England is gained, it is easier to see where each Austen character fits and subsequently what kind of life he/she was likely to lead. For example, Emma Woodhouse looks down upon Robert Martin as a match for Harriet because Mr. Martin is a farmer, while Emma imagines Harriet's ancestry to be much more prestigious. Also, the Bingleys are an example of a family who originally came from the merchant class, but worked their way up the social ladder through a few generations of prosperous business. Bingley's act of buying Netherfield Park is the final stratagem needed for him and his family to be a part of the landed gentry, quite literally, the genteel class who owned land. It is implied in *Pride and Prejudice* that the Bingley family's wealth came from trade. In order to distance themselves from this lower-class affiliation, it was incumbent upon them to purchase land and to sever any remaining ties they had with their business ventures so that they could successfully enter the middle class gentry. It is therefore ironic that Caroline Bingley often turns up her nose at the Bennet sisters' low connections when she herself came from a lower social class than the Bennet girls, whose father was a landowner and a member of the gentry. Through her portrayal of characters belonging to various classes, with varying views on their own statuses, Austen reveals some of her own views regarding the standards on which individuals ought to be judged. McMaster

states, "The quality of humanity is to be judged by moral and humane standards, Austen suggests, not by social status; but like her own temporary snobs, Darcy and Emma, she pays full attention to their social status first" (125). After all, it is only by paying attention to these characters' social statuses that the fact that they eventually learn humility can be appreciated.

Now that a brief background has been established regarding some important areas in which social conventions manifested themselves, the Austen characters who will be examined in relation to conformity to social convention, and who are ultimately marginalized by Austen in these three novels, can be introduced. In the next chapter, examining social conventions and marginalization as they play out in *Northanger Abbey*, I will focus on General Tilney, Mrs. Allen, and John and Isabella Thorpe. These characters, antitypes of the hero and heroine of the novel, and thus characters who behave in accordance with what Austen suggests are mistaken beliefs, are characters who conform to society's conventions particularly regarding the goals society sanctioned and promoted. I will also look at the counterparts of these characters such as Catherine Moreland and Henry Tilney in order to set up a contrast with the characters whom Austen implicitly condemns through the situation in which they find themselves at the novel's end.

I am beginning this study with an examination of *Northanger Abbey* not only because it is Jane Austen's earliest written novel of the three, but also because pursuit of accepted societal objectives—the area in which conformity to societal convention can be examined with the most clarity in the novel—is the most overarching one, and therefore suitable for framing the examination of conformity and marginalization. Conformity to

society's sanctioned goals is overarching because, of course, these goals can take the form of the other social conventions already discussed: those of monetary issues, gender roles, and social standing. Therefore, in beginning with *Northanger Abbey*, all of the relevant social conventions will be touched upon (along with the particular way they are dealt with in this novel). Conformity to what society prescribes as appropriate goals also envelopes conformity to what social convention stated regarding monetary issues, social status, and gender roles, the topics which will be examined in later chapters. Therefore, this will provide a convenient foundation for the discussions in the following chapters.

The next chapter will examine marginalization and conformity to social conventions in terms of *Pride and Prejudice*. Because *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen's most popular novel, there is a copious amount of criticism on it. In addition to this, there is a large amount of information to examine in regard to the way the characters in the novel interact with the concepts of marginalization and social conformity. There are many noteworthy characters in *Pride and Prejudice*, both for their conformity to social convention and for their unconformity, and thus I will not be able to examine all of them. My primary focus in this chapter is the social conventions which concern monetary issues, as well as the gender roles society prescribed for men and women. Austen's depiction of Charlotte Lucas, Mr. Collins, Lady Catherine, the Bingley sisters, Mary Bennet, and also Lydia and Wickham highlight the social conventions which revolve around financial issues and gender roles. Examining the way in which each of these characters conforms to the social conventions regarding monetary issues and gender roles will once again provide a contrast with the hero and heroine of *Pride and Prejudice* and will emphasize the parallelism which is at work between the marginal characters and the

heroes and heroines. Alex Woloch calls this phenomenon asymmetry, by which he means that the marginal characters in Austen parallel her heroes or heroines, thus providing a form of subverted symmetry since the marginal characters move alongside of the heroes or heroines and yet they are not given the attention the main characters are allowed. In this way, for example, it will be helpful to examine Elizabeth Bennet alongside of Charlotte Lucas or Lydia in order to highlight the same monetary issues and gender roles their society placed upon them, and then further, to take note of the disparate ways each of them dealt with these conventions (either by conformity or nonconformity), which in turn serves to define their status as either marginal character or hero or heroine.

In the following chapter I will be examining *Emma* and analyzing the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Elton, Mrs. and Miss Bates, and Harriet Smith. I will be examining the way these characters conformed to social conventions in terms of social standing. It will be interesting to look at a character such as Mrs. Elton who has a distorted view of self because she believes she is on a higher plane of social standing than she really is and then to look at a characters such as Harriet Smith who must be convinced by Emma that she deserves someone of a higher social standing as a marriage partner because she herself must be a gentleman's daughter. It will also be interesting to contrast these characters with Emma herself since the core of the novel is concerned with Emma's journey to realize that she does not know everything and that her high social standing and comfortable lifestyle do not give her the prerogative to dictate the lives of others around her.

"Society" in general has been mentioned extensively, and therefore a fuller explanation of what is meant by this term is warranted. The term "society" is rather vague

at its core, which is due, of course, to the fact that society is made up of people who, as far as they are a part of the collective entity, do not have any individual characteristics. It is important to remember, however, that when "society" is mentioned, for example, in a discussion of how Elizabeth Bennet flaunted the conventions of society, it is not a disembodied entity which is being referred to, but rather a collective of people who share the same values and beliefs and who adhere to the same cultural norms, thus both creating and furthering what the cultural norms (conventions) are for various aspects of life, such as monetary issues, gender roles, and social class. Therefore, one can see why a character like Elizabeth Bennet who refuses marriages which are advantageous from a monetary and even social standpoint—thus breaking with the majority view of the individuals who comprised her culture—is sometimes condemned by those characters who embody the conventional view, such as Mrs. Bennet or the Miss Bingleys. Elizabeth's actions illustrate the polarization that the heroine of each of the three novels is generating as she increasingly creates a division between herself and the novel's minor characters through her refusal to perfectly conform to social conventions and, conversely, through her adherence to the standards she lives by as an individual.

Chapter 2: *Northanger Abbey*: Going for the Goal (but is it worth it?)

Consistent with the concept of social convention and marginalization which is central to this study, Austen's *Northanger Abbey* presents the reader with four characters whose beliefs and behaviors are enlightening to analyze in terms of their conformity to social convention as well as the contrast they create with the heroine, Catherine Morland. *Northanger Abbey* is Austen's earliest written novel and continues the "mixed mockery and defence of fiction" (Brownstein 36) which characterized Austen's earlier but less well-known short stories. Bruce Stovel states that throughout the novel Austen sifts the events of the plot through the mind of her heroine so that the reader sees the proceedings of the action through Catherine's mind (243). This situates the novel as a *bildungsroman*, as the chronicle of a young girl's growth from un unsophisticated tomboy to a young lady who cultivates a wild and vivid imagination (Brownstein states that these Gothic novels "encourage a girl to behave like other girls—that is, like that extraordinary representation of conventional femininity" [36]), and eventually to a young woman who learns the importance of tempering her imagination with sound judgment. As the reader is drawn into observing Catherine's progress of learning, he/she is also presented with a number of characters who not only exhibit conventional beliefs and behaviors when they are first introduced but who maintain these conventional beliefs and behaviors throughout the novel. An analysis of these characters reveals the detriments of blindly adhering to social conventions, while also providing a contrast with Catherine, the novel's heroine.

Austen presents Mrs. Allen, John and Isabella Thorpe, and General Tilney in a negative light. These characters are also the ones who follow the social conventions of the day the most closely. Their motives in doing so range from unequivocally evil

motives to merely passive attitudes, but all of them subject themselves to society's dictates for them without questioning the value of the conventions. In fact, these characters all adopt the goals which society condones as their own and pursue these goals with varying degrees of fervor. The conventionally-minded characters become increasingly marginalized as the plot progresses while Catherine, although originally conventional in her adherence to the romantic ideals as seen through popular Gothic fiction of the day, becomes less tied to these conventions, and therefore, instead of becoming marginalized, she moves into full focus as the heroine, as we are told she is all along. Therefore, it will be seen that in *Northanger Abbey* Austen constructs an interplay between convention and breaking free from convention. Brownstein states that *Northanger Abbey* "contrasts the implausibilities of romance with the commonplaces of common life—ordinary life . . . only to show that the two have much in common. Mocking conventions and clichés, it suggests that they are inescapable—and that the best and most interesting way to live is with awareness of them, and in dialogue, as this novel is, with others" (42). Catherine, like Austen, lives in a society which was continually imposing conventional views upon her, but, as we will see, unlike Mrs. Allen, Isabella and John Thorpe, and General Tilney, Catherine is able to transcend the clichés of social conventions and to become her own person.

As stated in chapter one, Austen's society was heavily influenced by money, particularly in regard to young women pursuing marriages for the sake of financial gain. Susan Zlotnick discusses "the marriage market" in *Northanger Abbey*, stating that, "The pleasures and pains of living in a market economy consume the characters in Austen's novel [*Northanger Abbey*]" (277). The concept of the marriage market will be especially

relevant in analyzing the character of Isabella Thorpe who pursues a marriage partner as one might pursue the best bargain at a market. Drawing on Zlotnick's explanation of "the relationship between the eighteenth-century novel and the rise to dominance of the capitalist marketplace" (278), we can more clearly see the intense pursuit that marriage often became for a young, fortuneless girl, due to the social conventions of the time. The premise of capitalism is that everyone will act in accordance with his/her own interests and will therefore stimulate the economy by being as productive citizens as possible. In the same way, Isabella Thorpe and the other marginal characters of the novel act in accordance with their own interests (condoned by social convention) when they ardently pursue financial gain and social standing. The "invisible heart" which Adam Smith said was present in capitalism is often as difficult or impossible to see amidst the scheming and deception of the characters in the metaphoric marriage market as it is in the capitalist economy. This causes one to wonder if Austen was not expertly hinting that perhaps the original good intent (if it existed) of some of her period's social conventions, such as the inordinate amount of pressure placed on young women to make a good match, was now nonexistent and that therefore, the conventions should not be adhered to any longer. The characters in the novel whom Austen paints in a negative light are enmeshed in their society's system and do not think to question it. However, examining their behavior allows us as readers and critics to question this system of conventions, which is likely a part of Austen's intention in writing.

Mrs. Allen is one such character who is enmeshed in the social conventions of the day. When the reader is first introduced to Mrs. Allen she appears to be insipid. She is the anti-type of the woman who would be expected to elaborately foil all of Catherine

Morland's (the heroine's) hopes. Catherine is presented as the burgeoning heroine, just going off on her grand adventure. Mrs. Allen is her chaperone, the typical character who, in most Gothic novels (which Austen is parodying) would be the person who occasions trouble and distress for the heroine. However, Mrs. Allen is far more concerned with fashion and dress than with, "intercepting her [Catherine's] letters, ruining her character, or turning her out of doors" (964), standard behavior of the typical nemesis in a real Gothic novel of the time. Mrs. Allen's very insipidity in all respects excepting fashion, and then her rather excessive passion in this area, contributes to her conventionality. Mrs. Allen allows her interests to be consumed solely by the petty subject of how women adorn themselves, a testament to the fact that she subjugated herself to the strictures society placed upon the scope of a woman's mind. Austen states that, "Dress was her passion . . . our heroine's entrée into life could not take place till after three or four days had been spent in learning what was mostly worn, and her chaperon was provided with a dress of the newest fashion" (965). Mrs. Allen also takes so long in dressing that Catherine does not get to the ballroom and the dance till the room is crowded (965). Love of fashion consumes Mrs. Allen's thoughts and filters out into her actions. Mrs. Allen's passion for fashion, however, is not limited to having fashionable dress for herself. Her desire always to have the newest fashions also makes her jealous of anyone who is more in sync with the latest dress than herself. For example, upon meeting her old acquaintance Mrs. Thorpe, Austen states that, "Mrs. Allen was now quite happy . . . She had found some acquaintance . . . and, as the completion of good fortune, had found these friends by no means so expensively dressed as herself" (973). The subject of fashion also dictates

Mrs. Allen's attitude and behavior toward others—a trivial subject to dictate such a consequential part of life.

Fashion and dress were part of—or at least an extension of—the domestic scene, and were therefore considered suitable subjects for the contents of a woman's mind, due to the fact that they were trivial and consequently not dangerous. The female's preoccupation and skill in such a subject as fashion apparently did not impress Jane Austen. Lloyd W. Brown states that "Jane Austen perceives 'special' female talents not as a natural 'talent,' but as the unenviable results of social roles" (327). Therefore, in portraying Mrs. Allen's obsession with the latest dress and fashion, Austen is marginalizing her character, by hinting that her individuality has been compromised by her inadvertent submission to society's plan, which, of course, was a one-size-fits-all affair and did not take individuality into account. Connections have been made between a woman's smallness of mind in Austen novels and her preoccupation with dress and fashion. Efrat Margalit has written an article entitled "Pettiness and Petticoats" which explores this connection. The character of Mrs. Allen presents prime evidence for this theory. For example, when Catherine visits the Allens after General Tilney rudely requires her to leave Northanger Abbey, Mrs. Allen spends more time talking about dress than she does about the rude way Catherine was treated. She absent-mindedly and repeatedly remarks that, "I really have not patience with the General" and then goes on to say, "Only think, my dear, of my having got that frightful great rent in my best Mechlin so charmingly mended, before I left Bath, that one can hardly see where it was" (1083). Instead of choosing to engage in a more vigorous discussion involving human relationships and the well-being of her young charge, Mrs. Allen reverts to talking about

fashion, showcasing the vapidity of women's occupations, which were consistent with the status quo.

In creating a character like Mrs. Allen who was preoccupied with fashion, Austen hints at the fact that women did not have many other options open to them in which to invest their time and energy. In accordance with the smallness of mind women were often content with, Henry Tilney observes that, "In my opinion, nature has given them so much, that they never find it necessary to use more than half" (1017). Because Mrs. Allen is more concerned with the clothes which covered her body than with the mind which was occupied with choosing the clothes, she is certainly a prime example of this unfortunate truth at which Henry playfully hints. This recalls a poem by Jonathan Swift entitled "The Furniture of a Woman's Mind." In this poem Swift satirizes many women of his day whose minds were stuffed full of useless information and opinions, but who lacked genuine understanding. One of the particular satirized elements in the poem is the proclivity of women to wax loquacious upon the subject of fashion: "In choosing lace, a critic nice,/ Knows to a groat the lowest price;/ Can in her female clubs dispute,/ What linen best the silk will suit, / What colours each complexion match,/ And where with art to place a patch" (ll. 27-32). This description perfectly fits Mrs. Allen. However, such trivial thoughts are in direct contrast to the more robust thoughts which Catherine entertains—thoughts robust and imaginative enough that she frightens herself with them.

Jane Austen asserts that women like Mrs. Allen were ordinary individuals. She was "one of a *numerous* class of females, whose society can raise no other emotion than surprise at there being any men in the world who could like them well enough, to marry them. She had neither beauty, genius, accomplishment, nor manner" (964 emphasis

mine), and yet, like many women, Mrs. Allen was pleasant enough, and even pleasant enough to have garnered the attention of a "sensible, intelligent man, like Mr. Allen" (964). Society's prescriptions for the proper pursuits of women and girls were so overarching that not only did they influence the minds of women and girls, but they also influenced what men considered suitable pursuits for women and girls. Even a "sensible, intelligent man, like Mr. Allen" accepted the triviality of what were the accepted pursuits of women. We are given no evidence that Mr. Allen attempts to redirect the triviality of his wife's pursuits. He appears to hold the philosophy of "live and let live." For example, when Catherine visits him and his wife after Catherine has so rudely been dispatched from Northanger by General Tilney, "Mr. Allen expressed himself on the occasion with the reasonable resentment of a sensible friend" (1083). Mr. Allen always says what is sensible and proper and then leaves his wife to make her inane comments, without interfering or correcting, as this same paragraph shows from Mrs. Allen's comments quoted above. Therefore we see that the majority view in Jane Austen's culture regarding suitable pursuits for the female sex (things such as preoccupation with fashion) were shared by members of both sexes; men largely promoted the marginalization of women to the domestic sphere and "numerous" women blindly accepted this marginalization.

The obsessive pursuit of fashion was merely one way in which women who were confined by society to the domestic sphere attempted (probably unconsciously like Mrs. Allen) to make better use of their minds. Unfortunately, consuming one's mind with the latest fashions was not a true solution to the quandary in which women found themselves, possessing minds which begged to be used, but lacking the autonomy to make use of them in any sort of education or profession as the male sex could. The lack of education

available to women played a key role in the commonly engaged in trivial pursuits to which women devoted their time. Deidre Le Faye states that, "Until well into the nineteenth century education was not considered necessary for girls. In fact, it was felt to be rather a hindrance to their settlement in life, as they would be regarded with suspicion if thought clever or bookish" (87). This is precisely the dilemma which had Mary Wollstonecraft up in arms in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. In this work Wollstonecraft argues that, indeed women are often ignorant and content with the smallness of the pursuits to which society confined them; however, this is due to the male domination of education and women's subsequent powerlessness to achieve an education, and this is why women often did not use their minds for better purposes. Wollstonecraft states that women, "might, also, study politics, and settle their benevolence on the broadest basis . . . Business of various kinds they might likewise pursue, if they were educated in a more orderly manner. . . . Women would not then marry for a support" (Teachman 97). Le Faye echoes Wollstonecraft's lament over the poverty of education for women at this period: "The daughters of the landed gentry families would probably have had only the minimum of formal instruction before leaving home . . . to marry country gentleman in their own rank of society" (87). This restriction on the female sex created a vicious cycle in which women were restricted from living as full members of society by being barred from the education offered to the male sex, and consequently, because they were barred from attaining an education, they did not realize their loss, embodied in the triviality they were often content with. Social convention encouraged women to embrace the status quo rather than to question it like Wollstonecraft did. Miriam Ascarelli believes that Austen was another woman, like Wollstonecraft, who

recognized the position in which social convention (largely controlled by males) placed women. Ascarelli states that Austen did not overtly align herself with Wollstonecraft because Wollstonecraft's views were too dangerous to espouse at the time. However, Ascarelli goes on to state that Austen, like Wollstonecraft, is aware of women's need for a rational mind. Gilbert and Gubar, in their seminal work *The Madwoman in the Attic* go so far as to state that in writing *Northanger Abbey,* Austen is expressing her feminist angst at male suppression of females (*North**anger** Abbey* [emphasis theirs]*)* which often resulted in girls like Catherine Morland who had to rise out of their ignorant state of being. Whether *Northanger Abbey* is actually an expression of Austen's anger is not as important, however, as the fact that Austen recognized the poverty of mental faculties with which adherence to social conventions was encouraging women to be content.

Even Austen herself was not immune to becoming immersed in the common trivial pursuits of women. In a letter to her sister she gives a detailed description of what kind of things she saw while in Bath. "I saw some gauzes in a shop in Bath Street yesterday at only 4 a yard, but they were not so good or so pretty as mine.—Flowers are very much worn, & Fruit is still more the thing . . ." (42). But although Austen was immersed in her society enough to take note of these womanish interests, she was not so absorbed in them that she failed to recognize their limitations. In accordance with Austen's awareness of what her culture encouraged women to focus on, she writes her first novel about a girl who learns to transcend the limits which her society placed upon the female mind. Catherine realizes that real life is just as demanding on her as the dramatic Gothic romances with all their old houses, evil villains, and dashing gentlemen,

are on the heroine. Furthermore, Catherine realizes that to navigate life, she must have more resources at her disposal than melodramatic preconceptions.

Because Austen saw the value of a rational mind for women as well as men, it is obvious to see why she would have marginalized such a character as Mrs. Allen who fully embraces the triviality social convention encouraged her to embrace. Although Mrs. Allen may seem like a caricature, she is unfortunately typical of many women in her society, which is part of what Austen brings to our attention through her portrayal of Mrs. Allen. Christina Neckles posits that Austen's novels encourage us to disregard certain characters – the foolish, nonsensical, minor ones, thus implying that such people are of no value. Neckles asserts that this can be a dangerous implication, because, after all, we saw earlier that even Austen admits that there are "numerous" women who share Mrs. Allen's pettiness and smallness of mind, while the Catherine Morlands, Elizabeth Bennets, or Emma Woodhouses are much rarer. It is ironic, then, that nearly every reader of Austen's novels will identify with Catherine, rather than with Mrs. Allen or any other marginal character. Neckles's concern that Austen's marginalization of characters who are, in reality, more realistic (because, as she believes, most of us are rather conventional) than the heroines and that this will lead to marginalization of average people by the few who are above average in real life does have some validity. However, the fact that Austen has the story turn out well for the heroine who rose above the demands of society does not encourage disregard for averageness so much as it promotes independence and free-thinking. Catherine is at first submissive to what everyone tells her, good or bad, but as she matures, she begins to make more informed decisions. So although early on in the novel her respect for Mrs. Allen's opinion occasions an impropriety because of Mrs.

Allen's lack of judgment (Catherine rides alone with John Thorpe in his gig), Catherine later assumes a greater degree of autonomy when, for example, she refuses to answer Isabella's pleading letters. In this way, it is not so much something inherently superior in Catherine which is being praised and sanctioned by Austen, but rather the fact that Catherine allows her mind to expand and to grow and to become home to deeper thoughts than fashion and even than the girlish imaginings occasioned by the horror novels she read.

If Mrs. Allen conforms to the social conventions of the day by being content with the severely limited sphere assigned to her mental faculties, and by deriving sufficient stimulation for living from what the pursuit of the latest fashions offered her, Isabella Thorpe conforms to the social conventions of the day by being the epitome of the young woman who attempts to use social conventions to achieve what she wants, but who, in the end, is manipulated by society herself. In believing she is acting out her autonomy in choosing the choicest marriage partner (from a purely monetary and social class standpoint), Isabella actually becomes tethered to what society's dictates for a girl of her social standing. Thomas Gisborne, a contemporary of Austen, in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* acknowledges that "If a young woman be described as thus married [to have made a "good match"], the terms imply, that she is united to a man whose rank and fortune is such, when compared with her own or those of her parents, that in point of precedence, in point of command of finery and of money, she is, more or less, a gainer by the bargain" (Teachman 72). This was the predominant view of the time, the view which most people in England took for granted when "a good match" was mentioned. Isabella's adherence to this definition causes her to act accordingly. When

she and Catherine spy two gentleman in whom Isabella feigns disinterest so that Catherine suggests that the two girls wait a few moments so that they will not encounter the gentlemen, Isabella coyly states, 'I shall not pay them any such compliment, I assure you. I have no notion of treating men with such respect. *That* is the way to spoil them.' After this, the narrator says, "Catherine had nothing to oppose against such reasoning; and therefore, to shew the independence of Miss Thorpe, and her resolution of humbling the sex, they set off immediately as fast as they could walk, in pursuit of the two young men" (977). From this passage, it is clear that Isabella is fond of asserting her control over the male sex, but in reality, she was completely susceptible to the power they exerted over her in the superficial fulfillment she believed they offered. Isabella does realize, however, that accepting the social conventions which said she must make an advantageous marriage made it of paramount importance for her to subject herself to whatever it took—flirtation, deception, etc.—in order to gain a suitable marriage partner. Zlotnick states, "A young woman with no fortune and with only a tenuous grasp on gentility, Isabella knows she must sell herself, so she earnestly labors to exert some control over her life as a commodity by imagining herself as both merchant and merchandise" (282). While feigning nonchalance, Isabella is actively pursuing an advantageous marriage. Brown states that, "Many times Jane Austen characters' behavior reveal the 'sex-seeker' nature inculcated into many girls of the period by books, mothers, sisters, etc. and this is due largely to lack of true education" (331). Because Austen portrays Isabella in a negative way, we can conclude that she (Austen) is critiquing this 'sex-seeker' behavior which girls like Isabella adopted through outside influences (society). For example, when James Morland and John Thorpe come to Bath, Isabella

plays the duplicitous role of pretending to be Catherine's friend while she is really pursuing a connection with James Morland. Austen has her condescendingly say to Catherine, "My dear creature, I am afraid I must leave you, your brother is so amazingly impatient to begin; I know you will not mind my going away" (983). While Isabella keeps up a front with Catherine, saying many nice things to her "dearest friend," in reality she is avidly but coyly chasing James Morland. Her "friendship" with Catherine is only the means to an end—what she believes to be an advantageous marriage.

Social convention would have lauded Isabella's rejection of James Morland for the more advantageous match with Frederick Tilney, and since the means justify the ends, would even have condoned the dishonest ploys in which she engages in pursuit of what she thought were her own desires, but were, in reality, the cliché views she had uncritically allowed to become hers. Although Catherine at first goes along with Isabella since Isabella is "four years older than Miss Morland, and at least four years better informed" in regard to "dress, balls, flirtations, and quizzes" (972), she ultimately rejects Isabella's methods of trickery and false pretenses and of saying things she does not truly mean. The moral breaches Isabella commits when Catherine discovers that she has mercenary motives for leaving James Morland in favor of Frederick Tilney, and that she had mercenary motives even when she pursued James in the first place, cause Catherine to reject her friendship and refuse to answer her letters of supplication, rather than to follow in her footsteps. Isabella, however, continues on her path of pursuing an advantageous match at all costs.

As stated earlier, Zlotnick believes that there exists a metaphoric marriage market involving buying, selling, and haggling in which the novel's characters participate.

Jonathan Culler echoes this when he states, “Jane Austen’s novels narrate a national marriage market” (52). Isabella Thorpe, in particular, takes a lead role in this marketplace in her pursuit of a marriage partner who will offer her what she desires in regard to wealth and social standing—exactly the two elements which social convention deemed of utmost importance for a young woman of little fortune and status, as the earlier quote by Thomas Gisborne indicates. Also, it is ironic that through her fervent pursuit of wealth and high social standing in a marriage partner, Isabella conforms to what social convention dictated in terms of the role that society assigned her as a female. She energetically and coyly pursued the role of a wife by using every advantage she was endowed with as a female. She pretends to repudiate men and value Catherine’s friendship more highly than any attraction a man had to offer, while all the while she is calculating her plans and haggling over James and Frederick as if she were deciding which was the better woven piece of linen for sale at the market. It would seem, then, that Austen is giving a woman—Isabella—the power to objectify men. Zlotnick makes a pertinent statement: “Isabella Thorpe, whose sentimental rhetoric (derived from novels) is a mere cover for her rational and self-interested participation in the marketplace, has the greatest faith in commerce’s liberating possibilities for women, and Austen responds to her by making her the novel’s biggest loser and sending her back to London, alone and unengaged” (279). In allowing the pursuit of a husband for wealth and social standing—what the social conventions of the day deemed a proper pursuit for a young woman—to become her consuming goal, Isabella is a case in point of how Austen calls the social conventions of the day into question. She does this by revealing how young girls often made the pursuit of a suitable husband into a game, but then realized that what may have

begun with flirting and white lies (seemingly frivolous things) often ended in bleak realities for those who made a bad bargain or for those whose powers of haggling were stripped from them by others who entered the marketplace. Isabella believes that to secure a marriage partner who has wealth is of utmost importance, and thus all her hypocritical behavior can be excused because she is pursuing what she has been encouraged to pursue, and what every girl like her was encouraged by society to pursue. Isabella's "conviction that wealth is a sure passport to freedom, the means through which genuine choice can be guaranteed" (Zlotnick 281) is juxtaposed with the fact that, although she believes she is in command of her pursuit of a suitable marriage partner (likely because she had been conditioned to pursue this goal from a young age, but was just beginning to live out the actions originating in her convictions), "Isabella has command of little but her own person" (281). And once she achieved what she has been pursuing all along (a marriage of wealth and status), she will not even have that, for the social conventions of the day severely limited a wife's autonomy.

Isabella is fooled into thinking she has more autonomy than she does because, instead of allowing men like James Morland and Frederick Tilney to weigh her charms as a possible marriage partner, she believes she is beating them at their own game by evaluating them before they can evaluate her. Zlotnick asserts that Isabella endeavors to subvert what Laura Mulvey has defined as "the male gaze" and to give its power to women. Marina Cano Lopez states that: "Laura Mulvey coined the label 'the male gaze' to describe the act of looking usually exercised by men on women" (n.p). By "gazing" at James Morland and Frederick Tilney and taking into account the possibilities they offered her as marriage partners, Isabella believes she has subverted the male gaze. In this way,

Isabella is an extreme example of what would logically result from the social conventions of the day and what they encouraged in young women. Despite being a detestable character because of her shameless pursuit of the gentleman who offers the most money and the deception she employs to that end, Isabella does exhibit a thorough understanding of what life would offer her if she adopted the standards society laid out for her. She does not realize, however, like Catherine eventually does, that to gain her own sense of volition was not possible within the current social conventions, and to adopt those conventions was to doom herself to being a part of the haggling process, believing she was an autonomous participant, but all along being the one manipulated by those with the true power—the men.

Isabella's brother, John Thorpe, can be compared to a male version of Isabella, in the sense that, he, too, is out in the market, attempting to make the best purchase he can in a marriage partner in terms of wealth. All of John Thorpe's actions have this one objective at their core—that of gaining the most by giving the least. This is true of his pursuit of Catherine when he is under the impression that she has wealth to offer him if he married her. However, not only does Austen reveal to the reader how John Thorpe conducts his marriage pursuits, she also gives us an insightful and comical parallel which corresponds to the way he conducts his marriage pursuits in his incessant talk of the deals he got when he bargained for his horses and gig. It becomes apparent, then, that Catherine is just another "good bargain" which John Thorpe hopes to secure for himself. Society dictated that it was prudent to marry a woman of wealth and status, and since John believes Catherine to offer these credentials, he does what is in his power to secure her.

In the character of John Thorpe we see the other side of the metaphoric marriage market—the male side. John Thorpe knows that he is the shopper, the purchaser, and that, as Henry Tilney states, women only have "the right of refusal," and not the autonomy to actively choose themselves, Isabella's notions to the contrary. John Thorpe has ascribed the privileges of a gentleman to himself without also adopting the behavior of a gentleman. Juliet McMaster states that "The country gentleman, who leads a leisured existence and who subsists on income from land and inheritance, is at his best the moral and social ideal as a partner for a heroine. But the condition takes some living up to: Austen . . . insists that with the privileges go extensive responsibilities" (118) John Thorpe, however, grabs at the privileges without taking into account the responsibilities. In defining a gentleman as a man who owns land and has a degree of wealth, society had done itself a disservice. Instead of encouraging a greater degree of responsibility to accompany a greater degree of social and financial privilege (as Mr. Darcy and Mr. Knightley are aware of), the social conventions of the day tended to give unscrupulous gentlemen like John Thorpe a free pass to retain the privileges of leisure and spending money freely, while not requiring them to hold to a certain standard of behavior which came to be associated with a man who had the resources in life which were apparently supposed to cultivate genteel character to complement his genteel social status. John Thorpe makes no scruples of swearing around Catherine, nor is he concerned with protecting her honor by being conscious of propriety. On the contrary, John, like Isabella, has a mind to stretch the reins social conventions gave him as far as possible.

The profligate young man is a common character in Austen's novels (Wickham and Willoughby come readily to mind). John Thorpe is such a character. However, in her

portrayal of John Thorpe, Austen does not provide him with the typical easy manners and appearance of kindness that others of his kind had mastered. In John Thorpe we find the pseudo-gentleman for what he is. After all, even Catherine is not fooled for long into believing John Thorpe is someone by whom she might hope to be "purchased" ("The compliment of John Thorpe's affection did not make amends for this thoughtlessness in his sister. She was almost as far from believing as from wishing it to be sincere" [1034]). John Thorpe is on the outside what he is on the inside and because of this, it is easier to observe his character and how the social conventions of the day allowed him to claim a gentleman's status without any more requirements than a degree of wealth and a suitable social standing. John Thorpe adopts what society has prescribed for him in the sense of his privileges as a gentleman, but he rejects the behavior that was originally tied to such privileges. So we see that, as with Isabella's flirtations and coquettish behavior, because the goals condoned by the social conventions of the time often required selfish and devious motives to attain, John Thorpe's behavior is a testament to the relationship between the goals sanctioned by social conventions and the scheming behavior which the pursuit of these goals often encouraged. The inordinate emphasis Regency society placed upon wealth and social standing in marriage and the roles men and women were encouraged to play in pursuit of such an advantageous marriage often resulted in marginalization of the female sex. At the same time, the excessive emphasis on achieving a beneficial marriage fostered the dominance of the male sex by presenting a sort of marriage market where the female only had "the right of refusal," as if she was on display for the males to "gaze" upon and haggle over. Because the emphasis in a marriage relationship lay elsewhere, true virtue or original thought were often marginalized

concepts themselves. The measurement of what was "good" was subtly metamorphosing into social and financial status because wealth and social standing were the values that society coveted most. Thus, these things held the greatest amount of power. Although he likely could not articulate the philosophy behind what he valued and why, John Thorpe is a clear example of the failure of the current social conventions to keep gentlemanly behavior linked with the status of a gentleman.

Because Isabella and John Thorpe exhibit one of the unfortunate consequences of social convention—that the way in which one pursued life goals could be separated from the original purpose of the goals themselves—this reveals that Austen was critiquing and satirizing the breakdown of the place morality played in pursuing a marriage partner. In light of the happy ending Henry Tilney and Catherine Morland achieve, it is interesting to note that the nature of the "filial disobedience" (1090) in which Henry Tilney engages in applying for Catherine's hand, is disobedience to a parent who also, like John Thorpe, exalts wealth and social prestige above virtue and morality, and in a sense views wealth and social prestige as synonymous with conjugal happiness. General Tilney's behavior reveals even more clearly than does John Thorpe's that the fault behind the exaltation of wealth and social status in a possible marriage is rooted in a disproportionate amount of class pride—pride not only in his son's connections, but in how those connections would reflect on himself, because of his affiliation with his son. A prime way in which Austen draws a distinction between Catherine and the characters in the novel who ultimately do not attain what they desire is their differences in moral standards. While Catherine considers such things as the propriety of being alone with an unfamiliar gentleman or of rummaging through the contents of a room at Northanger Abbey (although her scruples

in this regard do not prevent her from doing so, to her later remorse), Isabella, John, and as we will explore further, General Tilney, do not base their evaluation of people in the person's character but in the externals of their status. Henry Tilney even tells Catherine in an indirect compliment that, "[her] mind is warped by an innate principle of general integrity" (1072). As a commentary on social behavior, Austen is perceptive enough to recognize that these three, like the majority of members of their society, have obscured what is of legitimate importance with what is only of superficial importance—they have confused the inner with the outer and in so doing, have contributed to the decline of morality by behaving so consistently with the goals which society encouraged them to lust after.

General Tilney is not in the marriage market himself. However, like other characters in Austen novels such as Mrs. Bennet or even Emma, the General takes a keen interest in the suitability of the marriages of those who are close to him. For the General, as for Isabella and John, wealth and social status are the chief concerns and chief requirements for a girl who wishes to marry one of his sons or for a man who wishes to marry his daughter. General Tilney has fallen into the trap of believing that wealth and prestige are of utmost importance and he directs his behavior accordingly. General Tilney concurs with Gisborne's definition of "a good match," and therefore, like other marginal characters in Austen, assumes the majority position.

General Tilney's behavior toward Catherine undergoes a complete metamorphosis—a fact that testifies to the shallowness occasioned by the exaltation of wealth and rank. Upon John Thorpe's communication that Catherine is a young woman of wealth and social standing, the General self-deprecatingly invites her to accompany his

family back to Northanger Abbey. Once at the Abbey he continues to be almost sycophantic in his concern that Catherine approve of his family and their home. However, when he finds out that Catherine cannot offer the wealth and status he believed she had, he forces her to leave his house in a fit of temper. In fact, he doesn't even have the dignity to ask Catherine to leave himself, but forces his daughter Eleanor to inform her of her need for departure, an important observation in light of the gender roles to which the General otherwise adhered, but refused to uphold when an unpleasant situation arose and it was easier to dictate the pseudo power of arranging Catherine's departure to a female instead of shouldering the burden for his miscalculation of Catherine's means and status himself. Eleanor Tilney bemoans the shameful way in which Catherine is being dismissed: "a journey of seventy miles, to be taken post by you, at your age, alone, unattended!" (1076). Furthermore, the General's staunch adherence to what social convention dictated regarding an advantageous marriage caused him to disregard other social conventions such as those that would prohibit his allowing the young lady Catherine to travel alone—something that Eleanor balks at. This situation is greatly different from the one in which Catherine received a humble entreaty from the General to come stay at Northanger at a time when he believed her to be a different person. However, even when the General changes his view of Catherine, he still does not base his estimation of her on anything relating to her actual character. His adherence to what the current social conventions encouraged obliged him to adopt superficial appraisals of people. Both in viewing Catherine as an heiress and in viewing her as a pauper's child, the General overlooks that wealth and social status do not truly define Catherine as a person, and should therefore not be the scale on which she is evaluated in regard to her

suitability as a match for his son. General Tilney's inability or refusal to view Catherine simply as a human girl, but instead as either a female approaching the goddess-like state of a perfect marriage partner for his son or conversely as a near waif-like creature who did not even deserve an escort home, is a reflection of how men of the period were taught to view women. This is what Cynthia Griffin Wolff calls the "Virgin/Whore Complex." Wolff goes on to explain that this means that a male will either view a female as a virgin or as a whore and that there is no room in this perception for the woman who is merely human, flawed but not irrevocably depraved.

Both the General and Catherine commit the error of misunderstanding who the other truly is. For example, with her overindulgence in her imagination, Catherine concocts an elaborately horrifying picture, involving the General in a scandalous plot of murdering his wife and maintaining a tyrannical authority over Northanger and all who live under its roof. However, although Catherine's suspicions miss the mark, unlike the General's uncorrected overgeneralization of her character, she is correct in surmising that the General is not as benevolent a character as his excessive attentions toward her might suggest. The social conventions of the time regarding what was important in a marriage partner encouraged people to confuse an individual with the monetary or social value of that person. This misperception led to a grave error in how people related to one another. Jane Austen was interested in countering this misconception—that individuals were defined solely by externals. Harold Bloom states that, "The matter of estimate and esteem, of self and of others, is central to Austen's vision" (285). Austen was concerned with exploring the true value of individuals and what things were important in forming a proper estimate of a person's merit. Austen realized that a proper sense of self was

necessary to achieve a proper estimate of others. This is precisely why General Tilney fails to evaluate Catherine's character correctly—he holds an exalted view of himself. His pride in his family's wealth and connections (and the impossibility of their aligning themselves with anyone who did not match these same credentials of wealth and social status) skew his estimation of those around him, resulting in his rejection of Catherine, and subsequently his son Henry when Henry disobeys his wishes and marries Catherine.

The social conventions of the time encouraged people to place a disproportionate value on things that were grand and impressive, espcecially in terms of wealth and social status. The inordinate amount of value ascribed to these externals often contributed to disregard for the mundane, everyday things, such as the contribution average people can make to society—or even that average people can become exceptional. General Tilney is acting in accordance with this view when he values Catherine only when he is under the illusion that she is wealthy and of high rank. When he yet believes that she is wealthy and socially elite he is concerned that the Abbey's rooms aren't large enough for her and that they might be below par in reference to what she is used to. Catherine, too, must overcome her propensity to exalt what seems important, exciting, and completely set apart from the ordinary; she must learn that her Gothic fantasies are just that—fantasies. While the people she encounters in real life like Mrs. Allen, Isabella and John Thorpe, General Tilney, and Henry, do not exactly fit into her imaginative, romantic molds, they do require her to exercise parts of her being which the fantastical did not—such as discernment, propriety, and even love.

The core of *Northanger Abbey* is about growth; we first meet Catherine as a rather wild tomboy of a child who grows, first into her status as a woman, and then into her

status as a heroine. Catherine matures, which involves change and even admission of being wrong, while a completely conventional character like Mrs. Allen remains the same at the novel's end as she was when first introduced to the reader; she continues to prate on about concerns of dress, merely repeating her husband's sentiments when Mrs. Morland tells the Allens how Catherine was treated by General Tilney (1083). Susan Zlotnick asserts that—"*Northanger Abbey* shows a particular interest in women's agency, or female volition, as the repetition of 'voluntary' in the novel's final chapters indicates (279). Catherine chooses to step outside of the pettiness society encouraged in women and to make her own choices, while Mrs. Allen remained inextricably tied to society's conventions for the pursuits which were considered acceptable for the female sex. The tragic thing, however, is that she appears to be completely content with the metaphorical small world which she inhabits. Through the testimony of the plot and how each character is portrayed in the end, Austen casts her vote in favor of more independence and free thought for women, which often involved disregarding the conventions society prescribed.

In addition to the contrast Catherine ultimately presents with Mrs. Allen, there is an even starker contrast between Catherine and Isabella. Both girls are close in age and both are young women of small fortune. Both hope for a good marriage, but the way they pursue that end is quite different. In contrast to Isabella, Catherine is only able to attain a degree of female autonomy by refusing to rely solely on physical charms and to undergo a transformation of her mind, involving recognition of wrong-headedness and changed action to prove her conviction that she had fallen prey to imagination severed from judgment. It is further of interest to note that Isabella's avid pursuit of a marriage partner

who could offer her what society told her was worth attaining is also an example of imagination misused, and in this way Isabella's (ultimately failed) journey to marriage parallels Catherine's. Isabella ultimately must come to terms with the fact that what society had conditioned her to pursue and what her "very indulgent mother" (Austen 972) assumed she would achieve had slipped from her grasp, and the confidence with which she began the pursuit was all a figment of her imagination. Isabella now realizes that her game of imaginary power is over. Catherine, however, is just coming into her female autonomy or power. The novel chronicles her journey to develop her own thoughts and to think for herself (a hallmark of a number of Austen heroines). Catherine begins slowly, tentatively voicing her opinions to Henry Tilney when they are dancing, but by the novel's end, she has gained a much more thorough understanding of those around her as well as of herself, including the faculties of her mind and imagination. Catherine ultimately rejects society's manipulation of her mind and imagination in the goals social convention urged her to pursue, but instead chose to exert control over her own mind and imagination instead of allowing outside influences to exert control for her.

Lastly, Catherine presents a contrast with General Tilney. In a sense, General Tilney's distorted view of the importance of grand marriages for his sons (directly translated marriages of wealth and status) is akin to Catherine's own Gothic imaginations. Both of these views are rooted not in reality, but in a transposition of what actually is for what one deems the pleasanter alternative, which, of course, exists only in one's mind. The social conventions of the time which pushed for the pursuit of marriages that would increase wealth and social status set up an ideal which often encouraged a person's marital aspirations to be at odds with reality. This shunning of reality (the object

of which, for the General, was embodied in an eighteen-year-old former tomboy, turned lower-middle class heroine) is dangerous in the sense that it encourages disregard for life as it actually exists. It turns people into daydreamers and those who do not care about correcting society but merely want to get out of it to a utopia. The satirist like Austen acknowledges what is real and then attempts to correct the fantasy. Catherine poignantly learns that her fantasies could cause her mind to form a false view of her surroundings. General Tilney, however, does not reevaluate his accepted view that his sons should and would marry women whose financial and social standing would be congruent with his own family pride. Instead of embracing Catherine for the young lady she was, he chooses to disregard her altogether. Catherine, however, as we have seen, turns out to be a rather interesting character, especially as we follow her journey as she matures in her thinking.

Austen sets up a contrast between the world of Catherine's fantasies and the world in which she actually lives and interacts with people. It is in this latter world that the heroine must either stand or fail. Of course, in the end, she does succeed in becoming the heroine she is announced to be at the novel's beginning, but this is no thanks to the thrilling, sensational fantasies she entertained. Austen realized that, as Anne Henry Ehrenpreis states in an introduction to *Northanger Abbey*, "In life as in literature, imagination must be ruled by judgment" (24). She also realized the necessity of sound judgment in making a correct assessment of whether or not what society condoned and encouraged was truly worthy of the value placed upon it. Austen called into question the belief that pursuit of wealth and increased social standing were worth pursuing to the neglect of other matters, namely, the seemingly small things of life. Thus, although Austen has been criticized because in her novels she pays such a large amount of

attention to what appears to be minutiae, in doing so she highlights the fact that it is in the daily minutiae of our lives—in the small details like choosing to read a certain book, deciding to go for a ride alone with a gentleman one has only just met, or in settling on what kind of company we will keep—that we form the habits that define us. Small things are important, and that is why Catherine Morland, a very unexceptional girl it appears, is able to become a heroine. As Alan D. McKillop states, "Jane Austen keeps saying in effect, 'Catherine is not a story-book heroine, and things do not happen to her as they do in novels,' and alternately, 'Nevertheless she must be a heroine, and this *is* a novel after all'" (quoted in an introduction to *Northanger Abbey* by Anne Henry Ehrenpreis 17).

Not only does Austen highlight the unlikeliness of Catherine's credentials for becoming the novel's heroine, but even more importantly, Austen highlights Catherine's unexceptional qualities. There is nothing about Catherine Morland which is stunning, different, or grand, and yet, she is a young woman who experiences a great deal of growth throughout the novel and awakes to her fuller potential as an individual. She learns to exert autonomy over her mind, instead of allowing it to be manipulated and played upon by the various fantasies she reads about and concocts herself. So while social convention stressed the importance of a fervent pursuit of the things to which society attributed importance (wealth and prestige), Austen reminds us that it is what is within us that we need to rule and govern wisely. Catherine gains more in learning how to make her mind her own (instead of complying with Isabella's every whim or even with her own whims of fancy) than Mrs. Allen does in her pursuit of fashion, than Isabella or John Thorpe do in their pursuit of wealth and status, or than the General does in his pursuit of maintaining prestige for his family, in the form of wealthy, socially revered

marriage partners for his sons, proving that Catherine emerges as the heroine while the other characters are marginalized by Austen for their conformity to societal conventions.

Chapter 3: Money to Buy Love and the Behavior to Secure it

As the most well-known and popular of Jane Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice* presents a unique challenge for analysis and examination. In this chapter, I will be examining marginality and conformity to social convention as they are embodied in characters from *Pride and Prejudice* who exhibit social conformity regarding economic concerns and gender roles. It will also be particularly pertinent to spend time examining the character of Elizabeth Bennet as Austen's most famous heroine as well as the character who is the antithesis of social conformity in a number of ways, especially in regard to her unique individuality.

One of the reasons why *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen's most famous novel is likely due to its themes such as "marriage, wealth, class, property, propriety, and a debate over the existence of universal truth" (Teachman 1). Despite being a domestic novel about everyday life in late eighteenth-early nineteenth century England, the presence of these topics positions *Pride and Prejudice* as a novel with enduring themes since these topics are still concerns in the present age. Examining them through the lens of early nineteenth-century England reveals Austen's skill in addressing complicated, enduring issues. Teachman goes on to state that these issues "retain their relevance as we move into the twenty-first century, still trying to determine how best to deal with issues of love, money (or the lack of it), and proper behavior in a world that resists simple solutions to complicated issues" (1). Analyzing the characters Austen created in *Pride and Prejudice* and the choices these characters make presents a platform from which to understand Austen's culture and why she had these characters behave a certain way. Furthermore, why certain characters are the heroes or heroines and why others are the exact opposite,

and therefore marginalized by the author, can be better understood by looking at the characters' social conformity or nonconformity.

Charlotte Lucas is the ideal example of the antithesis to the heroine. We learn from the dialogue among other characters that Charlotte boasts neither wealth nor beauty. She is a plain girl who embraces her plainness and ordinariness instead of seeking a way to circumvent the fate social convention dictated for her based on these two facts of her life. At the first ball in the novel Charlotte tells Elizabeth Bennet, "Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance" (Austen 16). In context, the happiness in marriage to which she refers as "a matter of chance" is the marriage partner's temperament, inclinations, and character—in short, his or her personality, and not, as we might assume in a discussion of the motives of Austen characters, the marriage partner's economic or social standing. Thus, Charlotte argues that conjugal felicity depends principally and perhaps completely on compatible personalities and tempers. Of course, Elizabeth answers her friend by saying, "You make me laugh, Charlotte; but it is not sound. You know it is not sound, and that you would never act in this way yourself" (16). Elizabeth means, of course, that she does not believe Charlotte would marry, pretending to be ignorant of the probability of her happiness or unhappiness (as far as compatible personalities go) with the partner she has chosen. And indeed, Charlotte does not "act in this way" herself. Although she marries Mr. Collins, a man of disgusting sycophancy and simpering politeness, she never has any illusions that they will be truly happy together in the sense of happiness based on shared interests, equality of understanding, and mutual romantic love. In fact, in explaining her recent engagement to Mr. Collins to the surprised Elizabeth later in the novel, Charlotte completely changes her previous views that

happiness in marriage is a matter of chance, which chance consists of whether the partners' personalities will be compatible. Charlotte now states, "I am not romantic you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home; and considering Mr. Collins's character, connections, and situation in life, I am convinced that my chance of happiness with him is as fair as most people can boast on entering the marriage state" (96). Charlotte knows her romantic wishes will not be fulfilled in this relationship, but, she reasons, she never has been very romantic anyhow. Charlotte does, then, act in a way that is consistent with what she states she believes about marriage. Debra Teachman has noted that, "Charlotte Lucas presents perhaps the clearest picture in Austen's works of the lengths to which a woman would go to avoid the fate of spinsterhood" (8). Thus, for Charlotte, financial support ultimately trumps all other things that may factor into marital happiness. Since Charlotte lives in a society which places little value on compatibility of personalities in a marriage, she accepts that her marriage to Mr. Collins, who can provide her with a comfortable home, is as ambitious a match as she—or any woman of her social status and financial means (or lack thereof)—can hope to achieve. Charlotte has been conditioned by the social conventions of the day to be content with what little comfort and happiness life affords, while Elizabeth is not content with the same limited lot in life.

By society's standards, Charlotte was acting prudently when she married Mr. Collins. Her family is pleased with the connection and it is enough to make Mrs. Bennet jealous. Elizabeth is the only one from whom the reader hears a different opinion. Elizabeth grieves in the knowledge that Charlotte is marrying a man who is foolish and prideful. The concern that Mr. Collins is foolish and prideful (which is why Elizabeth refuses to marry him) is the dissenting view within the novel. Most of the other characters

either view Charlotte's match with Mr. Collins with superficial notice (Kitty and Lydia), or with exaggerated interest (Mrs. Bennet), while Elizabeth alone ponders Charlotte's true happiness in the marriage from a different perspective of evaluation—that of genuine and mutual love rather than financial stability and the social status which comes from being suitably married. Jane Austen even goes so far as to introduce Charlotte as "a sensible, intelligent young woman" (12). Indeed, from a pragmatic standpoint (and, ultimately, the conventional position was pragmatic) Charlotte is sensible and intelligent to jump at the opportunity to marry Mr. Collins. Elizabeth, however, has different ideas; she believes love and understanding should play a role in marriage. As her father states, she needs to be able to esteem her life partner (288). It is interesting to note that, in contrast to this, when speaking of Mr. Collins's suitableness as a marriage partner, neither Mrs. Bennet nor Mrs. Lucas thinks to evaluate his character, but instead focuses on his financial means, specifically, his rectory and the patronage of Lady Catherine de Bourgh.

In the twenty-first century, it may be difficult for some readers of *Pride and Prejudice* to comprehend how Charlotte could make such a decision to marry "an obsequious, pompous, wife-seeking man" (Teachman 9), but it is important to take note that the social conventions of Austen's day placed more importance on economic gain in a marriage than on love. This is exactly opposite to the prevailing view of modern society in which true love in a potential marriage relationship is exalted above financial considerations. If we reverse the emphasis our society places upon these two concerns in a relationship, we will arrive at an idea of why Charlotte made "it the business of her own life to marry prudently and create a secure home and future for herself through marriage"

(10). In this way, Charlotte is the typical young woman, while Elizabeth is the exception, as will be further explored later.

Charlotte's attitude toward marriage reflects the conventional female role which was shaped by the conventional view of economic concerns. The reason Charlotte felt an acute pressure to get married as a twenty-seven year old young woman, dependent upon her middle-class gentry family, was that society did not allow women to pursue a profession, and therefore all that was available to Charlotte if she was not going to live with her family for the rest of her life was to secure another home—by marriage. By placing an excessive amount of importance upon marriage for young women of little fortune, societal conventions encouraged young women to view men as means to an end—which end, of course, was marriage and the benefits attached to it. Deborah Kaplan explains: "Women are objects of masculine determinations. Though they are assimilated in marriage as well as excluded in inheritances – patrilineages take them *and* leave them – women are never wholly free to determine their own lives" (540). Instead of questioning this, as Austen is doing through her portrayal of Charlotte's choices (and, conversely, Elizabeth's choices), Charlotte exerts herself to achieve, to the best of her ability, what society dictated for her. By behaving as though marriage was more like a business than a relationship, Charlotte showcases one of the unfortunate consequences of the pressures social conventions placed upon young women.

The character of Charlotte Lucas presents perhaps the most obvious example of conformity to what social conventions dictated regarding monetary issues. Charlotte's decision to marry Mr. Collins appears to be one side of a distinct dichotomy between financial security and a mutually happy marriage based on esteem and love. Because of

the contrast between two drastically different kinds of marriages (especially due to the nauseating character of Mr. Collins on one side of the binary), Charlotte's character and her choices lend themselves well to an analysis of the plight that young women faced because of the dictates of social convention and the seemingly drastic, albeit rather common lengths they went to in order to marry well according to society's definition. Although Charlotte is not devious in her conformity as is Isabella Thorpe, for example, she has adopted the agenda social convention placed upon her and she acts accordingly with her beliefs. In writing about the assistance Charlotte is ostensibly giving to Elizabeth in giving her a reprieve from Mr. Collins's solicitations, Austen states that, "Charlotte's kindness extended farther than Elizabeth had any conception of;-- its object was nothing less, than to secure her from any return of Mr. Collins's addresses, by engaging them towards herself. Such was Miss Lucas's scheme" (93). It is therefore clear from this quotation that Charlotte has an undisclosed plan, as the negative connotation of the word 'scheme' suggests. This is a plan which she does not even reveal to her close friend Elizabeth, as is evident by Elizabeth's surprise in learning of Charlotte's engagement: "Engaged to Mr. Collins! my dear Charlotte,--impossible!" (96). Charlotte's marital pursuits thus trump every other pull on her time, consideration, and regard. Following social convention secures Charlotte what she had hoped to attain—a comfortable, financially stable home—but it does so at the cost of a dear friendship which could never afterwards be the same because Charlotte's marriage to Mr. Collins draws a distinction between the disparate views of each of the two friends, especially regarding marriage. Although Charlotte makes a financially wise decision in marrying Mr. Collins, and although that decision appears to be the only one available to her if she was not to be a

burden to her family, Austen suggests that she did have another option. Elizabeth's choices exhibit this other option. Elizabeth is in much the same position financially as Charlotte, refuses to follow conventional wisdom, is ultimately successful in her choice to disregard social conventions, and is vindicated in choosing to stand upon the principles she sets for herself. In order to more clearly show the difference between Charlotte's and Elizabeth's views of marriage Austen states that, "She [Elizabeth] had always felt that Charlotte's opinion of matrimony was not exactly like her own, but she could not have supposed it possible that when called into action, she would have sacrificed every better feeling to worldly advantage" (96). 'Worldly' is a key term because it further delineates Charlotte's marital views from Elizabeth's. Social conventions encouraged young women to pursue worldly goals—financial means and socially acceptable marriages. Charlotte's choices are consistent with these pursuits.

It is lastly interesting to note that Charlotte does not bemoan her situation in feeling forced to marry solely for financial reasons, without a shred of romantic feeling (at least Austen does not tell us if she did lament it). This is likely in part because such circumstances for a marriage were numerous and Charlotte was not the exception but rather the rule. Her position and her decision which arose from it was not revolutionary, but rather lauded by her parents and friends, and, in short, accepted with relative nonchalance by everyone except Elizabeth. This, of course, highlights the different views which Elizabeth holds.

Although as readers we likely mourn Charlotte's marriage with Mr. Collins along with Elizabeth, at least to some extent, we do not feel the same sense of disappointment or repulsion which we would feel had Elizabeth accepted Mr. Collins's proposal. I posit

that this is because Charlotte actually shares with Mr. Collins the mindset of the importance of adherence to social conventions. In this one respect, if not in others, the two of them are a good match. Teachman states that, "the fact that Charlotte Lucas seeks out his [Mr. Collins's] proposal and accepts it with ease indicates that, even if Elizabeth (and, by inference, Austen herself) disapproves of considering marriage as business per se, such an attitude was widely accepted and openly acknowledged in Austen's time. It was acceptance of life as lived in eighteenth-century England, especially for women of the gentry and aristocracy" (7-8). Therefore, to put it in rather simple terms, Mr. Collins can be viewed as the embodiment of the social conventions to which Charlotte chooses to adhere.

Mr. Collins states that his purpose for coming to visit the Bennets at Longbourn is so that he may choose a wife, and he feels the necessity of choosing a wife because, as a clergyman, social convention (in this case using Lady Catherine de Bourgh as a mouthpiece) dictated that he ought to be married. Lady Catherine's actual words, quoted by Mr. Collins, are as follows: "A clergyman like you must marry.—Chuse properly, chuse a gentlewoman for *my* sake; and for your *own*, let her be an active, useful sort of person, not brought up high, but able to make a small income go a good way" (81). In this way Lady Catherine instructs Mr. Collins in what is proper for him in his position, occupation, social status, and financial means, and Mr. Collins promptly obliges his patroness, for when his chances with Elizabeth prove hopeless, he settles on Charlotte. In fact, Elizabeth was not even his first choice. It was Jane, the eldest Bennet, on whom he had originally set his hopes, until Mrs. Bennet hints that she is expected to be soon engaged. Therefore, it is evident that to Mr. Collins the particular identity of the young

woman whom he will marry matters little. As long as she fits a few basic conventional requirements, she is suitable. In this way, Mr. Collins in no way attempts to transcend the place and role society had allotted him, but instead seeks to fulfill that role as much as possible, and seeks a life partner who does so as well.

Another aspect of Mr. Collins's character which emphasizes his conventionality can be found in the letter he writes to Mr. Bennet after hearing that Lydia Bennet has run away with Mr. Wickham. In it he says, "I am truly rejoiced that my cousin Lydia's sad business has been so well hushed up, and am only concerned that their living together before the marriage took place should be so generally known. I must not, however, neglect the duties of my station, or refrain from declaring my amazement, at hearing that you received the young couple into your house as soon as they were married" (278). Mr. Collins is not concerned with the genuine state of Lydia's or Wickham's morals, but rather with the outward appearance of propriety. All of his flattering speech and sycophantic praise attest to the same thing—that he values adherence to what society said was proper disproportionately more than the true welfare of individuals.

This is also the case in his pedantic readings of Fordyce's sermons. These sermons were instructions for young ladies in behavior, decorum, and spiritual pursuits. While Mary Bennet—the most sophistic of the five Bennet girls—approves of Mr. Collins's choice of reading, the other girls either politely tolerate it or, like Lydia Bennet, fail to restrain her boredom. Isobel Grundy states, "Lydia Bennet is never more sympathetic than when she meets James Fordyce's *Sermons to Young Women*, 1766, with yawning and interruption" (202). Mr. Collins's choice of text for evening reading is consistent with his belief that outward propriety is of utmost importance. He believes it is

his duty as a clergyman to encourage the moral edification of his younger female cousins, but the dull way in which he speaks of improving one's conduct equates moral edification with tedious pursuits. The explanatory notes in the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Pride and Prejudice* state that Fordyce's sermons "had been attacked by Mary Wollstonecraft in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) for being written 'in such an affected style [ch. 5, section II] . . . Fordyce condemned modern novels and their dangerous effects on young women" (320-321). By allowing some of her characters to view Mr. Collins's choice of Fordyce's sermons in a negative way, Austen is doing two things. Firstly, she is presenting Mr. Collins as a conventional character who promoted the prevailing stereotypes of the female sex as in need of particular spiritual, moral, and social edification; and secondly, through the negative role Fordyce's sermons play in *Pride and Prejudice* and furthermore, through the negative way Mr. Collins is then viewed because of his commendation of the sermons, Austen is critiquing such texts as well as those who produce and promote them.

In one sense Austen presents Mr. Collins merely as a curiosity for Mr. Bennet's entertainment. Upon receiving Mr. Collins's letter stating his intentions of visiting the Bennet household, Mr. Bennet states, "There is a servility and self-importance in his letter, which promises well. I am impatient to see him" (48). In order to underscore the foolishness of Mr. Collins and the views he purports, Jane Austen is first careful to establish the sensible character of both Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth, the two people who are most aware of Mr. Collins's unattractive characteristics. When Mr. Collins arrives, "Mr. Bennet's expectations were fully answered. His cousin was as absurd as he had hoped, and he listened to him with the keenest enjoyment, maintaining at the same time the most

resolute composure of countenance, and except in an occasional glance at Elizabeth, requiring no partner in his pleasure" (51). Austen's presentation of the ridiculous character of Mr. Collins, who fully satisfies Mr. Bennet's pastime of laughing at his neighbors (278), also illuminates Austen's awareness of the ridiculous nature of the role often assigned to women by her society. Austen does not overtly align herself with a revolutionary like Mary Wollstonecraft, but through the means of the novel she more subtly critiques the prevailing conventions that promoted the devaluation of women through demeaning instructions as contained in Fordyce's sermons, which were based on the assumption that women required greater instruction since their mental faculties were not on par with those of their male counterparts. Austen gets at the heart of this issue—the way her society often stereotyped women—through the character of Mr. Collins.

In opposition to the sensibleness of Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth, Mrs. Bennet is portrayed as a foolish woman who at first loathes Mr. Collins because he is to inherit the Bennet estate, but then capriciously changes her mind when Mr. Collins states his intentions of marrying one of her daughters: "the man whom she could not bear to speak of the day before, was now high in her good graces" (53). Like Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet is easily flattered and considers a good marriage to be one based upon financial gain. Interestingly, however, in adhering to the social conventions of the day much more fervently than her husband, Mrs. Bennet is actually more active in laboring for the welfare of her daughters than Mr. Bennet is or has ever been. Mrs. Bennet is misguided, silly, and overbearing, but she firmly believes the only way to provide for her daughters is to follow what society affirmed and to marry them off to some well-to-do gentleman. It is toward this end that Mrs. Bennet is consistently and constantly working.

She values her daughters based on the "husband-catching" characteristics they possess. Thus, she prates on about Jane's unmatched beauty or encourages Lydia's penchant for being out in society and flirting with the officers. Mrs. Bennet is one of the "numerous" women Austen references when speaking of Mrs. Allen in *Northanger Abbey*. "The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news" (3). Mrs. Bennet is no longer in the marriage market herself, but she still pines for those days when she was—as when she recalls to her daughters how she used to be in love with a man in the militia. However, she has embraced her role as the mother of five daughters and devotes her life, not to their education or the improvement of their minds (as Elizabeth makes clear to Lady Catherine [127]), but to their eligibility as desirable marriage partners. It is to this end that Mrs. Bennet is engaged from the novel's beginning to its conclusion. She is perhaps the most consistent in her goals of the novel's characters. Her goal is to achieve suitable marriages for her daughters, and for girls of the lower middle class gentry whose family estate is entailed to a male relative, the most important aspect of a suitable marriage is the financial benefits.

In the first scene of the novel, Mrs. Bennet tells Mr. Bennet of the new resident at Netherfield Park, Mr. Bingley. The first thing she says about him is that he is "a young man of large fortune" (1). And even when her penchant for gossip encourages her to prate on about the nasty, prideful, rude character of Mr. Darcy, she easily warms up to him when she learns that Elizabeth is engaged to him. "My dearest child . . . I can think of nothing else! Ten thousand a year, and very likely more!" (290). Her complete change of mind about him ("Such a charming man!—so handsome!—so tall!" [290]) reveals that her concerns about his character had no greater depth than useful fodder for her gossip.

All other concerns are quickly subsumed into the financial gain that her second eldest daughter would receive upon marrying him. Mrs. Bennet was so emphatically disappointed when she could not force Elizabeth to accept Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage that one wonders how horrified she would have been had she known of Mr. Darcy's first proposal of marriage and Elizabeth's subsequent refusal. Mrs. Bennet values both gentlemen based on their financial means. In this sense, she ultimately agrees with Elizabeth that Mr. Darcy is a better marriage partner than Mr. Collins, though the two of them have very disparate reasons for their evaluation of the two gentlemen.

Because Mrs. Bennet structures her life around getting her daughters married, she views the Forsters' invitation to have Lydia accompany them to Brighton with the militiamen as a perfect opportunity for Lydia to flirt and to possibly secure a husband. She doesn't see the danger in the scheme like Elizabeth does and she has a higher opinion of Lydia's desirableness than does Mr. Bennet. While Mr. Bennet tells Elizabeth that, "We shall have no peace at Longbourn if Lydia does not go to Brighton . . . she is luckily too poor to be an object of prey to anybody" (177), Mrs. Bennet believes that Lydia has a good chance of achieving a suitable match with one of the officers. Since Mrs. Bennet values financial gain in a marriage, she naturally values the external trappings which are likely to garner interest from the male sex (and will hopefully lead to a proposal of marriage). Deidre Le Faye notes that "Lydia is her mother's favourite" (185) because she takes to the extreme the husband-hunting skills society condoned, and in this way aligns her goals with her mother's. Le Faye continues, stating that Lydia is "most like her [mother] in looks and character" (185). Mrs. Bennet and Lydia take to the extreme the paramount importance society places on an advantageous marriage and the flirtation and

coquetry they believed were necessary to secure such a marriage. This often results not only in Austen's disapproval of these two characters, but in their censure by other characters within the novel. The obvious example, of course, is Lydia's running away with Wickham while Mrs. Bennet mourns not her daughter's lack of morality and propriety, but the uncertainty of her attainment of a husband. After this event, the Bennets have ample cause to fear for the marriageable eligibility of the rest of the daughters because Lydia's "patched-up business," (273) of marriage to Wickham, as Lady Catherine calls it, taints the reputation of them all. Lady Catherine vehemently balks at the thought of Mr. Darcy's connection with the sister of such a reprobate young lady as Lydia. Mr. Collins echoes Lady Catherine's shocked sentiments, also expressing his vindication of being refused by Elizabeth in his marriage proposal because he, too, would then have been in much closer connection to the infamous occurrence of Lydia's running away with Wickham and their hasty marriage. Another example of censure by fellow characters within the novel which results from Mrs. Bennet pursuing social conformity to the extreme is when, in his letter of explanation to Elizabeth, Mr. Darcy states as a greater objection to Jane's marriage with Bingley the "total want of propriety so frequently, so almost uniformly betrayed by herself [Mrs. Bennet], by your three youngest sisters, and occasionally even by your father" (152), rather than Jane's lack of social connection and fortune.

The importance Mrs. Bennet places on securing advantageous marriages for her daughters even eclipses propriety. Mrs. Bennet's intentions are originally good in that they attempt to further the welfare of her daughters the only way she believes it can be furthered. Le Faye states, "Mrs. Bennet is so anxious to see her daughters married as soon

as possible; she is not very wise in the way she goes about husband-hunting, but at least she is trying to do her best for them" (185). Mrs. Bennet's good intentions, however, become obscured in society's confused hierarchy of what is important. Financial gain becomes the dominant deciding force in a suitable marriage. At middle age, Mrs. Bennet is well-schooled in what is important in life, according to what society has communicated, and for the same reason that Lady Catherine deems Elizabeth's engagement to Mr. Darcy to be utterly unsuitable, Mrs. Bennet views it happily, because her daughter would be the one who would most benefit, financially and socially speaking. While Lady Catherine, with her large fortune and high ideas of privileged social class, views a connection between her family and the lower-middle-class Bennet family to be demeaning, Mrs. Bennet, of course, views a connection which would propel her daughter into greater financial and social mobility with pride and satisfaction.

Lady Catherine, on the other side of the financial and social spectrum, nonetheless also conforms to conventions. She is the epitome of the old order and the social class which prided itself in its wealth, pure ancestry, and flawless connections. Lady Catherine's indignation as voiced to Elizabeth upon the rumor of her engagement to Mr. Darcy (and thus the debasing connection this would be for Mr. Darcy, particularly because of Lydia's scandalous escapade with Wickham) presents perhaps the most striking example of the line of distinction that existed between the upper and lower classes in Regency England. Financial means, social acceptability, and propriety were everything. Lady Catherine forcefully states it this way: "And is *such* a girl [Lydia] to be my nephew's sister? Is *her* husband, is the son of his late father's steward, to be his brother? Heaven and earth!—of what are you thinking? Are the shades of Pemberley to

be thus polluted?" (273). The indignation Lady Catherine voices here has nothing to do with Elizabeth's true eligibility as an individual as a potential marriage partner for Lady Catherine's nephew Mr. Darcy, but instead has everything to do with factors which were outside of Elizabeth's ability to control. Elizabeth could choose neither how wealthy her family was, nor *who* her family was, but nevertheless, social convention dictated that these were the factors upon which someone like Lady Catherine—who had access to all the wealth and prestige (and also the pride which came from these things)—could legitimately judge someone like Elizabeth. Lady Catherine does not take into account that it is possible for a person to rise above or overcome their circumstances, which is the case with Elizabeth. Also, perhaps this is why Austen gives Elizabeth a stronger connection with her gentleman father who is also her more sensible parent in order to show that Elizabeth's extraordinariness in being able to rise above the limits of her social and financial sphere was not completely implausible. Lady Catherine, however, makes generalizations and disregards Elizabeth's personal worth as well as anything of value she may have gained from her family. Through her portrayal of Lady Catherine, Austen is suggesting that some social norms were perhaps out of date and misguided to begin with, and that suitable marriages should be evaluated on more than financial or social equality.

In Elizabeth's sharp reply to Lady Catherine's accusation that in marrying Mr. Darcy she would be quitting "the sphere in which [she] had been brought up" (272), one can hear echoes of Austen's own beliefs. Elizabeth states, "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" (272). Lady Catherine acquiesces to this fact, but then goes

on to question the connections of Elizabeth's mother's side of the family. In reply to this accusation, Elizabeth steps outside of the argument of proper social class and instead asserts that, "Whatever my connections may be . . . if your nephew does not object to them, they can be nothing to *you*" (272). In this way Elizabeth realigns the argument, so that the evaluation of a suitable marriage is not based upon the social conventions which Lady Catherine is staunchly championing and thus upon Lady Catherine's own opinion in the matter, but instead on Elizabeth's own opinion and on Darcy's—the two people who are the potential marriage partners. Through the story and especially through this exchange between Lady Catherine and Elizabeth, Austen suggests that if a man of high social class and ten thousand pounds a year like Mr. Darcy was indeed in love with a girl like Elizabeth Bennet, the second daughter of five, from a lower middle class gentry family, with a sister who was involved with a scandal, then the foundation for marriage had to be based upon something other than social class and financial gain. Fiona Stafford states in an introduction to *Pride and Prejudice* that, "Lady Catherine regards equality purely as a question of rank and status . . . The unsatisfactory nature of the Bennet marriage not only influences the attitudes and decisions of those involved, but also leads to a quiet critique of prevailing standards and assumption. 'Equality' in marriage means very different things to different people, but the differences emerge subtly, through corresponding scenes and accumulating conversations" (xxi). Elizabeth and Darcy are equals in a way which Lady Catherine could never fathom because she is so steeped in the socially acceptable beliefs and practices of the day. Lloyd Brown states that, "To sum up, the experiences and statements of Jane Austen's heroines, especially in *Persuasion* and *Pride and Prejudice*, suggest that Jane Austen is sympathetic to the eighteenth

century feminist revolt against narrow male definitions of female personality and women's education" (332). Austen's portrayal of Lady Catherine's conformity to what social convention dictated regarding equality in marriage, and her subsequent marginalization when Darcy and Elizabeth get married despite her fierce objections, attests to the truth of Brown's statement. Although Lady Catherine, as a female character, constantly asserts her authority in the novel, her adoption of a narrow view of what a proper marriage had to include or exclude attests to the fact that she was enmeshed in the conventional ideas of the proper roles of men and women and the prevailing belief that held that the majority of women should be relegated to the trivial pursuits of caring for their domestic concerns (which is why she approves of the compliant Charlotte Lucas as Mr. Collins's wife). Social conventions regarding the typical role assigned to women were helpful to Lady Catherine because they gave her license to continue to exercise her domineering (and interfering) will over others. By drawing on the marginal role society assigned to women in almost every circumstance, Lady Catherine is able to maintain her own position of authority, as a rare woman who has, in this case by wealth and social status, managed to elude the marginal position to which her society relegated women. Elizabeth, then, poses a threat to Lady Catherine because she has, as her father says, "something more of quickness than her sisters" (2). She is not the typical "elegant female" (83), but instead is presented by Austen as a character with genuine feeling, perceptive understanding, and a ready wit. Elizabeth is a woman of whom Mary Wollstonecraft could be proud. Even Austen herself states concerning the character she had created in Elizabeth Bennet, "I must confess that *I* think her as delightful a creature as ever appeared in print, & how I shall be able to tolerate those who do not like *her* at

least, I do not know" (Le Faye 200). Austen was speaking of readers of *Pride and Prejudice*, of course, but the quote is also applicable to Lady Catherine, a character within the novel who was not "able to tolerate" Elizabeth Bennet.

Another character, or, rather, characters, who are at odds with Elizabeth Bennet and present perhaps the best contrast with Austen's most popular heroine, are the Bingley sisters, Miss Bingley and Miss Hurst, to be precise. These two sisters, especially the unmarried Caroline Bingley, are jealous of Elizabeth and therefore seek to criticize her at every opportunity. Caroline's jealousy of Elizabeth is worth noting. After all, Caroline is a part of a family who was moving up the social ladder. Her brother Charles Bingley had recently gained custody of the Netherfield estate, the event which presents the opening scene for *Pride and Prejudice*. Although Caroline's ancestors may not have been members of the gentry, the Bingley family's status at the time of the novel was a satisfactory one, so much so that every eligible young lady in the surrounding neighborhood of Netherfield hopes to achieve a match with Mr. Bingley. He is young, handsome, and wealthy and therefore highly desirable. It is curious, then, that Charles's sister Caroline should envy a girl like Elizabeth who had hardly any fortune, who was the second of five sisters, had no brothers, and had a mother and younger sisters who often embarrassed her in social situations by being so consumed with procuring marriage partners and pursuing the female pursuits of the day. This certainly attests to Elizabeth's extraordinariness, but it also attests to the Bingley sisters' insecurity in their own position. Caroline asserts that, in part to spite Elizabeth, "A woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages . . . 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" (29). Caroline has enumerated a number of things which she believes a woman must have in order to be termed accomplished, and yet, her very need to list all of these things testifies to her lack of confidence in her own role as a woman. She both asserts her credentials and criticizes Elizabeth's, all in an effort to prove to herself and to Mr. Darcy that she is the more desirable woman.

Efrat Margalit, in her article "On Pettiness and Petticoats: the Significance of the Petticoat in *Pride and Prejudice*" uses the scene in which Elizabeth arrives at Netherfield to visit her ill sister Jane "above her ancles [sic] in dirt" (26) to draw out what Austen is saying through the dialogue in which the Bingley sisters engage concerning Elizabeth. Margalit defines the purpose of her article as follows: "This paper addresses a certain reference to dress and fashion in *Pride and Prejudice* that serves as an indirect presentation of character-traits; that is, a reference that does not name or describe explicitly the traits of a character but rather displays and exemplifies them" (n.p.). In this scene the Bingley sisters harshly criticize Elizabeth for walking three miles to Netherfield as a woman, alone and in the mud. Such an expedition exhibited a shocking disregard for female delicacy, as the Bingley sisters see it in their conventional view. Deborah Kaplan has stated that vigorous exercise for women was considered a sexual stimulant in Jane Austen's time period (542). Therefore, not only are the Bingley sisters criticizing Elizabeth's impropriety in getting her petticoat soiled; through their dialogue with each other they are also suggesting that, in her walk alone to Netherfield, Elizabeth displayed an independence and recklessness which had unacceptable sexual overtones. This, in turn, suggested Elizabeth's unsuitability as a marriage partner—something, of course, on

which the Miss Bingleys, and especially Caroline, would have capitalized, because of her self-appointed rivalry with Elizabeth for the attention of Mr. Darcy.

Margalit goes on to give evidence for what the petticoat symbolizes in the dialogue between Miss Bingley and Miss Hurst. During Austen's time, societal conventions dictated that a woman's petticoat, which was worn so closely to her body, ought to be kept in the utmost condition of cleanliness. Therefore, when Mrs. Hurst remarks, "Yes, and her petticoat; I hope you saw her petticoat, six inches deep in mud" (26), Caroline, the gentlemen listening to the conversation, and Austen's contemporary readers understood this statement's implications. Margalit comments on this statement: "By indicating that Elizabeth's petticoat is "six inches deep in mud," the sisters insinuate that it contrasts with the accepted norms of modesty, the rule being "that garments next to the skin should be white, to conform with the purity of the mind" (Cunnington 20, quoted by Margalit n.p.). In criticizing Elizabeth's dress, the Bingley sisters were not only making a jab at Elizabeth's provincialism, but also suggesting to Mr. Darcy and Mr. Bingley who were present during this scene, that Elizabeth displayed a shocking disregard for the conventions of female propriety and modesty. Margalit states that "Since Caroline and Louisa cannot afford to be more explicit on the subject without its severely reflecting on their own sense of decorum, they must rely on the connotative qualities of the soiled undergarment" (n.p.). The Bingley sisters are therefore drawing on social convention to criticize Elizabeth. Of course, divergence from social conventions will only provide grounds on which to criticize Elizabeth if the sisters themselves place a great deal of importance on adherence to social conventions. Caroline and Louisa have completely accepted the system of female propriety which their society has placed upon

them—so much so, in fact, that they become fierce proponents of it themselves, and even use it to criticize a woman like Elizabeth who is more individualistic and independent. Gilbert and Gubar believe that the conforming and conventional behavior that the Bingley sisters exhibit is evidence of the repression of women in Austen's society. They state, "women can themselves become agents of repression, manipulators of conventions, and survivors" (172). This is what has occurred for Caroline and Louisa. They have accepted their society's conventions and are now utilizing them to further the oppression of woman, and particularly Elizabeth Bennet.

Austen utilizes this dialogue between the Bingley sisters to reveal, not only Elizabeth's character, but also the character of the sisters. Margalit states, "Their censure of Elizabeth, using her appearance as ammunition, is ironized by the text, ultimately reflecting on the soiled and superficial nature of their own ostensible gentility rather than on Elizabeth's honor" (n. p.). The Bingley sisters thought that, by being fierce advocates of social propriety and what it dictated in regard to women, they were triumphing over Elizabeth, but, in reality, their blind adherence to the limits society had placed on the female sex resulted in their narrow-mindedness in the views they espoused, and, conversely, in the views they condemned. Margalit sums it up: "By noting the socio-cultural significance of the petticoat at the time *Pride and Prejudice* was written we are able not only to understand why the Bingley sisters insistently refer to it, but also to pick up on the ironic undertone of the dialogue which foreshadows the text's final rejection of mock propriety, propriety that has everything to do with appearances and nothing to do with true gentility" (n.p.).

The Bingley sisters are the perfect example of women who ostensibly have done everything right according to what society prescribed for the female sex, and yet they fall short, for Elizabeth does not sink in Mr. Darcy's esteem because of her shocking and immodest escapade to Netherfield, and the sisters' subsequent criticism of her in Darcy's presence. On the contrary, Mr. Darcy asserts that the "fine eyes" which have enchanted him are merely, "brightened by the exercise" (26). Mr. Darcy, therefore, refuses to propagate the conventional views to which the Bingley sisters assume he also adheres. He sees in Elizabeth something which Caroline and Louisa do not or cannot because of their immersion in what society has dictated in regard to the role the female was to play. Society told them that gentlemen like Mr. Darcy valued females who conducted themselves in a flawless, albeit external, show of propriety. The sisters conduct their lives fully and flawlessly in accordance with this belief, but, as Mr. Darcy adds after Caroline enumerates the things in which a woman must be proficient if she is to deserve to be called an accomplished woman, "All this she must possess . . . and to all this she must yet add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (29). Mr. Darcy, it appears, although the perfect gentleman himself, is not looking for the flawless female who perfectly conforms to her role as a woman in Regency society. Perhaps the simpering perfection of a woman like Caroline was not enough for him—or, rather, too much. Many of the women of the gentry who were in his circle of acquaintance likely displayed the same sort of smugness within their own confined, conventional gender role as do both of the Bingley sisters.

Elizabeth's interactions with Mr. Darcy are very different from Caroline's. Lloyd Brown states that, "Jane Austen critiques the notion that women's sexual interest should

be merely responsive" (336). Both the Bingley sisters and Elizabeth Bennet are interested in Mr. Darcy as a potential husband (of course, this isn't true of Elizabeth until the latter part of the novel), but Austen paints two very different pictures of how they conduct themselves in regard to the sexual interest they have in Mr. Darcy. The Bingley sisters employ subtle deception and flirtation (the former to ward off Elizabeth as their rival, the latter in an attempt to engage the affections of Mr. Darcy), while Elizabeth does not allow her eventual love for Mr. Darcy to consume her entire existence and thus to necessitate husband-snatching behavior, however refined, subtle, and consistent with society's accepted behavior for the female sex such behavior might be. The Bingley sisters are operating, however, in accordance with the opinion Charlotte Lucas has voiced to Elizabeth early in the plot that "When she [in this context, Jane Bennet] is secure of him, there will be leisure for falling in love as much as she chuses" (15). The goal is to secure a husband (and especially a wealthy and high class one as Mr. Darcy); the genuine relationship part of the connection can come later, as an afterthought. Elizabeth's views of matrimony, however, are exactly opposite to those espoused by Charlotte Lucas and the Bingley sisters. Elvira Casal states that, "Miss Bingley is chasing Darcy while Elizabeth is determined to show her indifference" (n.p.). Societal conventions often made it easy for women to sacrifice everything (notably, their individuality) on the altar of attaining a good match. Caroline gives in to this worldly wisdom, while Elizabeth does not.

Casal goes on to explore the parallels between Caroline Bingley and Elizabeth in order to better see how they differ. She asserts that both characters share an attraction to Mr. Darcy, a ready wit, and a propensity to castigate those who engage in improper social

behavior. Casal, however, in addition to suggesting that Caroline is a foil for Elizabeth, also fascinatingly suggests that Caroline and Elizabeth's use of laughter is something which serves to differentiate between them and thus to reveal their disparate characters. While Caroline uses laughter most often to scorn those who do not fit her conventional standards of propriety or those with low social connections or little fortune, Elizabeth declares, "I dearly love a laugh" (42) in a spirit of playful good humor. Although subject to them herself, Caroline Bingley manipulates societal conventions so that they give her license to censure characters like Elizabeth who do not fit all the rules of the conventions. For example, Caroline condemns Elizabeth for her display of impropriety in her independent walk to Netherfield. In Austen's time period this display of independence and vigor would have been frowned upon especially because such an act had unacceptable sexual overtones. Through the text of *Pride and Prejudice* and specifically Austen's portrayal of the Bingley sisters in a negative light and of Elizabeth in a positive light, it can be inferred that Austen favored a greater degree of independence for women. After all, Austen was herself a writer in a time when women were not encouraged in that pursuit. Jan Fergus speaks to the obstacles a woman faced in following a career as an author: "Publishing her own writing could threaten a woman's reputation as well as her social position. For any woman, the frame of authorship could become infamy, and novels were particularly reprehensible" (13). Through *Pride and Prejudice* Austen also calls into question the accepted beliefs society held concerning the role a woman ought to hold in relationships.

Caroline is a poster girl for the role societal conventions assigned middle-class women of the gentry (even though the Bingleys were originally tradespeople [10]). She

believes that conducting herself in a show of propriety, refinement, cordiality, feminine decorum, and subtle flirtation will secure her place with a man of wealth and status. In this sense, Elizabeth is a frustrating malfunction in her plan. Caroline likely did not expect to contend for Mr. Darcy's attention with someone like Elizabeth and is therefore at a loss for how to conduct herself, so she resorts to scorn and criticism, which, of course, backfires. Through Mr. Darcy's ultimate approval of Elizabeth and his subtle disapproval of Caroline (as when he wittily turns Caroline's criticism of Elizabeth into a jab back at her: "there is meanness in *all* the arts which ladies sometimes condescend to employ for captivation. Whatever bears affinity to cunning is despicable" [29]), Austen condemns the conventional and ultimately malicious behavior of the Bingley sisters while championing the independence and individuality of Elizabeth. Rachel Brownstein writes that, "To observe Elizabeth's similarity to catty Caroline Bingley . . . is to begin to understand the moral point of Austen's novels, that on the one hand we are not so very different from our neighbors, and that on the other we must tirelessly discriminate among our common traits in order to understand the extreme importance—and moral implications—of the differences" (55). It is only when we understand that it takes work for Elizabeth to rise above the catty behavior in which Caroline indulges that we begin to see why Elizabeth stands out from the other female characters in the novel. Elizabeth shares some "common traits" with Caroline, but she is much more discerning of which ones will contribute to the betterment of her character and which ones will place her among the dozens of other young women who were looking for an advantageous marriage. It is to Elizabeth's character that we now turn.

Elizabeth is Austen's most famous heroine. Her character has been contrasted with the more conventional nature of others in the novel, but her particular character remains yet to be more closely examined. *Pride and Prejudice* was well-received when it was published in 1813. Le Faye cites the *Critical Review* which stated that Austen's Elizabeth Bennet had an "archness and sweetness of manner" and that her "sense and conduct are of a superior order to those of the common heroines of novels. From her independence of character, which is kept within the proper line of decorum, and her well-timed sprightliness, she teaches the man of Family-Pride to know himself" (200). Indeed, in the character of Elizabeth Bennet, Austen successfully walks the precarious line between condoning overt female autonomy (along the lines of Mary Wollstonecraft) and the conventional views of the domestic, subservient female. Elizabeth's individuality is a key to understanding her character as well as a key to understanding the beliefs Austen held concerning the place of the female in society, especially as we consider Austen's confident endorsement of the character she created in Elizabeth Bennet which was cited earlier.

Elizabeth is a more complex character than the other heroines of Austen's earlier novels, *Northanger Abbey* and *Sense and Sensibility*, respectively. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, the two heroines in the latter novel, do not present themselves in such perfectly heroic fashion as does Elizabeth, largely because there are two of them and their various character traits can be contrasted with those of the other so that, on a simplistic level, they can be reduced to foils for one another: one embodies sense, while the other embodies sensibility. Catherine Morland, too, who has been examined in detail in the previous chapter, although explicitly referred to as the heroine of *Northanger Abbey*, does

not reach the full potential of heroine status which belongs to Elizabeth Bennet. Rachel Brownstein contrasts Catherine with Elizabeth, observing that while Catherine is the passive character in the playful exchanges with Henry Tilney, Elizabeth actively engages in witty conversation with Mr. Darcy, often without his initiation (51). Elizabeth possesses a confidence in herself (largely manifested in her quick wit and discernment) which is both conducive to her role as a heroine and revelatory of Austen's own love of irony and wit. Elizabeth is able to disengage herself from her circumstances and in this way at times her voice becomes indistinguishable from the narrator's. Brownstein writes that "Tricks like the narrator's echo of the very words Elizabeth has used ('Mr. Collins was not a sensible man,' chapter 15 begins) encourage the identification of the heroine with the novelist—and with the reader, also outside the frame of the fiction" (55). Thus, Austen's tone or voice in *Pride and Prejudice* serves to give Elizabeth's character autonomy and transcendence. Elizabeth's ability to disengage herself from her circumstances allows her to see past her own society's conventions, sealing her appeal to future generations and identifying her as the novel's indisputable heroine.

In typical Austen fashion, Elizabeth does not fit the social stereotypes society tried to impose upon her, but instead she emerges as a character who calls these stereotypes and conventions into question through irony and satire. It must also be noted that the most famous hero of Austen's fiction and also the wealthiest, Mr. Darcy, becomes captivated, almost against his will, with Elizabeth Bennet. She is not a typical "elegant female," but perhaps, Austen suggests, that is why he is attracted to her. Brownstein speaks to this: "Conventional himself, he admires her for defying convention. The first volume dramatizes Elizabeth's impatient divergences from the stock heroine of

romance fiction and the proper young lady of moralizing novelists" (51). Jane Austen was certainly no "moralizing novelist" as is evident by her love of irony and her mockery of social conventions from a young age, even in her Juvenilia. In the character of Elizabeth Bennet, Austen created a heroine who managed to maintain a sense of propriety and decorum and yet was a champion of the individuality of women before such a notion was widely popular. Elizabeth inherits her father's proclivity for seeing the irony and the ridiculousness in situations, a character trait which both characters inherited from the author who brought them to life. Elizabeth utilizes her perception of irony and her love of laughter to achieve some degree of autonomy in the restrictive society in which she was born. Casal notes that, "In her readiness to laugh at what she calls the '[f]ollies and nonsense, whims and inconsistencies' of those around her (57), Elizabeth is defying social conventions that linked femininity with passivity" (n.p.). Through her laughter which exhibits her independence, Elizabeth shows that she refuses to accept the fate that society laid out for her as one of five daughters in a family with little fortune. Gilbert and Gubar state that, "Austen admits the limits and discomforts of the paternal roof, but learns to live beneath it. As we have seen, however, she begins by laughing at its construction, pointing out exactly how much of that construction actually depends upon the subjugation of women" (121). This is precisely what Austen is doing through the character of Elizabeth Bennet, allotting her a place firmly within society which she can then subtly question and subvert and thus "make a virtue of her own confinement," (121).

Unlike her friend Charlotte Lucas, who resigns herself to a marriage without love,

Elizabeth is able to see beyond the societal conventions. She acts upon principle (she will not marry a man who is repulsive to her; she must esteem her husband), while Charlotte acts upon practicality. Elizabeth is an attractive heroine (both to Mr. Darcy and to Austen's readers) in large part because her principles give her something to fight for. She functions just like every other character in the novel—in the particularities of Regency society—but unlike the other characters, Elizabeth rises above many of the unfortunate, but accepted practices of her society. For example, she does not allow the fear of what will happen to her father's estate of Longbourn and consequently to herself, her mother, and her sisters, to cripple her decision-making processes. She refuses Mr. Collins's proposal of marriage as well as Mr. Darcy's first proposal because she recognizes that the focus on attaining wealth and status through marriage which was emphasized so heavily by her society for young women in her situation, was in actuality, not an indisputable law, but a pursuit which society had come to encourage. And because Elizabeth does not conform to what society dictated for her, embodied especially in the tension between her character and that of the conventional Caroline Bingley, as well as her opposition to her mother when Mrs. Bennet attempts to force her to marry Mr. Collins, Elizabeth is able to forge her own path, which, quite conveniently (and ironically?) is the path to marrying a man who is understanding, kind, and also very rich

In the discussion cited earlier in which Darcy, Bingley, the Bingley sisters, and Elizabeth engage concerning what makes a woman accomplished, Darcy asserts that a woman must be an avid reader in order to improve her mind. This is an echo of Austen's own view, which is evident in her creation of Elizabeth Bennet who wins the heart of the dashing hero, in large part because she maintains her wit, discernment, and rationality,

while society emphasized the outward cultivation of female charms. Ascarelli asserts that Austen, like Wollstonecraft, is aware of women's need for a rational mind and that all of Austen's heroines use their minds, or learn to use them (n.p.). A legitimate case may be made that *Pride and Prejudice* is first and foremost a story of self-discovery, rather than a love story or a romance, or even a critique of culture. It is the story of Elizabeth's discovery of herself through the various social circumstances and relationships she must navigate and her own failures in the form of pride, prejudice, and misjudgment with which she must wrestle in order to emerge as the heroine. Susan Fraiman notes that, "In Austen country, there is no bridge away from culture and society" (n.p.). This is perfectly compatible with the fact that Austen does not create Elizabeth Bennet to totally subvert her culture and society, but instead to find her own way amidst the cultural norms, the pressure of friends and family, and the dictates of her own conscience and sensibility. Fraiman further notes that in order to stress the reality-like quality of Elizabeth's character Austen "makes a point of framing Elizabeth not as *sui generis* or as some kind of child of nature but rather as the product of particular parents at a certain historical juncture. . . . Austen's Elizabeth doesn't come strolling in from the wild but emerges very specifically from the bosom of a bad marriage" (n.p.). Austen situates Elizabeth in a world very similar to her own and allows her to grapple with circumstances which would be relevant for many young women of the day. By presenting Elizabeth as a young woman who managed to succeed in her society while not giving in to the role it confined her to, Austen suggests that young women do not have to be at the mercy of societal conventions and furthermore, that awareness of irony and what is worth laughing at in the world is essential to maintaining one's individuality.

Because of Elizabeth's character as examined above, it is evident why she is Austen's most famous heroine and why *Pride and Prejudice* is Austen's most famous novel. Elizabeth is the epitome of a heroine with a tragic flaw—prejudice (and/or pride)—which she must and does overcome. Elizabeth is not even introduced into the novel until the second chapter and it could be argued that her story does not become the defining focus of the novel until the second volume. However, it is clear that *Pride and Prejudice* is Elizabeth's story because, as Judith Lowder Newton observes, "Elizabeth alone is her own analyst" (39). Elizabeth is an extremely perceptive character, and the reader thus identifies with her because it is almost as if she knows as much as the author who is telling the story. Part of Elizabeth's appeal originates in her individuality, as has been observed. This, in turn, reflects on the power she holds—a power that Austen gives her character, and a power which is rare in the hands of a female. Newton states, "Real power in *Pride and Prejudice*, as is often observed, is to have the intelligence, the wit, and the critical attitudes of Jane Austen; and Elizabeth Bennet, as it is also sometimes observed, is essentially an Austen fantasy, a fantasy of power" (34). Elizabeth is the embodiment of the female power which Austen could not fully achieve in real life. It is small wonder, then, that Austen gave such ringing praise of the character of Elizabeth Bennet.

Elizabeth stands in stark contrast to the other characters of the novel, including Charlotte Lucas, Mr. Collins, Mrs. Bennet, Lady Catherine, the Bingley sisters, and others not examined herein. The contrast is part of Austen's purpose to highlight the irony which exists when characters conform to social conventions and then become swallowed up in the personal story of a heroine who rejected many social conventions.

This is both brilliant social commentary, as well as an intriguing plot line, two significant reasons why *Pride and Prejudice* is an enduring classic, for both critics and pleasure readers.

Chapter 4: *Emma:* The Power of Social Standing (and how too much belief in that power is blinding)

As one of Austen's later novels (written 1814-15, published 1816), *Emma* exhibits the complexities one would expect from an author who is experienced and is now perfecting her craft. Although it is not easy to sum up any Austen novel with simple morals, themes, or conclusions, *Emma* presents perhaps the most difficult challenge for examination. The title character is not as beloved as Elizabeth Bennet (Deidre Le Faye notes that, "According to an Austen family tradition, Jane said that for this book she was going to create a heroine 'whom no one but myself will much like' [255]), but Emma is even more complex. As we will see, she does distance herself from social conventions and emerge as the novel's heroine, but she has a very muddled and mistake-ridden journey in reaching a place in which she is able to assess honestly how society works and where her place in it ought to be. As Emma's self-awareness unfolds through the plot, it is revealed that her miscalculations in matchmaking are due to a false sense of her own place in society, as well as an incorrect view of the place of others in the same society. Social conventions of the time reflected the stratified hierarchy in which Emma thinks. The novel's complexity is clearly manifested as Emma must learn how to overcome her prejudices of social status and yet maintain a sense of obligation and responsibility which proceeds from her own upper class status as a woman who is "handsome, clever, and rich" (1). Perhaps because Emma is the most autonomous heroine of Austen's novels, Nora Foster Stovel has stated that she is more modern than her Austen contemporaries (n.p.). Yet despite her large fortune and high social standing, Emma is still subject to obeying the role her society assigned for women. This novel, "that most class-conscious

of novels" (Maggie Lane 347), is about her wrestling through her place in society, as well as her journey to see the truth of where others belong in the social hierarchy. As an upper class woman, Emma has the especially complex task of maintaining both the rights and the responsibilities of her social class.

Highbury, the town which provides the setting for *Emma*, is a self-contained place. Because Highbury is like a microcosm of Austen's world, or a small representative of society in England as a whole, the interactions among characters heighten the reader's focus on the role of social class in this small society. Because most of the events of the plot take place within Highbury, it serves as the ideal place in which to examine the details of social status. The depth of detail that Austen gives to Highbury is, as John Wiltshire notes, "One of the achievements of the novel" (68). Wiltshire further notes that "the novel generates, especially in volume II, a sense of busy interplay between characters and between *social classes*, a network of visiting, gossip, charitable acts, and neighborly concern" (68, emphasis mine). *Emma* is filled with diverse characters, many of whom we as readers only know about through the dialogue of other characters. Mr. Perry, Highbury's doctor, the Coles, or James and the Woodhouse's other servants are examples of this. Each of these characters is assigned a social class or place in society which we as readers discover through the eyes of Emma. Juliet McMaster gives an apt summary of social class in the village of Highbury: "The Highbury of *Emma* is close to presenting a microcosm of Austen's social world. Here, from Mr. Knightley . . . to the poor family to which Emma dispenses charity, we have assembled nearly all the levels of society that Austen presents. Moreover, the novel's heroine is one who specializes in social discrimination, and makes prompt though often inaccurate judgments about the

social station of the people around her" (118). It is clear, then, that *Emma* provides a discourse on social class and that, through the novel, readers are enlightened concerning the role of social class in the culture in which Austen herself lived.

Austen populated this microcosm of social class which is Highbury with a diversity of characters. In fact, there are so many characters in *Emma*, each with varied social statuses and functions, that it is difficult to choose which primarily to discuss as key examples of social conformity. It will be relevant, however, to begin the discussion of social class in *Emma* with examining the Bateses. Mrs. and Miss Bates are single women, a mother and her daughter. Mrs. Bates is a widow and Miss Bates has never been married. McMaster notes, "They are of a class that was later to be called 'shabby genteel,' people who have come down in the world. Once prominent as the wife of the vicar, Mrs. Bates lives on slender means, in cramped quarters in an upstairs apartment, with only one servant" (125). In Austen's time period, of course, two women who lived together with few financial resources likely had a harsh lot in life. Mrs. Bates is old and cannot see or hear very well, but her daughter takes good care of her. Miss Bates is the epitome of the good-natured town gossip. She can ramble on for hours and yet say very little, but she is overall uncomplaining, cheerful, and very thankful for the kindnesses that those who are more well off (like Mr. Knightley and the Woodhouses) bestow upon her and her mother. Mrs. and Miss Bates seem to be cheerful enough with the lives they lead. They are, after all, "on visiting terms with the best families of Highbury" (126). This alludes to the fact that Mrs. and Miss Bates, although not well off, are of a higher social class than, say, the less genteel Coles whose company Emma initially scorns, though they possess a larger fortune.

Mrs. and Miss Bates unquestioningly accept the place in life that society allots them. They are content with what they have, though it is little. They are perfectly happy with the place society assigned to women of their fortune and social standing. They are even happy to receive charity, such as Emma's pity calls or Mr. Knightley's gift of his store of apples (159). Mrs. and Miss Bates are an interesting case, because, unlike many of the characters previously examined, their conformity to or acceptance of social conventions does not explicitly serve to accentuate their underhanded motives or mistaken views. After all, contentment is not generally viewed as a negative thing; however, contentment can also lead to apathy. Mrs. and Miss Bates do not wish to go beyond the small borders in which they live their lives. Austen presents them as staple characters of Highbury; they fit their role in the makeup of the town demographics, but they in no way transcend the stereotype of the aged mother and the gossipy middle-aged spinster. In this way, they reinforce the rightness of the already established place in which societal conventions placed women of their social and financial standing (which two things were often nearly synonymous or at least closely linked), and furthered the notion that that place was permanent. Ultimately, Mrs. and Miss Bates's social conformity is most clearly evident in their subservience to the plot as opposed to their manipulation of it. Austen creates Mrs. and Miss Bates as examples of the life lived by single women of the fallen upper class in a provincial town.

The one time in the novel when Miss Bates becomes the focus of the plot is in the expedition to Box Hill. This scene is worth examining closely in order to reveal more about Miss Bates as well as crucial information concerning the other characters involved. All of the characters are sitting down on the hillside, enjoying the afternoon. Emma and

Frank Churchill, who have the most exultant spirits of the assembled group, become bored, so they decide to begin a game in which every person is required to provide something for the others' amusement; either one very clever thing, two moderately clever things, or three very dull things. When it is Miss Bates's turn, she remarks that she is not very clever so she will have to provide three very dull things to which Emma responds that the trouble is, she will be limited to only three, alluding, of course, to Miss Bates's penchant for incessant chattering. When Miss Bates understands Emma's meaning, she says, "I must make myself very disagreeable, or she would not have said such a thing to an old friend" (243). She takes Emma's indirect criticism to heart, so much so that Mr. Knightley, ever the guardian of Emma's behavior, remonstrates her for being so careless and hurtful with her words. While Miss Bates's acquiescence to the legitimacy of Emma's criticism shows that she accepts that Emma, who is of a higher social standing, has the right to criticize her, a woman of lower social standing, Mr. Knightley's criticism of Emma serves to delineate Mr. Knightley's and Emma's different views regarding social status. Mr. Knightley takes it upon himself to make Emma sensible of the hurt she inflicted on Miss Bates with her pointed comment: "How could you be so unfeeling to Miss Bates? How could you be so insolent in your wit to a woman of her character, age, and situation?—Emma, I had not thought it possible" (245). Emma counters that she believes that indeed there is not a "better creature in the world," but goes on to observe "that what is good and what is ridiculous are most unfortunately blended in her" (246). Emma thus recognizes that although Miss Bates means well, she has a serious lack of perception in regard to the social graces. Mr. Knightley acknowledges this but goes on to state that because of Miss Bates's lack of fortune and fallen social class standing, she

should not be held to such high standards: "Were she a woman of fortune, I would leave every harmless absurdity to take its chance, I would not quarrel with you for any liberties of manner. Were she your equal in situation . . . She is poor; she has sunk from the comforts she was born to" (246). Mr. Knightley believes that proper behavior is dependent upon the social class of both parties concerned. Miss Bates's lack of fortune and the lower social status that results from it are a factor in the way Emma ought to treat her (she ought to be less critical of her faults), while Emma's claim to fortune and high social status place a responsibility upon her to those of the lower classes, as Mr. Knightley goes on to affirm.

This scene at Box Hill, then, in addition to revealing more about the character of Miss Bates, also serves as a means by which the characters of both Emma and Mr. Knightley are elucidated, and even further, it serves to show how the two of them relate to one another. Since the novel ultimately ends with the union of Emma and Mr. Knightley, this conflict involving Miss Bates is central to the plot because it is a circumstance which Austen uses to expound upon the social statuses of these characters. Ironically, although Emma's comment to Miss Bates was rather mean-spirited and even spiteful, because she criticized someone of Miss Bates's low social standing and lack of fortune (and by inference, lack of education and refinement), she actually treats Miss Bates with less condescension than does Mr. Knightley who is consistently good-natured and kind toward those of lower social standing. It is precisely because of their lower social status (and thus the responsibilities of his higher social status) that he takes it upon himself to treat them with particular kindness and forbearance, while Emma apparently

doesn't believe that fallen social class status or lack of fortune can excuse ridiculous behavior.

The fascinating question which arises upon this examination of the character of Miss Bates is whether Austen's sympathies lie with Emma or with Mr. Knightley in regard to their views of Miss Bates. Mr. Knightley ultimately believes that Miss Bates is a product of her circumstances—she can do nothing to change her status in life and therefore those who are more privileged ought to judge her less harshly. Emma, on the other hand, appears not to regard the natural benefits which life awarded her upon birth, nor does she take to heart the lack of benefits which life allotted to Mrs. and Miss Bates. Although Emma and Mr. Knightley bestow charity upon the Bateses, they view the Bateses' situation in life differently. Cornish notes: "Jane Austen, as we know from her way of speaking of her neighbors in her letters to her sister Cassandra, or when describing and putting in motion the other more real people whom she created, was grateful to the fellow-creatures who gave her so much amusement" (163). Like Mr. Bennet and Elizabeth in *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen enjoys making sport of her neighbors because ridiculousness in human beings does not make them less human, but more so; it shows that they are imperfect and often believe in misguided notions, but because of this, they are subject to humanity—the bond that unites us all. Emma is often irked at Miss Bates's constant jabbering and incessant gratitude, but her comment to Miss Bates on Box Hill, although somewhat cutting, shows that she viewed Miss Bates as more than a charity case, which cannot strictly be said of Mr. Knightley. In this respect, Austen would seem to align herself more closely with Emma.

However, the case is further complicated by the fact that, as Nancy Armstrong observes, "Austen's novel castigates behavior that has been prompted by social motivation—Emma's low regard for Martin, Knightley's for Harriet, Elton's for Harriet, as well as Emma's for Miss Bates" (154). Armstrong believes that, in *Emma*, Austen criticizes any form of prejudice (whether predisposed in someone's favor or quite the opposite) in which one character treats another a certain way based upon his or her social status. Armstrong continues, "It makes such motivation . . . into the distinctive feature of the nouveaux riches and a false basis, therefore, for genteel behavior" (154). According to this (social motivation as a prompter of behavior), then, Knightley does not have sufficient grounds on which to castigate Emma for her criticism of Miss Bates, because Emma's criticism has to do with Miss Bates's character or personality, and not with her social status. Of course, Knightley argues that Miss Bates's character is such *because* of her social status, which brings us back to the issue of how social conventions exert influence over characters. Mr. Knightley seems to believe, along with Miss Bates herself, that she is trapped within her social situation, while by her comment, Emma implicitly suggests that she believes that Miss Bates is not irreversibly assigned to being a poor spinster, or at least a poor, *ridiculous* spinster, and that her lack of refinement, perception, and education are something that she could improve if she wished, just as Emma herself could improve her mind by reading if she wished as Mr. Knightley encourages her to do (22).

These two disparate views which Mr. Knightley and Emma espouse regarding Miss Bates are consistent with their respective characters. Emma is accustomed to having a greater degree of autonomy than most women in her society, so she would naturally

presume that other women have some access to control over their own lives as well. Mr. Knightley, however, as the owner and manager of a large estate—Donwell Abbey—is accustomed to the natural order of hierarchy which his society sanctioned. He treats people with kindness and respect, but it is always the kindness and respect of a superior man to those beneath him. Mrs. and Miss Bates are clearly classified as those beneath him, and that they are content with remaining in their current social position shows that they accept, as he does, the norms of social class which the culture of Regency England promoted.

It has been noted that Highbury is a self-contained, self-sufficient place. It is a small country town. Francis Warre Cornish quotes Austen on the writing of *Emma*: "Three or four families in a country village is the very thing to work on" (151). Since the majority of the plot is contained within Highbury, it is little wonder that many of the novel's characters do not go beyond Highbury's social circles. Although Highbury is presented as a pleasantly provincial place, it is worth noting that Austen seems to imply that to transcend this literal and metaphorical small world is commendable. Emma ultimately transcends the bounds of Highbury when she marries Mr. Knightley and assumes her role as impending mistress of Donwell Abbey in the next parish. Miss Bates, however, who lives in a very small house in Highbury with no prospect of a husband or hope of fortune, must resign herself to inhabiting a small sphere of influence and existence, with which fate she readily complies. Social conventions had taught her that what a woman who was "neither young, handsome, rich, nor married" (11) (in contrast to the opening description of Emma) could plausibly expect out of life in a small country village was exactly what her life was. Miss Bates's penchant for gossip ("She was a great

talker upon little matters" [12]) attests to the smallness of her mind, which reflects the smallness of her outward circumstances. Austen says that she "had no intellectual superiority" (12), a fact that already foreshadows her triviality and marginalization as a character, and Cornish notes that "want of discrimination is a great blemish, and Miss Bates is as ready to be patronized by Mrs. Elton as by Emma" (164). Miss Bates is not very perceptive because, firstly, she is incessantly and obnoxiously bubbling about her gratefulness to her neighbors and friends, unconscious of the fact that she makes herself wearisome to them, and secondly, as the quotation above makes plain, she considers attention from someone like Mrs. Elton to be equal with attention from someone like Emma. Mrs. Elton, as will be further examined, is conceited and boastful and even vulgar, while Emma, although she makes many misjudgments throughout the novel, is still clever, perceptive, and conscious of propriety. Above all, Miss Bates's foolish talking communicates that she does not understand how to properly use language. Gilbert and Gubar posit that this is because of the marginal place to which women were sentenced during Austen's time period. "'Foolish' women characters in Jane Austen's novels (Miss Bates in *Emma*, for instance) express Malapropish confusion about language" (58). Women during Austen's time period attempted to use their words to transcend the boundaries a patriarchal society placed upon them, but most often, they were unsuccessful. Someone like Miss Bates with limited innate resources to draw upon was especially doomed to wield the province of speech inappropriately. Since these boundaries placed upon women by their patriarchal society often involved making distinctions between upper and lower social classes and because the hallmark of the upper classes was possession of land and aristocratic connections, women were often

marginalized even within their own social class. After all, women rarely possessed land. Debra Teachman notes that "a married woman, having no independent legal identify in the eyes of civil law, could not own property in her own right" (38). This was the privilege of her husband or male relative. In addition to this, the aristocratic connections which were considered so important were generally patrilineal. Therefore, Miss Bates's inability to properly express herself is evidence of her subjection to patrilineal authority and the social conventions this authority espoused.

Another couple of characters who are heavily concerned with social class, and particularly how to achieve a higher social standing, are the Eltons. Mr. Elton is the vicar of Highbury and the man whom Emma deems a suitable husband for her protégée Harriet Smith. Mr. Elton, however, has higher ambitions than securing the hand of the inconsequential Miss Smith. McMaster states, "Mr. Collins and Mr. Elton are parsons on their preferment, servile towards a 'patron', and eager to marry money" (121). Emma is blinded to his true intentions of securing her own hand in marriage. Upon Emma's decided refusal of his proposal, Mr. Elton soon goes away to Bath and comes back with his new bride, Miss Augusta Hawkins. Mrs. Elton then becomes the chief focus of the couple in the remaining portion of the novel. She serves to make Mr. Elton's true character plain, but she also ushers in his marginalization, and, in the process, her own as well. As the selected husband for the protégé of the novel's heroine, Mr. Elton promises to play a large part in the story. Instead, because of his pompous notions of social standing (embodied both in his rejection of Harriet and his aspirations concerning Emma) and his choice in a wife, Mr. Elton shows that he is merely a product of what social conventions encouraged regarding a prudent marriage, and therefore destined to remove

himself from the focus of the novel. Mr. Knightley warns Emma of Mr. Elton's motives in finding a wife when he says that Mr. Elton is "not at all likely to make an imprudent match. He knows the value of a good income as well as anybody. Elton may talk sentimentally, but he will act rationally" (42). Therefore, even Mr. Knightley acquiesces that to marry a woman of fortune and status (which status was often achieved because of fortune) was a wise thing to do. It is worth noting that while Mr. Elton is acutely conscious of class distinctions and of repudiating a connection with "illegitimacy and ignorance," as Mr. Knightley describes Harriet's situation (39), he is not immune to pursuing a connection with Emma who is of higher rank than himself, making clear that the discrepancy of social class he repudiates in a match with Harriet does not apply to his desired match with Emma. This shows that Mr. Elton was acting in accordance with what the social conventions of the time encouraged regarding improving one's social status by marriage. Armstrong notes that, "Mr. Elton's preciously penned charade [a riddle which expresses his love to Emma, which she mistakenly believes is meant for Harriet] characterizes him as a man of class pretensions and mercenary concerns" (145). He is a product of social convention, but, unlike Mrs. and Miss Bates, Mr. Elton seizes the opportunity to align himself with a woman of higher rank, and in this way attempts to improve his current social status, rather than believing that his current social situation could not be improved. Mr. Elton's efforts to improve his place in society are consistent with what the social conventions encouraged a man with his claims to do. This is in contrast with what social conventions conditioned women in Mrs. and Miss Bates's position to expect from life. Mrs. and Miss Bates are older single women, without cleverness, perception, or other qualities except simple cheerfulness to recommend them,

while Mr. Elton is an eligible bachelor. He is "well acquainted with his own claims . . . He knows that he is a very handsome young man, and a great favourite wherever he goes" (42). The conventional view was that someone with the claims Mr. Elton possessed could and should do all in his power to attain a prosperous match.

At this time period, those of the *nouveaux riches* were just beginning to emerge. These were people who acquired their money and status through trade. Members of this social class began to close the gap in social status between themselves and the landed gentry. Juliet McMaster states that "Trade represents new money, and new money, like wine, isn't considered quite respectable until it has aged a little (123). Social conventions, however, were beginning to encourage alliances between those of the landed gentry with those who had made their fortune in trade and had thus risen in social status as they increased their wealth. For Mr. Elton, who already had moderate claims to an accepted social class and a good position as the vicar of Highbury, money was certainly a factor when considering marriage. When Emma, who boasts both rank and fortune, refuses him, Mr. Elton settles for a woman of large fortune (10,000 pounds, Lefaye 270), albeit only recent (and perhaps still tentative) claims to social acceptability among the landed gentry. Mr. Elton has lofty expectations of what he may gain from a marriage. He knows his social status is acceptable and he is willing to marry Miss Augusta Hawkins whose "father had been a petty tradesman, and until her marriage she lived with her uncle, an attorney's clerk, in the heart of Bristol—origins which would raise misgiving in any contemporary mind" (270-271). Such a connection would satisfy both partners, as Mr. Elton would increase his fortune and the future Mrs. Elton would solidify her distinction as a member of the landed gentry.

In her argument with Mr. Knightley about her attempt to pair Harriet with Mr. Elton, Emma refers to Mr. Elton's satisfactory social class, indicating both her own bias for those with claims to social status as well as Mr. Elton's sufficiency in this regard. Emma claims that Harriet and Mr. Elton are equals regarding social status, so that if Mr. Elton deserves the title of a gentleman, then he will be a good match for Harriet, for whom Emma has invented claims to nobility. Mr. Martin, Harriet's first choice of a husband, on the other hand, is inferior to Mr. Elton. "Mr. Martin may be the richest of the two, but he is undoubtedly the inferior as to rank in society" (39). If Mr. Martin is despised because of his fortune made through hard work, then the new Mrs. Elton, an example of the *nouveau riche*, will undoubtedly be repudiated by Emma. Although, considering the circumstances, Emma is predisposed to dislike Mrs. Elton, this lady fulfills all of Emma's worst prejudices concerning the behavior of someone of the merchant class. Harriet, whose unknown origins may very well also be rooted in the merchant class, is nevertheless someone for whom a woman with such an active imagination as Emma may concoct a genteel history. However, Mrs. Elton's claim to acceptability among the landed gentry clearly originated in the fortune her family made in trade, and her arrogance, boastfulness, and self-assigned superior status (as when she nominates herself to care about the welfare of Jane Fairfax) suggest that being a gentleman or gentlewoman requires more than wealth and land. In this case, Emma's prejudiced assumptions that those of the merchant class are vulgar and unrefined are proven to be entirely correct. The character of Mrs. Elton, then, serves to reinforce Emma's initial class snobbishness, which is ironic because one of the reasons that Emma despises Mrs. Elton is her pretentiousness in placing herself in a superior social class. In

reality, however, Mrs. Elton possesses none of the finer qualities of a gentlewoman, though because of her claim to wealth, society was willing also to allow her claim to a higher social status. In direct contrast to the status (and, by implication, the behavior) of a gentlewoman, Mrs. Elton is, as Cornish states, "the vulgarist woman to be found in Jane Austen's pages (which is saying a good deal)" (156).

One might imagine that someone who recently ascended to acceptability among England's landed gentry would be less conscious of class distinctions, but in contrast to this, Mrs. Elton seems to sense that because her social status was not inherent, but rather attained over time, that she needs to prove constantly to others that she deserves the status which the amassing of wealth has given her. In this way Mrs. Elton's continual prattling about "her Mr. E., and her *caro sposo*, and her resources" (181) which are so abhorrent to Emma, suggest that she felt the tension which the conventional notions of social status encouraged concerning the place of the *nouveaux riches*. Similarly to Miss Bates, but for more mercenary motives, Mrs. Elton attempts to cover her deficiencies of character through the misuse of language. As an author known for her witty dialogue and quotable characters, Jane Austen valued a correct, dynamic use of language. Bruce Stovel attests to Austen's skill with language: "They say a picture is worth a thousand words, but not if the picture is unremarkable and the words are Jane Austen's" (245) In her novels and particularly in *Emma*, Austen stresses the importance of an appropriate use of communication through speech. Social conventions implied that manipulating language could be a way to attain social status. For example, Isabella Thorpe in *Northanger Abbey* deceives Catherine through her words in order to attain a desirable marriage, Caroline Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice* attempts to influence Mr. Darcy's opinion of Elizabeth

through her critical words, and Mrs. Elton in *Emma* uses a profusion of pretentious language to solidify her claim to gentility. Because Austen gives us a negative view of Mrs. Elton (primarily because of her disparaging use of words) through the eyes of Emma, we can conclude that Austen rejected the social conventions which allowed social status to be attained through misleading means.

On the other hand, Austen also criticizes the conventional notion that elevated social status which was innate, rather than attained, gave those fortunate enough to be born with it the freedom to use it as a cover for improper behavior. In contrast to these two binaries which lead to marginalization because they are based on a false view of one's own worth—or rather, how that worth is assigned—Austen suggests that, "The quality of humanity is to be judged by moral and humane standards . . .not by social status" (McMaster 125). However, in order to highlight this truth, "like her own temporary snobs, Darcy and Emma, she pays full attention to their social status first" (125). Austen emphasizes Mrs. Elton's pretentiousness and even, as McMaster terms it, Emma's proclivity to be a "temporary snob," to critique the accepted tendency to be blinded by the belief that social status was the sole measure of someone's worth. Rather, Austen marginalizes a character like Mrs. Elton who abuses her claim to an elevated social status, primarily through her repetitive mention of her credentials, which chiefly take the form of material possessions, such as her *barouche landau* and her continual reference to the beauties of Maple Grove, her home in Surrey. Because Austen judges her own characters based upon his or her true merit, rather than upon externals, how that character behaves plays a large part in this judgment. McMaster states that "much has to do with manners and tact. . . . It is a difficult exercise in discrimination to pick apart

social standing, manners, and morals. But Austen enables us to distinguish between Emma's unapproved social snobbery and her proper moral aversion to Mrs. Elton's loud-mouthed self-approval. For instance, like Miss Bingley, Mrs. Elton regularly uses her newly acquired status to put down others" (124). This quotation provides an apt summary of how Mrs. Elton abuses her claim to upper class social status through the way in which she employs language.

Once Mrs. Elton enters Highbury, Mr. Elton's marginalization is thoroughly underway. It has been seen that Mr. Elton follows the social conventions which sanctioned his endeavor to elevate his fortune in the world by attempting to garner Emma's affections. In that sense, he is proactively seeking to increase his social status, but after he marries Augusta Hawkins, his acknowledgment of the importance of high social standing becomes more passive. Austen states, "He [Mr. Elton] seemed not merely happy with her [his new wife], but proud. He had the air of congratulating himself on having brought such a woman to Highbury, as not even Miss Woodhouse could equal" (182). Now that he has secured a wife whom he believes fulfills his desire for social elevation, Mr. Elton is content to revel in his good fortune and to agree with everything his wife says and does, rather than to pursue actively further elevation of social status. He becomes complacent and sanctimonious because he believes he has attained what society must acknowledge as a good match. This attitude is in contrast to Austen's emphasis on her heroines' continual process of gaining new insights and better understanding of themselves and of the world around them. In Emma, contentment which quickly turns into complacency and acceptance of the status quo is a hallmark of conformity to social convention.

Consequently, once the denouement of the novel is approaching, the Eltons have both become marginal characters. In the final chapter of the novel in which the three marriages take place, Mr. Elton has no more significance than that of the clergyman who unites the couples in marriage. Of Harriet it is said that, "Perhaps, indeed, at that time she scarcely saw Mr. Elton, but as the clergyman whose blessing at the altar might next fall on herself" (318). Mr. Elton has been relegated to performing the social and clerical duty which has no specific connection to his person and is instead purely a function in which he serves the community. Ironically, this social and clerical function requires him to speak only words which are dictated to him as the man with the power vested in him from a higher authority. Similarly, Mrs. Elton's incessant, pretentious prattling lags significantly toward the end of the novel. She is no longer the novelty of Highbury and her misuse of language in order to convince those around her of her upper social class status is ultimately shown to have only temporary power. Therefore, it can be inferred that the ability to have autonomous speech is associated with the successful emergence of a character into a state of solidified personal identity, while, on the other hand, the inability of a character to recognize that it is possible to transcend the position he or she was assigned by society signifies his or her marginalization. Similarly, although she will not be discussed in detail, Jane Fairfax is able to attain her desired place in society (instead of the position society would have relegated her to—that of a governess earning a pittance) only when the secrecy of her engagement to Frank Churchill is ended and she is able to speak about it freely.

Harriet Smith, a boarder at Mrs. Goddard's girls' school whom Emma designates as her protégée, is another example of a character who accepts the status quo. Like Mrs.

and Miss Bates, Harriet is ready to embrace whatever position society has assigned her in the social class hierarchy, but unlike the Bateses, Harriet looks to Emma to define what that position is. Harriet presents an especially interesting character study in reference to conformity to social conventions because Emma becomes, in a sense, the embodiment of the social conventions to which Harriet conforms since Harriet is ready to believe anything Emma tells her, and much of what Emma tells her in regard to the match she can hope to make is based on conventional ideas of class status. In one sense, then, Harriet does not directly conform to social conventions regarding views of social class, but since Emma is her ultimate authority on most everything and especially on what to believe about whom, Harriet doubly conforms, first to Emma and then, because she conforms to Emma's leading, to the class consciousness which Emma espouses.

Harriet is a character who possesses layers of conformity to social conventions. She is ready to believe anything Emma tells her. She is even ready to believe anything Mrs. Goddard tells her: "She had been satisfied to hear and believe just what Mrs. Goddard chose to tell her; and looked no farther" (15). Harriet "was certainly not clever, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition . . . only desiring to be guided by any one she looked up to" (15). Harriet's world is extremely limited, not only to the small village of Highbury but to two subjects in particular—Mrs. Goddard's boarding school and the Martin family, with whom she spent two months over the past summer. While she was staying with the Martins she began to entertain thoughts of marrying the young Robert Martin, whom Mr. Knightley calls a "gentleman-farmer" (39). For Harriet, whose thoughts encompass nothing deeper than a sweet-tempered and simple understanding of the basic ideas of what "any one she looked up to" may have placed in her mind,

marriage is the obvious and only pursuit of any young lady. Therefore, she is aghast when Emma declares she means never to marry: "Ah!—so you say; but I cannot believe it . . . Dear me!—it is so odd to hear a woman talk so!" (55).

In addition to her acceptance of the status quo in regard to the inevitable life to which a young woman was suited, Harriet also cheerfully and innocently accepts what Emma tells her in regard to *whom* she ought to marry. While initially the humble but hard-working Robert Martin, a tenant of Mr. Knightley's, is good enough for her, she changes her mind once Emma implants loftier notions in her head. Mr. Elton is Emma's first choice of a marriage partner for Harriet. Mr. Knightley, as has been seen, cautions against the pursuit of such a match, not because he believes Mr. Elton does not behave as the gentleman he claims to be, but because Mr. Knightley believes Mr. Elton will take social class and fortune into consideration when he chooses a bride, and thus will not choose someone with uncertain connections and no fortune like Harriet Smith. This discussion between Mr. Knightley and Emma over Harriet shows that Mr. Knightley does not possess perfection of perception any more than Emma does. However, in his defense, he does claim that, "Men of sense, whatever you may chuse to say, do not want silly wives" (41). Mr. Knightley recognizes Harriet as "not a sensible girl, nor a girl of any information. She has been taught nothing useful and she is too young to have acquired any thing herself. At her age she can have no experience, and with her little wit, is not very likely ever to have any that can avail her" (39). Mr. Knightley realizes that, although pretty and agreeable, Harriet Smith is not an ideal wife for a man of the upper classes, who ought to be a man of sense. He is a sensible man himself, and unlike Mr. Allen and Mr. Bennet, he does not allow a merely pretty and agreeable woman who has a lack of

sense and cleverness to attract his affections (his compassion and mild good favor, perhaps, but not affections); nor does he wish others to choose such a wife. This is evident when he says to Emma in their disagreement about Harriet's proposed match with Robert Martin that, "The advantage of the match I felt to be all on her side" (39). Through this dialogue, then, Harriet, although not presented in a negative light as being a mean-spirited or socially pandering young woman, is yet far from emerging as any sort of heroine. She is far more docile and less clever than either Emma or Elizabeth, and although she shares more with Catherine in that she is innocent, naïve, impressionable, and overall congenial, the differences between these two emerge when we reflect that, when given opportunity to learn from society, Catherine does so and thus becomes more sensible and wise and gains improved judgment of character, while in the last mention of Harriet in *Emma* as in the first, she remains much the same amiable, accepting, simple schoolgirl she has been throughout the novel. The lack of education which seems often to be at the root of a character's failure to transcend the bondage of connections with a low social class is nevertheless an obstacle which it is conceivable for a character to overcome. Catherine Morland did so and even Elizabeth Bennet managed to rise above the influence of her mother's ignorance. Harriet, however, merely accepts what society tells her through its various mouthpieces: Emma, Mrs. Goddard, Mr. Elton, or whoever it may be. Austen does not give Harriet someone who can successfully help her to rise above her circumstances. The sense of Elizabeth Bennet's father helped to counter the influence of her mother's foolishness and Catherine was better able to see her folly in allowing her imagination to run wild through the rational counsel of Henry Tilney, but Emma's influence on Harriet does not save her from the fate to which her low

connections destined her; rather, Emma encourages Harriet's foolishness by engrossing her in petty things such as the riddle Mr. Elton writes or the portrait Emma insists on painting of Harriet.

In large part due to her subservient attitude and lack of initiative in bettering her understanding, Harriet clarifies her place in Highbury society as nearly synonymous with her place as a character in the novel: in both cases she serves to highlight and showcase the role social class played in English small town society. She ultimately functions as a character who is easily objectified and who therefore cannot transcend her circumstances. She cannot transcend Emma's design for her nor her own acceptance of the inevitability of marriage. Furthermore, she can no more transcend her purpose as assigned by Austen, the author. Austen uses Harriet to explore the subject of class consciousness in her world. Michael Kramp states that "Emma's care for Harriet is clearly in part an egotistical adventure, but the heroine's plan to improve her newfound friend also suggests a national concern about the social positions and potential of young women" (151). The inclusion of the character of Harriet Smith in *Emma* thus engenders a broader discussion. Although her concerns in the novel are mainly petty ones, the very nature of her character suggests that Austen was not unaware of the role that social class played in England in general.

The fact that Austen is able to hint at a larger picture while confining herself to a story that takes place in a limited space (the small village of Highbury as well as the often constricted space of the stereotypical female mind, given to triviality) suggests that she was marvelously aware of the social boundaries which existed, both in terms of class and in terms of gender. That she chose to address these issues from the bottom up by using detailed, intimate portrayals of characters whom we feel as if we know by the end of the

novel, attests to the fact that, as Virginia Woolf states, "Jane Austen is thus a mistress of much deeper emotion than appears upon the surface. She stimulates us to supply what is not there. What she offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed by something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial" (Woolf 339). Although Harriet is not destined for heroine status, and although she is not a particularly compelling character, her character is valuable to examine because she is a true picture of many such girls in Regency England, and her plight, especially as concerns social status, is not unique to her character as created by Austen. Hers is the common fate of a young, fortuneless, simple schoolgirl, though not many Harriet Smiths have an Emma Woodhouse by whom to be instructed.

It is to Emma that we now turn. Although the character of Harriet Smith is rather typical or even stereotypical—Kramp states that "Harriet appears as the anonymous and archetypal Anglo-Saxon female" (150)—Emma is not as easily classified. As has been stated, she is one of Austen's most complex heroines. Part of this is due to the fact that she makes many of the same mistakes as other characters who are far from being the hero or heroine of the novel and yet she alone emerges as the heroine, which begs the question of what differentiates her from them. For example, like Mrs. Elton, Emma uses her elevated social status (although Emma's is real, while Mrs. Elton's is largely self-assigned) as a cover which allows her to use language in an inappropriate way, as in her pointed comment to Miss Bates. Through this, Austen suggests that social conventions can dictate how social classes are assigned and thus who belongs to which class, but they cannot guarantee that the behavior which was associated with a particular social class would be inseparable from it. Armstrong speaks to this: "As the essential quality of the

new aristocrat—so closely akin to charity, on the one hand, and to condescension, on the other, yet utterly unlike them in the complex of emotions from which it springs—politeness hangs in the balance in Emma's gravest crime, a nearly imperceptible act of rudeness toward the tiresome Miss Bates. As Mr. Knightley explains the nature of this crime to Emma, politeness emerges as the model for feelings, speech, and social behavior" (153). From this, it could be suggested that Austen is advocating for behavior which is purely dictated by the standards of politeness which Regency society attributed to those of the upper classes. Unlike Miss Bates and Mrs. Elton, it is Emma who emerges as the heroine through her recognition of her own blindness in believing that social class is inextricably linked with proper behavior. "It is when she turns her critical eye on herself, not when she tries to regulate the feelings of others, that Emma becomes the very figure of politeness," according to Armstrong (153). It is Emma's eventual self-evaluation, then, that distinguishes her from other characters and allows her to emerge as the novel's heroine.

The presence of the male hero who serves as the heroine's instructor, mentor, and guide is a common theme in Austen novels. To different extents, Henry Tilney fills this role for Catherine, Mr. Darcy fills this role for Elizabeth, and Mr. Knightley fills this role for Emma. The progression of the heroine's complexity of character can be seen when one reflects that in *Northanger Abbey*, Catherine gladly accepts Henry Tilney's tutelage, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth at first vehemently opposes Darcy's superior role but learns to embrace his authority (in large part when she visits Pemberley and hears the testimony of a servant that he is a wonderful master), and in *Emma*, Emma eventually comes to accept Mr. Knightley's love (and, of course, her love for him), but possibly

never his authority. At the novel's end it is Mr. Knightley who consents to live at Hartfield with Emma instead of removing her to Donwell Abbey. Though Mr. Knightley agrees to remove himself to Hartfield due to the fragile condition of Emma's father and not for Emma herself, per se, because the wellbeing of Emma's father is a direct concern of hers, this still shows that Emma's relationship with Mr. Knightley is one based upon a greater degree of equality than has yet been seen in an Austen novel, or in novels of the time for that matter. Austen's common novelistic structure of having her heroine turn introspective and use her newfound self-awareness to advance her understanding of the world and those around her signals to the reader the emergence of the heroine from among the other characters. This process which the heroine must undergo is most complex in *Emma*. A. Walton Litz states, "In *Pride and Prejudice* the fault of vision, once corrected, is taken as fully overcome, whereas in *Emma* life is presented as a constant process of emotional miscalculations and rational corrections. Even after her final disillusionment with Harriet we find Emma unconsciously planning a match between Mrs. Weston's daughter and 'either of Isabella's sons'" (373-374). That Austen included this piece of information after the novel's denouement makes it clear that, although Emma has been un-blinded and comes to see that in many respects Mr. Knightley had greater foresight than she, and she has entered into the married state with him, she still retains her individuality and character. Emma thus submits to a conventional role as wife, but she does not lose the character traits which defined her in her unmarried life.

This process of the heroine's disillusionment thus serves as a way in which Austen can imbue her heroines with autonomy. Because in all three cases the respective

heroine's self-awareness includes recognition of her love for the hero and subsequently, her imminent subjection to his authority (in Catherine's case, this is less pronounced since she had an attraction to Henry from the first time she dances with him), Austen needs to find a way to reconcile the conventional, matrimonial, and male-dominated role to which her heroine is moving with the characters of the strong, smart female heroines themselves, whom she has spent the course of a novel developing. Judith Lowder Newton states that "though it is necessary and vital to assert oneself against one's own blindness, in a patriarchal society, it is also a much surer and more lasting form of power than pitting oneself against the traditional privileges of men" (38). Austen utilizes self-awareness as the prime way in which her heroines are able to maintain their autonomy, while yet fulfilling the role of a wife. After all, if the heroine is self-aware, this means she has a large degree of control, though this control may be subtle—she knows who she is as an individual in relation to others. In addition to this, it is important to note that Mrs. Henry Tilney, Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy, and Mrs. George Knightley do not exist for more than a page or two at the end of the novels. By not dwelling on the married life of her heroines, Austen stresses their individuality. Even if she cannot realistically exempt her characters from fulfilling the conventional role of a wife, Austen chose to end their stories upon their marriages so that their identities would be comprised largely of who they were before they married in the mind of her readers. Through this, Austen suggests that marriage did not define a young woman, although her story after marriage was perhaps not as worth writing about, since after marriage it would likely become more conventional, because the role of a wife is a conventional one.

The complexity of both *Emma* as a whole and Emma in particular is evident in the interplay between high and low social classes and the degrees of conformity and oppression manifest in each of them. Jane Austen's signature use of irony reveals itself as we as readers recognize that even Emma, the most popular woman in Highbury, must wrestle through issues of social class and come to understand that she, as much as anyone, can be mistaken about social class, and furthermore, that social class is not a sufficient standard on which to evaluate people. Austen provides a relevant commentary on social conventions as applied to ideas about social class by first allowing her heroine to pay specific attention to the details of social class (as evident in her self-appointed matchmaker status) so that she can later realize that she must allow people of all social classes some degree of the autonomy which she herself is used to having as an upper class woman and as mistress of Hartfield. McMaster notes that "the novelist, and especially Jane Austen, always cares, because it is the business of the novel to represent people—not exclusively, but prominently—in their social roles, and to be precise about the differences between them" (128). This is what Austen does through the character of Emma for the majority of the novel. Class played a significant role in Regency England; Austen acknowledges this, and then questions it. "The importance assigned to class distinction is the source of much of her [Austen's] comedy and her irony, as of her social satire. In Emma . . . the snobbish heroine becomes both our guide as to where each character in the novel should be 'placed', and our negative example of one who assigns far too much importance to the matter of status. And the best treatment for her self-importance is laughter" (129). Thus, Austen "shows us amply how such things [social class distinctions] matter. She also shows us how they should not matter too much" (130).

Emma is thus set up to fall, but through her fall and subsequent newly-acquired self-awareness, we as readers come to better understand how a rigid adherence to the minute distinctions of social class can obscure one's perception of people, and also how people have value apart from their respective social classes.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

It is tempting in the conclusion of this study to focus on the heroines of the three novels because, as we have seen, they are dynamic, fascinating characters who appear to be infused with portions of their author's own wit, individuality, and intelligence. However, doing so would be to fail to realize that the very presence of characters in Austen's novels who are marginalized by the author attest to the realistic portrayal of Regency society which Austen creates for her readers. The presence of characters who adhere to and thus further the status quo attests to the fact that Austen recognized that most people in her society were more like Isabella Thorpe, Charlotte Lucas, or Harriet Smith, than the heroes or heroines. However, through her portrayal of her heroines, Austen shows us that to be marginalized by one's society for choosing to transcend the status quo is better than to find oneself marginalized in a story that belongs to someone else.

Austen realized that these three heroines represent the few who often had to struggle against the status quo. In the three examined novels, Austen portrays heroines who perhaps transcended her readers' views of what society condoned, as they also transcended the socially acceptable practices in the world of their respective novel. Culler states that, "Austen's marriage plots, it can be argued, helped shape a nation in showing that there is a large space in southern England where heroines can be at home" (71). Austen was able to create heroines with whom her readers would identify, and because these heroines did not passively conform to society's conventions and the patriarchy which dominated Regency culture, she subtly suggests that her readers, too, can learn to "laugh" at the men in their life—good-naturedly, of course.

A major point in all of Austen's novels is that things ought not to be given an inordinate amount of seriousness. A major point in all of Austen's novels is that things ought not to be given an inordinate amount of seriousness. For example, Jill Heydt-Stevenson comments that the riddle Mr. Woodhouse tries to recall—the first (and only) line we are given being "Kitty, a fair but frozen maid"— is actually a sexually explicit riddle about venereal disease. That Austen included only the first line of the riddle in *Emma* suggests that she was not the perfect example of propriety and womanly decorum some have thought her, nor was she insensible of the power of laughter which would result from including such an indecorous reference in a novel which largely revolves around social propriety. Heydt-Stevenson states that "In using bawdy humor Austen announces her 'knowingness,' since laughter, like sexuality, is associated with agency" (312). Elizabeth proclaims that "I dearly love a laugh" (42) because laughter is her way of participating in life and of maintaining control over her emotions. Because Austen values laughter, even when it comes at the expense of others, the marginal characters in her novels often serve as amusement for their fellow characters. Instead of allowing this laughableness to degrade certain characters, however, Austen allows *all* of her characters to indulge in ridiculousness, at least for a time. Catherine realizes she has been concocting ridiculous fantasies; Elizabeth realizes her own pride has been preventing her from seeing Mr. Darcy's true worth, while she has been focused on condemning *his* pride; and Emma's attempts at match-making prove to be completely misguided. Therefore, it is evident that, although Austen condemns the characters who conform to the status quo, she also recognizes that even the heroes and heroines can be objects of laughter for the amusement of their neighbors, and it is only by a small margin that the

heroine emerges from the sea of typical characters. Austen leaves us to wonder if, for example, Charlotte Lucas may have had different expectations from life if one of her parents had instilled in her the kind of good sense that Mr. Bennet instills in Elizabeth, or if Harriet Smith would have been less flighty and accepting had she been fortunate to have a mentor who did not encourage her as Emma did in the triviality of feminine pursuits (what if the two of them had persisted in reading together, as they had intended?). In leaving room for such questions, Austen reminds us that the differential between the status of a heroine and the status of a marginal character is a fine one, and the agency associated with the ability to laugh at one's situation is often an arbitrator of the differences between a heroine and a marginal character.

In so doing, Austen stresses the importance of the seemingly small things which comprise our lives. For example, if one book which Isabella and Catherine read, *The Mysteries of Udolpho,* can encourage Catherine to imagine an elaborate Gothic story surrounding Northanger Abbey and its inhabitants, then it is clear that Austen believes that the things in which we invest our time will inevitably affect our practice—how we live. Austen is not dramatic (she has even been criticized by her contemporaries for lacking true feeling), and so she recognized that the process of becoming a hero or heroine is not a supernatural one, but rather is grounded in learning from sensible counsel and cultivating an ability to see beyond the confines of one's own culture. Austen was able to do this, and so naturally she bestowed this ability upon her heroines, and withholds it from the characters who conform to societal conventions.

Now that three of Austen's novels have been examined and the conventionality and marginalization of a number of characters has been explored, it remains to see how

conventionality and marginalization directly apply to Jane Austen in her personal life. Jane Austen lived a fairly conventional life herself. Aside from her authorial pursuits, her life was not filled with any major, noteworthy events. Likely the people with whom she came into daily contact would not have pegged her as a heroine or significant personage. At the time of most of her major novel-writing she lived a moderately comfortable life with her family. Austen's father, the Reverend George Austen, however, recognized that his daughter's writing had value. Perhaps Austen drew upon her relationship with her own father for the relationship she created between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. Austen's father passed away unexpectedly in 1805 (Le Faye 29) which left Jane, her mother, her sister, and a female family friend with only a small income on which to live. Four years later these four females moved to the village of Chawton where Austen continued her writing and found her first success in publishing (33-35).

Writing and publishing, however, were not an overtly subversive activity for Austen. Although it has been theorized that a major reason in her refusal of Harris Bigg-Wither's proposal of marriage was that she valued the writing time which spinsterhood allowed her, her writing and publishing pursuits are largely juxtaposed with the seemingly unexceptional happenings in the life of a middle class, unmarried woman. This juxtaposition between Austen's authorial pursuits and the typical, domestic life she lived with her female companions after her father's death can be most clearly seen in her personal correspondence. She writes of her interactions with the printer of one of her novels in the midst of also writing about a game of Wits, the company she kept or didn't keep, a date for having tea, and pheasants she had received as a present (298-299). In

addition to this, Gilbert and Gubar state that Austen was a "novelist whose personal obscurity was more complete than any other famous writer" (107). Austen did not change her simple, unassuming lifestyle to accommodate her writing pursuits, but rather, with her innate ability to recognize the characteristics of the society in which she lived and to meticulously replicate those characteristics in her novels, tingeing them with humor and irony, she drew upon her life's daily occurrences and influences to create novels which are both engaging stories and fascinating cultural critiques.

Although Austen did live a rather modest life, consisting of such simple things as card parties, tea, news of company, and other domestic concerns, all framed by the reality of a modest income, she does share some of the individuality and transcendence of social conventions which she ascribes to her heroines. Her rejection of Harris Bigg-Wither, for example, was similar, if not as dramatic, as Elizabeth Bennet's rejection of Mr. Collins, and it certainly was exactly opposite of Charlotte Lucas's pragmatic courting of Mr. Collins's attentions and her ultimate acceptance of his marriage addresses. Le Faye describes Bigg-Wither as "the plain and awkward younger brother of some girlhood friends; thus, Jane, who also like Elizabeth or Emma would only marry if she was in love, ultimately rejected Bigg-Wither's proposal because "worldly benefits would not outweigh the disadvantages of a loveless marriage" (29). Austen chose to maintain her relative independence as a single woman, untethered to the ultimate figure of patriarchal authority—a husband, instead of to surrender her individuality (largely embodied in her writing) to the pragmatic wisdom of social conventions which encouraged economic gain over personal freedom. Austen's writing gave her a sense of independence and self-sufficiency which a husband would completely compromise, not only by requiring most

of her time, but by ushering in her role as the domestic housewife—the epitome of the conventional role of the female during this period. Miriam Ascarelli states that Austen was a realist because she recognized that life was tough for women and that they needed a reason to survive. Ascarelli says this is "the ultimate feminist statement" (n.p.). Austen found that reason through her writing.

Austen did not overtly align herself with a contemporary radical such as Mary Wollstonecraft; however, critics who view her as an author who never challenged the status quo are missing the true Austen. As Gilbert and Gubar state, "Critics who patronize or castigate Austen for her acceptance of limits and boundaries are overlooking a subversive strain" (112). Austen's recognition of the faults of social conventions, in contrast with a contemporary like Mary Wollstonecraft, often found expression through subtle satire, stressing the point once again, that Austen enjoyed laughing at the ridiculous things people believed and acted upon. She was not one to nail ninety-five theses up on the church door—which is why she is rarely labeled a revolutionary—but she found her own way to critique her culture, a way that was so subtle at times that people often mistook (and mistake) it for affirmation of the very conventions it calls into question. Because Austen used humor and irony as an inroad to critiquing social conventions, she can be viewed, not as an opposite of a radical like Wollstonecraft, but as someone who complements the feminist views of which Wollstonecraft was a proponent. Austen arrives at many similar conclusions as Wollstonecraft concerning the confines of patriarchy, including the limited options available for females and the constricted space in which they were conditioned to think and act and build their lives. However, Austen

suggests these things through novels, instead of asserting them through a manifesto. Also, Austen's main tool is humor and irony, not passionate invective.

There are some people who do recognize the subtly subversive strain in Austen's writing. Poet W. H. Auden wrote this verse:

> You could not shock her more than she shocks me;
> Beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass.
> It makes me most uncomfortable to see
> An English spinster of the middle class
> Describe the amorous effects of "brass,"
> Reveal so frankly and with such sobriety
> The economic basis of society. (112)

Auden recognized that when Austen writes about the decisions of Charlotte Lucas, for example, she herself recognized how entrenched her society was in its patriarchal authority which ascribed power to money and prestige, which money and prestige was chiefly under the control of males. Austen understood the social and cultural politics of her society extremely well. As has been seen, her novels are filled with the intricacies of Regency society, in which even small things such as a slighting comment (by Emma to Miss Bates) or an act of impropriety (Elizabeth walking to Netherfield alone and in inclement weather) have much broader implications for those involved as pertains to the overarching social conventions which defined what was a breach of impropriety in the first place. Auden would likely agree that, as Gilbert and Gubar state, "Although she has become a symbol of culture, it *is* shocking how persistently Austen demonstrates her discomfort with her cultural inheritance, specifically her dissatisfaction with the tight

place assigned women in patriarchy" (112). Gilbert and Gubar go on to state that the very fact that Austen uses parody and irony in her novels is a testimony to the fact that she was grappling with the confining role she herself was assigned as a female author. The stakes were high for someone who criticized the conventional order of a patriarchal, economically based society. It is a testimony to Austen's genius that she was able to write novels which critiqued her culture's standards without being severely criticized herself for being subversive. It is as if she presents her readers with an opinion on conventional views of worthy goals, money, gender roles, and social status, but she is content enough if they choose only to enjoy her novels for the stories they tell and no more. But for the reader who wishes for something deeper than a pleasant, domestic story with a plot that ultimately culminates in the marriage of the hero and heroine, it can be found.

Austen concludes all three of the examined novels with the conventional and expected denouement of a marriage. For example, William H. Magee states, "After laughing at the absurdities of Catherine's Gothic novel delusions, she closed them off with a storybook romance taken seriously" (199). However, the body of the novels chronicles the heroine's journey of self-awareness and growth as an individual, suggesting that, while Austen recognized that she would likely not, during her lifetime, see the liberation of women from the confining, marginal place to which they were sentenced by the patriarchal structures of authority, there were signs of an impending revolution in the way society viewed women and the place to which they were assigned. Austen was a realist, so she did not attempt to usher in this revolution before its time; nevertheless, she contributed to its arrival by subtly mocking the conventions of her time and by condemning characters in her novels whose ideologies were enmeshed in the

social conventions of the day. Furthermore, even in ending her novels with the expected marriage of the hero and heroine, Austen does so in less romantic terms than many of her contemporaries, whom she is parodying. For example, in *Emma*, the loophole which allows Emma and Mr. Knightley to marry despite Mr. Woodhouse's misgivings about the marriage state is that the presence of a male at Hartfield will prevent the Woodhouse's chickens from being stolen. This anticlimactic and comedic ending reveals that Austen was subtly mocking the typical conclusion of contemporary novels and the belief that a woman's tale had to end with a storybook marriage. Lloyd W. Brown states, "Here Jane Austen is once again using the comic conclusion as an ironic vehicle for final judgments on the individual and his society" (1587). Like her heroines, Austen was extremely self-aware, both of what her society believed and of her place within it. She recognized that her society placed an inordinate amount of importance on marriage, for reasons which were steeped in patriarchal views of what was acceptable, which is why in her novels as well as in her personal life, she rejects the conventional wisdom in favor of independence and increased autonomy for the female sex.

Austen's novels, moderately well-received in her own time, remain beloved classics in the modern age. A significant reason for this is Austen's ability to capture the nuances of her own society's beliefs and practices while at the same time transcending their confines by suggesting that the mere existence of social conventions which restricted women, economically and socially, did not signify the rightness of those conventions. Austen imbues her heroines with a degree of autonomy, especially in their mental capacities, which is not to be found in contemporary novels of her day. Harold Bloom suggests, "the heroines of Austen's novels are exemplars of the Puritan will,

which exalts the soul's autonomy" (288). Bloom further suggests that the powers of discernment and evaluation which Austen attributed to a heroine like Elizabeth Bennet was instrumental in ushering in the modern belief in the ability of the individual to arrive at a valid evaluation of his or her circumstances and situation. Elizabeth has strong beliefs about what is right and proper and these opinions do not always coincide with what society believed to be right and proper. Thus, through the character of Elizabeth Bennet, Austen rejects a Utilitarian belief and instead stresses the value of individual choice, a very modern belief. Since Utilitarianism stresses beliefs and actions which promote the greatest good for the greatest number, and since in Regency society the greatest good was largely considered to be what was good for the male population (because, since the males were the ones who possessed authority, they can be viewed as the "greatest number"), Austen's rejection of Utilitarian beliefs in favor of individuality emphasizes her identification with and promotion of women, the societal group which was marginalized and bound by the conventional rules which were set in place by the group with power—the males. And yet, Austen does not fit into the typical feminist framework; she condemns both males and females who conform blindly to social conventions and commends both males and females who learn to see beyond their society's social code.

Through her novels Austen suggests that the lines between social conformity and individuality are often blurry ones and it is ostensibly small choices which serve to delineate between conformity and individuality. However, this is precisely why it is difficult to be a heroine, because small choices often constitute one's separation from social norms and usher in one's marginalization by the majority. By writing novels with

heroines who ultimately come to recognize their immersion in their own culture, Austen makes it clear that recognition of one's own position is the first step in transcending it. Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, and Emma Woodhouse each present the reader of Austen with an example of a female character who identified who she was so that she could make a valid critique of her society. In creating these heroines, Austen substantiated the legitimacy of individuality, even as she ultimately subjected them to the conventional role of a wife. Reading about characters like these three heroines can remind current readers as much as Austen's contemporaries that they can have confidence in courting society's marginalization for nonconformity to social conventions, and that it is possible to engage in transcending social conventions as a process, instead of as a world-changing event. This is what Austen did in her personal life, writing within the reality of the society she knew, but using her powers of foresight and irony to suggest that merely because something existed did not necessarily mean it was right or good.

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