“These Would Have Been All My Friends” : Families of Birth, Families of Choice, and Personal Autonomy in Mansfield Park, Emma, and Persuasion

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"These Would Have Been All My Friends": Families of Birth, Families of Choice, and Personal Autonomy in Mansfield Park, Emma, and Persuasion by Tavya Jackson

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements For the Degree of Master of Arts

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Abstract

The six completed novels of Jane Austen all fall into the category of courtship novels, which focus on the heroines' experiences as she meets, becomes acquainted with, and eventually marries the "right" man. Yet in Austen's three later novels, *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), and *Persuasion* (1818), the three heroines engage in more than a quest for the most suitable husband. In each of these novels, the female characters appear to be employed in a search for a suitable family, which can only be obtained through marriage.

The quest for family that manifests itself in these novels is closely related to issues of female power and autonomy. Each of the heroines attempts to secure her position in a family that will allow her optimum opportunity to exercise personal power and influence through the one important choice that was more and more commonly afforded to women of the early nineteenth century, that of the acceptance or rejection of a proposed partner in marriage. In interrogating this issue, Austen's novels can be seen to draw on three intersecting ideological trends concerning marriage among the author's contemporaries: the increasing popularity of an ideal of companionate marriage; Edmund Burke's philosophy regarding gender roles and the influence of the domestic sphere on national interests; and Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas regarding the rights and education of women. Viewed in the light of these interrelated conceptual perspectives, Austen's three later novels reveal imagined ways in which the philosophies of Burke and Wollstonecraft apply to the everyday lives of middle-class men and women in Austen's contemporary England, and examine opportunities for women to exercise personal
autonomy within the confines of traditional patriarchal systems of family and gender roles.
“THESE WOULD HAVE BEEN ALL MY FRIENDS”: FAMILIES OF BIRTH VERSUS FAMILIES OF CHOICE IN MANSFIELD PARK, EMMA, AND PERSUASION

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The six celebrated novels of Jane Austen fall neatly into the pattern of what Katherine Sobba Green has called the "courtship novel," which traces the experiences of young women during the period between their introduction into society and their marriages. Austen’s novels were written in the context of three major intersecting ideological trends regarding marriage and the structure of family relations. Beginning approximately in the seventeenth century, concepts of marriage in England were undergoing a noticeable change, resulting in a new ideal of companionate marriage, or marriage based on affection and choice. In the late eighteenth century Sir Edmund Burke, in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), presented a new philosophy in which marriage and familial relations were accorded national social and political importance, as the preserver of conservative English culture and ideals. In 1792, proto-feminist Mary Wollstonecraft presented her own philosophy regarding gender roles, behavior, and the social and political importance of women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which gives significant attention to the role of women’s education in the functioning of Burke’s proposed familial and societal models. Writing within the ideological context of these intertwining concepts regarding family and marriage, Austen produced novels strongly influenced by these concerns, and used the ideological frameworks provided by Burke and Wollstonecraft to interrogate her own apparent topic of interest, female power and autonomy.

While Austen’s novels portray few roles for women outside of marriage, within the boundaries of marriage they describe an array of roles for women, based on varying
degrees of personal power. With marriage as the ultimate “goal” of each of Austen’s novels, it is hardly surprising that a considerable amount of concern and even anxiety surround the heroines’ exploration of their power of choice in regard to potential husbands, and the potential futures such husbands might represent. While all of Austen’s novels deal with some aspect of this issue, her three later novels, beginning with *Mansfield Park* (1814), focus specifically on matters related to women’s power within the family. *Mansfield Park* and *Emma* (1815) in particular examine the ways in which women can possess and exercise personal power in the context of the patriarchal family, presenting a discernible expansion of scope from the closed family circle of the Bertrams in *Mansfield Park* to the community relationships in *Emma*. In the final complete novel, *Persuasion* (1818), this theme is expanded even further, emphasizing its national implications through the connections drawn between women’s behavior, choices, and influence, and the Navy, a national institution for the defense of England and an English way of life. *Persuasion* takes the issue of feminine power and choice and moves it outside of the realm of family to include society as a whole, a logical conclusion to the examination of this issue begun in *Mansfield Park* and continued in *Emma*.

Most of the marriageable female characters of *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, and *Persuasion* engage in a search not only for a suitable husband, but also for a suitable family position, and each subtly reiterates the connection between this quest for personal power and the expanded power of choice implied by the relatively recent companionate marriage ideal. The development of the traditional courtship plot in these novels takes the form of a bid for personal authority within a society that systematically tends to deny female individuality and self-government. Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the*
Jackson 3

Revolution in France, while primarily concerned with government and national politics, devotes a certain amount of attention to gender roles, relationships between the sexes, and the position of women in society. Burke draws a significant connection between private, family life and wider political functioning, a connection hinted at in his emphasis on describing the horrors of the French Revolution in terms of the disruption of family life. He particularly dwells on how “this king […] and this queen, and their infant children (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people), were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre” (338). One of the most important concepts to arise from Burke’s treatise deals with the manners and behavior that Burke stresses as the result of proper enactment of gender roles, and which supposedly insure correct, moral actions in both private and public spheres. According to Burke, “the mixed system of opinion and sentiment […] subsisted and influenced through a long succession of generations, even to the time we live in. If it should ever be totally extinguished, the loss I fear will be great” (343). The “mixed system” to which Burke refers is an ideal standard of chivalry, under which man’s tender, human sensibilities ensure fair, generous treatment of others, including protection of the weak, the helpless, and women. In this system, women were to inspire the fulfillment of this ideal by men by embodying the weak, helpless role and thereby appealing to men’s sensibility, emotions, and pity.

Burke views the national government as an extension of family, and sees the same forces at work in the functioning of each. His concept of the patriarchal family is of a valuable institution in which human sentiment guarantees the protection of the weak and
innocent, while insuring the respect and veneration of authority figures or those in power. Burke conceives of the French Revolution as the result of dissolution of these values on an individual, private level, which in turn led to a disintegration of class, social, and political relations. He refers to “[a]ll the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society” (343-44); one of these “pleasing illusions” for Burke is the enactment of distinct gender roles that require women to be soft, weak, innocent, and primarily ornamental (it is in such terms that he describes Marie Antoinette, his feminine ideal) in order to inspire “that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom” (Burke 343). Burke’s ideal conception of society preserves social and political order through strict adherence to private manners, including gender role performance. His theory of personal, familial relationships as a microcosm of national affairs proved influential, while his insistence on a strictly delineated gender binary sparked ideological debate in England.

This concept of the dichotomy of the sexes emphasized by Burke was of prominent concern to Mary Wollstonecraft, and she particularly addresses it in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman. Wollstonecraft appears not to quarrel with the claim that men and women have inherently different strengths and attributes; in fact, she declares that, “from the constitution of their bodies, men seemed to be designed by Providence to attain a greater degree of virtue […] but I see not the shadow of a reason to conclude that their [men’s and women’s] virtues should differ in respect to their nature”
(29). However, Wollstonecraft argues strenuously for equality between the sexes despite any inherent differences, and against many of the aspects of the feminized stereotype advocated by Burke, described by historian Josef Ehmer:

Activity and rationality, strength and reason, penchant for external activity and public life were held to be the natural attributes of men; passivity and emotionality, modesty and feelings, grace and beauty, predilection for privacy and domestic life those of women. (Ehmer 287)

Wollstonecraft views such artificially differentiated roles for women as the root of a number of social problems, and contends that the requirements such stereotypes place on women’s behavior prevent them from attaining true “virtue.” For example, she asserts that the result of the lack of education that often accompanies the popular “ideal” for female behavior is that “strength of body and mind are sacrificed to libertine notions of beauty, to the desire of establishing themselves—the only way women can rise in the world—by marriage. And this desire making mere animals of them, when they marry they act as such children may be expected to act […]” (4). By emphasizing the importance of women’s appearances and encouraging a lack of meaningful activity, society creates women who are far from equal and fitting as wives. This is one of the problems that lie at the base of Wollstonecraft’s argument for better education and more active roles for women in English society.

A third factor to consider in the discussion of male and female roles in the family and in society is the development of a new way of thinking about the individual human being and the institution of marriage. This ideological trend, along with the ideas debated in the works of Burke and Wollstonecraft, had significant implications for Austen’s
writing, in which marriage and female behavior and autonomy play such important parts. Historian Lawrence Stone has traced the enormous significance of the development and dissemination of what he terms “affective individualism” in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in England, and the influence of this new trend in ideological and emotional patterns on the institution of marriage in particular. According to Stone one major aspect of this individualism was “the rising demand for autonomy, which found practical expression in growing resistance to put extreme pressure on the individual’s body and soul” (156). This way of thinking, applied to traditional marriage patterns in England particularly among the upper classes, called for a drastic change in the way marriage was conceptualized and treated. Traditional views of marriage related it expressly to the economic, social, or political interests of the family, and therefore constructed marriage as “primarily a contract between two families for the exchange of concrete benefits, not so much for the married couple as for their parents and kin” (Stone 182).

The developing concept of individualism would have problematized this approach to the institution of marriage both on the basis that it potentially exerted “extreme pressure” on the men and women actually being married off, and that it did not allow for the development of affective relationships between spouses. The importance given to marriages formed on a basis of friendship and affection was another result of increased individualism, which brought about a “deep shift in consciousness, a new recognition for the need for personal autonomy, and a new respect for the individual pursuit of happiness” (Stone 184). The eighteenth century saw the development of what has been widely termed “companionate marriage.” As Ehmer points out, this type of marriage
gradually became the dominant ideal for the institution, gaining a position of moral privilege over the more traditional form of marriages based on family interests (283). With the rise of companionate marriage came a number of other significant changes in social views and practices, changes that affected the position of women in society and in the home, and that considerably influenced the work of writers such as Austen.

As Katherine Sobba Green emphasizes in her study of the courtship novel, works such as Austen’s focus on “the brief period of autonomy between a young woman’s coming out and her marriage” (2). While it has been indicated that English culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was becoming more indulgent and affectionate toward children, the ideology that was still in place called for the authority of parents over their children, and children’s obedience to their parents’ will (Stone 151). For young men, this period of obedience and subordination presumably expired when they reached the age of majority. For women, the age of autonomy might be harder to fix, yet Green suggests that it began when she became eligible for marriage, an argument seconded by historian Alan MacFarlane, who states:

> Often it is marriage that gives a woman adulthood, but in England it was not so clear-cut. She was already a free and independent adult, irrespective of marriage. Marriage might give her a certain new status, placing her higher up the table than her ‘spinster’ sister and enabling her to wear certain clothes, but in relation to one man she had become, as it were, a subject. (149)

In this light, Green’s assessment of a woman’s autonomous position in society as a temporary one, primarily concerned with her freedom of choice in one particular area, that of a marriage partner, becomes especially interesting.
Given at least the power to accept or reject potential spousal candidates, and expected to become fitting companions for husbands themselves, in some ways women came to occupy positions of greater equality with their husbands. Stone and Ehmer both point out that the expectations for affective marriages also tended to lead to expectations of gender equality. Ehmer further elaborates upon this, explaining that although women were no longer necessarily seen as inevitably inferior and subordinate to their husbands, true equality between the sexes was not the ultimate result of a trend toward companionate marriage. As the historian puts it:

Much more influential was the effort to link together the concept of companionate marriage with the claim of male dominance. The theoretical construction that allowed for the reconciliation of these two contradictory objectives was a redefinition of sexual stereotypes [...]. (Ehmer 286)

Specifically gendered stereotypes could be posited as compatible with the ideals of companionate marriage through the claim that men and women fulfilled equally necessary, but inherently different roles, which were both complementary and mutually exclusive. Such ideology claimed the support of the standards of companionate marriage in favor of traditionally patriarchal interests, asserting the equality of the sexes while continuing to position women in a subordinate, passive role.

While increasingly strict stereotyped gender roles presented grounds for contention as well as a problem in effecting equality between men and women in marriage, Green points out that they may also have had some positive consequences, primarily the creation of “a feminized space” that led to “heightened awareness of sexual politics within the gendered arena of language, especially with regard to defining male
and female spheres of action” (2-3). The feminized space referred to in this description is specifically that of the courtship novel, but can be extended to include the feminized space that represents the female “sphere of action.” If the female ideal did indeed include a “predilection for privacy and domestic life,” despite the standard of subordination to husbands and fathers, women could perhaps devise ways in which to exercise power within private and domestic life. Although this would almost necessarily be personal power limited to the immediate family or social circle, it would at least give women greater control of their own lives, preventing them from becoming purely “subjects” of their husbands or other male heads of household. Such power would also, according to Burke’s theories, influence conditions outside of the private circle of the family, as the domestic sphere provides a model for the public social and political spheres. For Burke, the sentiments that allow the traditional system of government to function are merely public versions of the sentiments that exist and are cultivated within the family. Such sentiments, according to Burke, produce a certain type of behavior or manners that keep private relationships pleasant. In describing the effects of the French Revolution, Burke laments the loss of “All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which by a bland assimilation incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society” (343-44, italics mine).

Burke envisions successful governments as those based on the affection of individuals for a nation and for national institutions. Furthermore, he recognizes that such affection, or the capability for such affection, begins in the private spheres of life, and can then be carried over into the political by an extension of the manners learned and
practiced in society. It is Burke’s opinion that “These public affections, combined with manners, are required sometimes as supplements, sometimes as correctives, always as aids to law” (344). For Burke, the stability of both national government and culture have their basis in the sentiments and manners formed in the home, a philosophy that accords notable significance to women, whose sphere was supposed to be purely domestic. The matter of women’s education again becomes of primary importance here, as Wollstonecraft emphasizes throughout Vindication the many detrimental ways in which uneducated or undereducated women may seek to exercise power within the home. As Austen’s three later novels appear to demonstrate, however, for a properly educated woman the autonomy and choice involved in the formation of a marriage based on mutual friendship, if carefully managed, could lead to expanded opportunities to exercise personal power within the domestic sphere.

In Mansfield Park (1814), Austen creates a heroine who appears to embody the newly reinforced stereotype of the ideal woman. Fanny Price certainly possesses “passivity and emotionality, modesty and feelings, grace and beauty, predilection for privacy and domestic life” (Ehmer 287). While all of Austen’s heroines enter into marriages based on love and esteem, Fanny is the first to directly confront the reactionary female stereotype that arose in response to the moral demands of such marriages. Interestingly, this is also the first of Austen’s novels in which the issue of family becomes undeniably central to the courtship plot. Fanny’s quest for a suitable husband is in fact a quest for much more; it is also the search for a suitable family, a suitable social situation, and greater personal power. This is a quest that is repeated in both Emma and Persuasion, but with increasingly widespread implications.
If, as Green postulates, the usually temporary period of autonomy in the lives of women in early nineteenth-century England occurs between introduction into society and marriage, it seems particularly relevant to note that two out of the three Austen novels examined here have heroines who are largely denied any degree of personal power during this period as a result of their familial situations. Both Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, in different ways, are challenged in their attempts to exercise even their limited prerogative of choice by their patriarchal affiliations, making the quest for a new familial position central to the novels’ interrogation of the courtship plot and the goal of companionate marriage. Emma Woodhouse, as a heroine with tremendous personal autonomy on a small scale even before her coming out into society, reverses this situation, and reveals her search for a suitable husband and family position as the attempt to avoid relinquishing her power and submitting to traditional patriarchal authority. This reversal in *Emma* is contrasted with the situations of the other courtship plots within the novel, in which the characters of Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax continue the theme of disempowerment during a woman’s supposedly most autonomous period of life. *Mansfield Park*, perhaps because of its peculiar insistence on its heroine’s conformity with the stereotyped feminine ideal advocated by Burke, provides a starting point for interrogating this issue as it appears in this novel and in Austen’s two later works. In none of the three earlier novels are the issues of personal authority, the choice of marriage partner, and the choice of family position so directly linked.

*Northanger Abbey* (1818), the earliest of Austen’s novels, is a staunch advocate of the companionate marriage ideal, soundly condemning characters such as the Thorpes and General Tilney, who are expressly concerned with arranging marriages of interest,
and supporting the uninterested love matches made by Catherine Morland and Eleanor Tilney. The role of family in this novel, however, remains marginal. Catherine’s original family situation is far from undesirable or unsuitable, and although her marriage to either John Thorpe or Henry Tilney would unite her with a “friend” as a sister-in-law, her motives in rejecting or accepting are purely based on her liking or disliking of the men themselves. Furthermore, her eventual marriage to Henry Tilney removes her from the comfort of her own family without placing her within a more or even equally desirable position in her husband’s family. General Tilney remains a short-tempered, greedy father, even when he is reconciled to the idea of Catherine as a daughter-in-law who is not an heiress, and while Catherine may gain in Eleanor a valued sister-in-law, she also gains the selfish and unprincipled Captain Tilney as a brother-in-law. In marrying Henry Tilney, Catherine also seems to put herself into a position of reduced personal autonomy, as the novel indicates throughout her willingness to follow his advice and conform to his expectations. The focus in this novel’s conclusion is on the affective relationship of the couple, irrespective of family connections. Clearly, then, *Northanger Abbey* does not display the type of concern with marriage, family, and domestic control that pervades *Mansfield Park, Emma*, and *Persuasion*.

For similar reasons, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) can be dismissed from this category as well. Elinor and Marianne Dashwood marry in such ways that they remain close to each other, but these marriages still remove them somewhat from their affectionate mother and younger sister. Moreover, Elinor in particular would have to be almost entirely disregarding the issue of family connections in choosing Edward Ferrars as a pleasing candidate for a husband. Not only is she already tangentially related to the
Ferrars family through her sister-in-law; that relationship is also a constant source of discomfort to her. The formation of closer ties to a desirable family circle can hardly be viewed as a motive behind Elinor’s choice, nor can an increase in her degree of power and influence. Following her father’s death, Elinor is effectively the head of household for the Dashwood women, and we are given little reason to think that her position will change in her marriage to Edward.

Marianne’s motives for marrying Colonel Brandon are rather more obscure, yet family situation and power considerations do not seem to play into the decision, since her marriage connects her with no real family at all, and unites her with a considerably older man who serves as a sort of father figure throughout the novel. *Sense and Sensibility* enacts the ideology of companionate marriage as an aspect of individualism, primarily concerned with the matching of particular characters, a theme that continues to be carried out in the less central marriages described in the novel. John and Fanny Dashwood, despicable as they are, are perfectly suited to each other, as are Robert and Lucy Ferrars. Interestingly, these pairings are contrasted with the novel’s marriages of “interest,” portrayed in the Palmers, the Middletons, and Mr. Willoughby’s match. It seems safe to say that this work’s primary agenda is the examination of marriages for affection in contrast to marriages for material or social benefit. Beyond this issue, considerations of personal power in relation to family situation do not significantly come into play.

Both temporally and in terms of its ideological preoccupations, *Pride and Prejudice* comes closest to the issues that begin to be interrogated in *Mansfield Park*. Neither Elizabeth nor Jane Bennet experience the constriction of personal autonomy characteristic of a Fanny Price, but they do find themselves in a position of discomfort
within their paternal family, setting up the impetus for a desire for change. Here we also begin to see a growing concern with the families that the heroines will marry into. The agreeableness or disagreeableness of Bingley's sisters is of real importance to Jane, while Darcy's role as a responsible landowner and affectionate brother help to counteract the negative impression Elizabeth receives from her interactions with the de Bourghs. However, the concern with family is still subordinate to the individual project. Elizabeth's goal is not so much removal from an unsuitable family situation to a suitable one, but a project of reform. Her elevation to the position of Mrs. Darcy enables her to improve her own family in turn, but it does not essentially change her relationship to her paternal family.

With the possible exception of Lydia, Elizabeth becomes neither closer to nor more distant from her parents and sisters through this significant change in her life. *Pride and Prejudice*, in fact, seems to make a point of the impossibility of escaping from one's blood relations, stressing such relationships as those between the Bennets and the Philipses in Meryton, and Darcy's relationship with Lady Catherine de Bourgh. The novel's conclusion gives particular attention to Elizabeth and Jane's continuing interactions with their family of birth, including Mr. Bennet's frequent visits to his eldest daughters, Kitty's improvement under her sisters' influence, and the financial help that both Elizabeth and Jane give to Lydia from time to time (PP 365-67). Although *Pride and Prejudice* does not yet afford its heroines the option of "escape" from an unpleasant family situation, it seems to suggest a logical step toward this possibility in *Mansfield Park* and the subsequent novels: Elizabeth's marriage to a wealthy man may not remove her from her family of birth, but it does relieve her from the most painful aspects of her
paternal family circle, and puts her in a position of greater power, from which she can superintend the improvement of her family and of her husband’s temper. The connections that this novel draws between family relations, position within the family, and personal power do not yet coalesce as they do in the three later novels, but they do seem to indicate a shift in Austen’s concern with the issues related to courtship and marriage, from the purely personal affective relationship between spouses to the broader considerations that such relationships make possible. In its attention to the national role that Darcy fills as an influential landlord, and Elizabeth’s potential ability to influence him in this position as well, *Pride and Prejudice* also gestures toward the wider social and political concerns that begin to become evident in *Emma* and *Persuasion* in particular.

In moving from the more individual concerns of affection and mutual attraction in companionate marriage, the focus of the first three novels, to issues of family relationships and women’s influence, Austen expands the scope of her ideological investigations and enters into a highly relevant contemporary debate. Considered in this light, the novels no longer seem simply to be what Martin Amis has referred to as “six samey novels about middle-class provincials” (qtd. in Tyler 1); instead they become records of an important conversation regarding social and political issues. Written by a woman, and presumably for female readers, Austen’s three later novels encourage a critical mode of thinking about apparently accepted conservative social theories in the guise of entertaining fiction. Without subverting the philosophy of Burke, these novels suggest ways in which women may be able to experience a greater degree of control over their own lives, as well as the potential for expressions of personal power and opinions in
a broader social or even national context, even within the established boundaries of the conventional patriarchal family structure.
Chapter Two: Mansfield Park

Mansfield Park is the first of Austen’s novels to show a pervasive interest, not just in women’s personal power and autonomy, but in women’s personal power and autonomy specifically in relation to the family. In exploring this issue, Austen engages with the questions raised by Burke and Wollstonecraft in the preceding century, particularly in regard to women’s education and political significance. The creation of Fanny Price as a heroine, and her situation at Mansfield Park, lie at the center of a complex examination of female education, the concept of the “ideal” woman, female autonomy and power of choice, and family relationships. Marriage, so central to all of Austen’s novels, also takes on the added weight of broader familial concerns in Mansfield Park. Presented alongside Fanny Price are three other marriageable young women, Mary Crawford and the Bertram sisters, and for all four of these women, the traditional project of entering into a favorable marriage is inextricably linked with issues of personal freedom as it relates to the family. Of particular importance to the matters interrogated in this novel are female education, emphasized by the contrast Austen creates between the educations of Fanny, the Bertrams, and Mary Crawford; and the nature of male-female relationships within the family, with special emphasis on the lateral relationships between siblings versus the hierarchical relationships between women and male authority figures in the family, such as fathers, uncles, and husbands.

Edmund Burke, in his Reflections on the Revolution in France, creates a striking analogy between domestic relationships and national politics, presenting, as one critic claims, “a vast and multifaceted series of events in France as a unitary family drama” (Johnson 4). In particular, Burke’s claims that France has “let loose the reins of regal
authority, doubled the licence of a ferocious dissoluteness in manners, and an insolent irreligion in opinions and practices,” a situation which he contrasts with the systems of other Western societies, which have “laid the foundation of civil freedom in severer manners, and a system of more austere and masculine morality” (302-3). Burke’s reference to an “austere and masculine morality” clearly seems to point to patriarchal authority, which begins on a domestic level, yet according to Burke provides the “foundation” for a system that controls civil liberties. As Claudia L. Johnson and Marilyn Butler in particular have labored to make clear, it is precisely this trend of tracing a connection between the domestic and the national or political during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that makes the study of women’s novels from this period especially relevant. Wollstonecraft, in her response to Burke, raises the issue of women’s education as a vital factor in securing national harmony and stability. It is this issue that is first to be addressed in Mansfield Park.

The story that provides the backdrop for this ideological debate is a fairly simple one. The heroine, Fanny Price, is taken at a young age from her large and impoverished family to live in the home of a wealthy uncle. Growing up among her affluent cousins, Fanny receives an education and many of the material benefits of wealth, but is constantly reminded of her inferior position in the household, making her a model of humility and timidity. Nevertheless, partially through the contributions of her cousin Edmund, Fanny also develops exemplary sense and morality in addition to shrinking, passive manners. The novel’s action really begins following the departure of Fanny’s uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, for his distant estate in Antigua. In the absence of the authoritative paternal moral center of Mansfield Park, the four adult Bertram children and
their cousin Fanny are left to their own devices, and all but Fanny are proven to be susceptible to temptation and corruption, aided by the arrival in the neighborhood of the charming and worldly Crawford siblings, Henry and Mary. Fanny, as an outsider in this group, is able not only to resist the temptations offered by the Crawfords, but also to stand by and assess the improper behavior of the others, a position made particularly difficult for her by her budding romantic feelings for Edmund, who falls in love with the morally deficient Mary Crawford. Meanwhile, Henry Crawford enters into a duplicitous flirtation with both Bertram sisters, a situation that is especially volatile due to Maria Bertram's recent engagement to Mr. Rushworth, a wealthy but stupid man she does not love.

Upon Sir Thomas's return from Antigua, the improprieties at Mansfield are rectified, but it soon becomes apparent that the patriarchal head of the household only preserves the *appearance* of propriety in his family. He consciously allows Maria to marry for money, and he encourages Edmund's suit of Mary Crawford, despite the not quite right way of thinking that both Fanny and Edmund can detect in her. When Henry Crawford becomes genuinely attracted to Fanny, Sir Thomas attempts to coerce her into the match because of its financial eligibility, and when Fanny refuses to cooperate, returns her to her family in Portsmouth. Eventually Fanny is vindicated in her refusal when Henry Crawford runs off with the married Maria Rushworth, and Edmund's eyes are opened to the true nature of Mary Crawford by her casual reaction to the illicit affair. Fanny is returned to the Bertram family and embraced as the solution to its moral shortcomings, a position that is reinforced by her eventual marriage to Edmund. The poor but morally sound Price children are taken into the Bertram family, while the
prodigal Maria and the selfish Aunt Norris are banished to exile in a distant location. The family’s structure is thus preserved, although realigned, and its prized stability continues with the promise of future generations.

The different fates of Fanny, her female cousins, and Mary Crawford, are partially attributed to the difference in their educations. Jane Nardin, in her study on propriety and morality in Austen’s novels, is particularly helpful in indicating the ways in which different types of education for women have very different implications for social and family interactions. Nardin divides the characters of _Mansfield Park_ into two categories, the “principled” and the “unprincipled,” and describes the main distinction between these two types as deriving from their views on manners. According to Nardin, “the principled characters in the novel tend to see the socially accepted rules of propriety, at their best, as outward manifestations of the moral principles to which they are committed” (85), while the unprincipled characters view proper manners as “an entirely social phenomenon, a set of behavior prescriptions which define one’s social position” (86). Johnson takes this discussion a step further, pointing out the ways in which characters such as Fanny’s oldest cousin, Tom Bertram, her Aunt Norris, and Maria and Julia Bertram twist the rules of propriety to suit their own purposes; on the surface, they are obedient to the demands of good behavior, but they disregard the moral precepts that are supposed to lead to such behavior (99). This problem of distinguishing true goodness from the mere appearance of goodness lies at the heart of the novel’s presentation of female education, and seems specifically to engage and accord with Wollstonecraft’s arguments in favor of educating women in more than superficial accomplishments. Wollstonecraft presents the issue of education as a moral one. She states:
the most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result from the exercise of its own reason. (23)

Wollstonecraft’s assertion is that it is useless to train anyone, women included, merely to imitate the outward signs of virtue if the inner judgment is lacking. The contrast between those who have virtue resulting from “exercise of the understanding” and those who merely have the appearance of virtue resulting from a superficial education in manners is presented throughout *Mansfield Park*.

Although Fanny and Maria and Julia Bertram appear to receive more or less the same education at Mansfield Park, Austen makes a point of stressing the differences in these educations that later lead to material differences in their characters. From the first, Sir Thomas concerns himself “as to the distinction proper to be made between the girls as they grow up” (*MP* 12), but this is not the only, or the most important difference between Fanny’s and the Bertram girls’ upbringings. Austen informs the reader of the special care that Edmund Bertram takes in his cousin’s education, particularly giving direction to her reading material and her reactions to this material (*MP* 22). While this is probably meant to imply the extent to which Fanny’s opinions and tastes are in fact internalized versions of Edmund’s opinions and tastes, it also implies discussion and a demand for individual thought regarding reading material that is apparently absent from the training of Maria and Julia, who conceive of knowledge as the ability to memorize and recite long lists of
facts (MP 18-19). In Sir Thomas’s epiphany regarding his daughters at the novel’s conclusion, the difference in education is once again highlighted:

They had been instructed theoretically in their religion, but never required to bring it into daily practice. To be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments—the authorised object of their youth—could have had no useful influence that way, no moral effect on the mind. He had meant them to be good, but his cares had been directed to the understanding and manners, not the disposition… (MP 430)¹

This seems to point directly to Wollstonecraft’s arguments about the nature and function of female education, and arguably Austen’s treatment of this topic is also closely related to concerns about the degree and type of power and influence that women will have over the men in their lives as adults. Wollstonecraft asserts that improperly educated women, in their quest for some degree of personal power, will improperly use the influence afforded them by assets of charm or physical beauty, and present the danger of interfering with “the progress of knowledge and virtue” (8-9). In Wollstonecraft’s view, merely to present a pleasing surface is not enough. The merits and deficiencies of education in Fanny Price, Maria and Julia Bertram, and Mary Crawford are interrogated in Mansfield Park in a variety of ways, but most importantly to this study, in the presentation of their influence over the men in their lives. Mansfield Park displays concern not just with the existence of women’s personal power, but with its nature and application in society. In particular, Maria’s incorrect use of her autonomy and power of influence leads to private tragedy and upheaval, but it also hints at the larger social evils to be apprehended from such private events.
Maria, whom the reader is eventually told is educated primarily to present the appearance of propriety, finds the best way in which she can assert her personal strength is in her ability to attract and flirt with the opposite sex. Her original object in marriage is to gain a wealthy husband, and although the narrative condenses the account of Mr. Rushworth’s courtship, Austen implies that Maria has secured her fiancé on the basis of superficial attractions. The narrator states that “Mr. Rushworth was from the first struck with the beauty of Miss Bertram”, and both Mr. Rushworth and his mother are apparently impressed by Mrs. Norris’s accounts of Maria’s “amiable qualities and accomplishments” (MP 37). Wollstonecraft refers to the inadequacy of such “qualities and accomplishments” when she observes that “in the education of women, the cultivation of the understanding is always subordinate to the acquirement of some corporeal accomplishment” (25). Later in the novel, in her interactions with Henry Crawford, Maria attempts to exert the same type of influence based on her superficially attractive qualities, despite the moral impropriety of attempting to attach one man when she is already engaged to another. It is this wish of exercising personal power that eventually leads to the disintegration of her marriage and her own exile, when her personal vanity makes her susceptible to Henry’s flirtation, as Austen tells her reader, “When he returned from Richmond, he would have been glad to see Mrs. Rushworth no more.—All that followed was the result of her imprudence; and he went off with her at last, because he could not help it” (MP 434-35). Certainly Maria is capable of influencing others, but her influence is precisely the sort that Wollstonecraft finds so alarming, and argues so forcefully against.
Mary Crawford, the Bertrams’ charming and cosmopolitan new neighbor, has also been taught to emphasize appearances over genuine virtue. Although Austen is not explicit regarding Mary’s educational background, she hints at its improper nature through Mary’s casual moral lapses, such as her remark about “Rears and Vices” in the Navy (MP 57). John Wiltshire specifically addresses this aspect of Austen’s characterization of Mary when he writes that her “remarks scandalize Fanny and Edmund, but their intensity, which is replicated whenever Mary brings up the topic of life at the Admiral’s, betrays an unhappy experience that is clearly formative” (62).

Ultimately the deficiency of Mary’s education is most clearly revealed in its results: her misguided attempts to influence Edmund. This is especially apparent in her reaction to learning of Edmund’s decision to become a clergyman. From the first, she attempts to persuade him to change his mind. These attempts begin as playful flirtation, in Mary’s exclamation, “Come, do change your mind. It is not too late” (MP 88), but as her power to influence Edmund grows, so does the seriousness of her efforts to do so, and the import of her success or failure. Fanny comments on the capability of Mary Crawford’s physical attractions to influence Edmund, and the likely consequences of this: “He is blinded, and nothing will open his eyes, nothing can, after having had truths before him so long in vain. —He will marry her, and be poor and miserable. God grant that her influence do not make him cease to be respectable” (MP 393). Mary’s power eventually fails, but only when Edmund himself realizes the dangers of allowing himself to be swayed by his attraction to her and recognizes her attentions to him not merely as proof of her feelings for him, but also as “seeming to invite, in order to subdue” him (MP 426). Mary’s motives in seeking to “subdue” Edmund are perhaps purer than Maria’s in
seeking to gain control over Mr. Rushworth and Henry Crawford, but her influence is still ultimately wrong in the world of the novel.

In fact, Fanny is the only female character in *Mansfield Park* that is portrayed as exercising power both for the right reasons and in the right way for the society she belongs to at Mansfield Park. Her education, influenced by Edmund, as well as by her subordinate position in her uncle’s household, leads her to a constant examination of her own behavior and motives, as she feels the need to align her thoughts as well as her actions with her system of moral values (Johnson 103; Butler 222). Fanny, in her gentleness, modesty, tendency to submit to authority, and attachment to the domestic sphere, embodies the early-nineteenth-century ideal of femininity, and in accordance with her efforts to maintain this ideal, she will only use properly sanctioned personal power. One result of this resolution is inevitably to keep Fanny in a position of disempowerment throughout most of the novel, and though this disempowerment is partially the effect of her personality and her position as a dependent young woman, it is also in part attributable to her own refusal to exercise power in ways that she feels are inappropriate.

This is particularly apparent in the first volume of the novel, as Fanny repeatedly tries to abdicate from a position of moral authority, wishing to ascribe this role to a male authority figure such as her uncle or cousin Edmund instead. For example, when asked to express a direct opinion, the young Fanny “shrinks” from the request (*MP* 142); when Edmund consults her regarding his chances of success with Mary Crawford, she cavils at the new role, claiming, “I am not qualified for an adviser. Do not ask advice of me. I am not competent” (*MP* 248). Not only does this display Fanny’s reluctance to act in a way that might be morally compromised, but it also, in conjunction with her several refusals
to give direct guidance throughout the novel, reveals her concern with adhering to the proper forms. Rather than attempt to give direct advice, Fanny prefers to disguise her moral suggestions in more innocuous terms. For instance, in trying to prevent Maria from entering into an improper situation with Henry Crawford, rather than expressing her concern for Maria's reputation and moral fiber, she couches her warnings in terms of concern for Maria's physical well-being: "You will certainly hurt yourself against those spikes—you will tear your gown—you will be in danger of slipping into the Ha-Ha" (*MP* 93). Jill Heydt-Stevenson points out the veiled caution regarding reputation and female virtue implied in Fanny's phrasing of "slipping into the Ha-Ha" (311). Significantly, Maria, who is concerned with surface rather than substance, apparently fails to catch Fanny's underlying meaning, but the ineffectiveness of the advice seems attributable to Maria's shortcomings rather than Fanny's indirectness. Indeed, Fanny's behavior is consistent with the ideal she strives to uphold. Ideally, a woman should influence those around her through indirect means, such as her own good example, or by "promot[ing] amiable and civilizing sentiments of protectiveness" in those around her through her own virtuous weakness (Johnson 98). Her tools of influence are largely confined to providing a good example for others to follow and the use of her own righteousness to shame others into also doing right. Fanny can only consent to influence others through these means, as she attempts to do in episodes such as that of the theater at Mansfield Park in Volume 1.

Fanny's education, consisting in instruction in both outward accomplishments and in proper moral values, trains her to have a correct concern both for the outward appearance of her influence (which should in fact be as little apparent as possible in Sir Thomas's household) and for the ends to which this influence is used. As Marilyn Butler
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points out, Fanny’s decision to marry Henry Crawford would have resulted in increased power in a social sense, as “At Everingham and in London, as Mrs. Henry Crawford, she would have enjoyed personal consequence, even, in a fashionable sense, triumph” (241), but Fanny is not interested in triumph “in a fashionable sense.” This is the sort of “triumph” that would comprehend Mary Crawford’s influencing Edmund to give up the church, or Maria Bertram’s successful conquest of Henry Crawford. The triumphs that Fanny wishes to accomplish are in support of the social systems she has been trained to venerate at Mansfield Park, rather than those triumphs that would merely gratify personal vanity. The power to exercise her own right reason and to have her example attended to by others is the power that appears most desirable to Fanny.

Such indirectly exercised and morally accountable power is almost necessarily limited in its scope. In Fanny’s case, the attention to propriety in the issue of female personal power makes it obligatory to limit her influence to an immediate family circle, although ideally feminine influence within the family should be such that it also extends to male behavior outside of the family. Questions regarding the connections between power and family ties seem to be demanded by Austen’s text, which places Sir Thomas Bertram at the head of both immediate and extended family groups. Throughout most of the novel, the power relations in the Mansfield Park family are shown to be out of balance. Fanny’s Aunt Bertram, for example has no power within her own family, and seems to embody the purely decorative, childish woman that Wollstonecraft decries (Wollstonecraft 4). Moreover, Sir Thomas appears to have no problem with this, and willingly takes on what would normally be his wife’s responsibilities, such as planning a ball (MP 234). This disturbed balance is also echoed in the Bertrams’ neighbors, the
Grants, where it is implied that Mrs. Grant tends to be dominated by her occasionally bad-tempered husband (MP 104, 197). Subtle implications of an overbearing paternal authority are given early in the novel, such as Maria and Julia’s relief “from all restraint” during their father’s absence (MP 31) and the “moment of absolute horror” they experience on his return (MP 163), but the most telling evidence of imbalance can be found in the confrontation between Fanny and Sir Thomas over Henry Crawford’s marriage proposals. According to Johnson, within Mansfield society

The system of female manners is supposed to eliminate the need for the nakedness of coercion, and the embarrassment this entails, by rendering women so quiescent and tractable that they sweetly serve in the designs of fathers or guardians without wishing to resist and without noticing that they have no choice.

(103)

This is directly in keeping with Burke’s philosophy of the necessity of correct behavior and manners to maintain the smooth operation of social—and political—interactions, as he refers to “all the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life” (343). Strict conventional manners and gender roles that dictate those manners are supposed to make clear to each individual what is expected of him or her, and thereby guarantee the continued functioning of social order.

Fanny consistently strives to be “quiescent and tractable,” but she is confused when the indirect influence based on careful moral judgment—the only type of power she finds it acceptable to exercise, especially in her dealings with Sir Thomas—comes up against her uncle’s more direct and vigorous assertion of his patriarchal authority.
Austen’s narrator informs us, “She had hoped that to a man like her uncle, so discerning, so honourable, so good, the simple acknowledgement of settle dislike on her side, would have been sufficient. To her infinite grief she found it was not” (MP 293). Not only does Sir Thomas fail to be influenced by his niece’s subtly voiced moral objections; in fact, he fails to recognize at all these objections based on principle. Instead, he chooses to impute her refusal to qualities that he probably knows Fanny does not possess: “wilfulness of temper, self-conceit, and...independence of spirit” (MP 293). In a world properly regulated according to Burke’s concepts of male and female roles, female delicacy and submissiveness such as Fanny’s actually would “assure...the chivalry” of men in relations between the sexes (Johnson 2). In Austen’s imagination of such a world, embodied in Mansfield Park, the ideal power relationships are distorted in order to serve selfish or materialistic ends rather than to promote moral stability.²

While Mansfield Park continues to house a corrupted version of the familial and social ideal, Fanny, who has internalized the principles underlying this ideal (Johnson 96), remains a disempowered figure. As the “ideal woman,” she disclaims personal power with the understanding her interests will be protected by those to whose power she surrenders herself, but in this less than ideal society, her interests are not adequately protected. The other young women in the novel have no such expectations to begin with, and therefore they do not hesitate to join their male counterparts in a world in which “every individual is loud, self-assertive, at war with the interests of others” (Butler 244). As a result, Fanny has much more difficulty in asserting any influence for the greater part of the narrative, as we have seen in her failed attempts indirectly to advise Maria, to show disapproval of the play in which she will not participate, and in her refusal of Henry
Crawford. This does not mean, however, that Fanny does not wish to possess personal power and influence within her family circle. This wish is, in fact, expressed from Fanny’s earliest appearance in the novel, when arriving for the first time at Mansfield, she suffers from homesickness when thinking of “the brothers and sisters among whom she had always been important as play-fellow, instructress, and nurse” (MP 15). As she adapts to life with the Bertrams, Fanny becomes accustomed to her role as a virtual nonentity in the family, but she retains the wish of having greater importance, declaring, “it would be delightful to feel myself of consequence to any body! —Here, I know I am of none” (MP 27). If Fanny can only conceive of a familial venue for exercising her personal power, her lack of a fixed position within either her birth family or her adoptive family is closely linked to her disempowerment. She may wish to influence those around her, no matter how indirectly, but until those around her become responsive to her influence, she must remain powerless.

This consideration becomes especially important when looking at Fanny’s visit to Portsmouth. Upon first learning that she is to visit her birth family, Fanny is thrilled with the idea of what it will be like “[t]o be in the centre of such a circle, loved by so many, and more loved by all than she had ever been before, to feel affection without fear or restraint, to feel herself the equal of those who surrounded her” (MP 342). She imagines herself occupying a position of some importance in the Price household, which she cannot occupy in the Bertram family because of her economic dependency and her timidity, and she finds this a highly attractive prospect. Therefore it is all the more disappointing to her when, arriving at her family’s home in Portsmouth, she finds that she is even less necessary than she is at Mansfield Park to the majority of her birth family.
Austen’s narrator tells us that Fanny’s father “scarcely ever noticed her, but to make her the object of a coarse joke,” while her mother “had neither leisure nor affection to bestow on Fanny” (MP 361). Fanny’s greatest pleasure in Portsmouth is her project of improving Susan, which causes her “to feel again the blessing of affection, and to entertain the hope of being useful to a mind so much in need of help, and so much deserving it” (MP 369). This is the type of power that Fanny most wishes to employ, and in instructing a younger female relative, she can even bring herself to administer advice directly, an act of which she was incapable with the Bertrams.

The central position of the issue of Fanny’s power of influence and “usefulness” is emphasized again and again by Austen in the Portsmouth section of the novel, and specifically in relation to Fanny’s conception of “home.” Awareness of her ability to influence Susan allows Fanny “to feel again the blessing of affection” toward her own sister, but later during her stay at Portsmouth, she is shown longing for Mansfield Park, and thinking of it as her true home: “the word had been very dear to her, and so it still was, but it must be applied to Mansfield. That was now the home. Portsmouth was Portsmouth; Mansfield was home” (MP 400). It seems no accident that this reassignment of the location of home should be so closely linked in the text with Fanny’s estimation of her own usefulness and influence. Her own thoughts of Mansfield as her home coincide with her aunt Bertram’s wishes for her presence in that home, and the narrator informs us of Fanny’s feelings that, “Could she have been at home, she might have been of service to every creature in the house. She felt that she must have been of use to all” (MP 401). For Fanny, home is the place where she is useful, needed, and important to others. It is the place where she has enough consequence to make her morally inspired influence felt.
In her introduction to the novel, Kathryn Sutherland stresses that “Fanny returns not to her old position on the margins, as ‘the stationary niece’, but as the centre around whom all that is left of the shattered Bertram household rearranges itself” (xiii). Mansfield Park, as it appears in the first two volumes of the novel, cannot fulfill Fanny’s requirements for home, despite her attachment to the people and the location, and her desire to belong more fully. During this period, it is Portsmouth that she continues to think of as her true home. Only when Mansfield becomes a proper arena for Fanny’s ideal feminine influence does it also become recognizable to her as the home to which she most rightfully belongs.

The process of entering this proper home, however, presents a challenge that is closely bound up with the issue of power relationships within the family, particularly the hierarchical power structure of patriarchy. In Mansfield Park, the father-daughter relationship emerges as centrally important, but it is presented alongside a very different yet equally significant type of male-female familial relationship, that of brother and sister. As Julia Prewitt Brown suggests, Fanny herself seems to endorse the sanctity of the patriarchal family structure, seeking the approval and acceptance of Sir Thomas as much as the love of Edmund (99). The novel as a whole, however, seems to support not the hierarchical father-daughter model of relationships between men and women, but the model of the much more equitable sibling relationship. Rather than arguing, as Brown does, that in marrying Edmund Fanny is in fact marrying his father, I suggest that in marrying Edmund and becoming “the daughter that [Sir Thomas] wanted” (MP 438), Fanny moves into a central position in the Bertram family by becoming more of a sister to Edmund as well as more of a daughter to his father. Fanny’s empowerment depends
on two things: Sir Thomas’s realization that he has been too absolute in ruling his 
children, as he realizes “how unfavourable to the character of any young people, must be 
the totally opposite treatment which Maria and Julia had been always experiencing at 
home, where the excessive indulgence and flattery of their aunt had been continually 
contrasted with his own severity” (MP 430); and Fanny’s ability to ensure her position as 
one of those “children” within an enlightened Sir Thomas’s household.

The emphasis placed on the relationship between brothers and sisters in Mansfield 
Park can hardly escape notice. The narrator stops in the middle of the novel to deliver a 
panegyric on the possibilities of “fraternal love” (MP 217), but the importance of this 
relationship has already been presented through the examples of the sibling pairings of 
Fanny and William Price and Mary and Henry Crawford. Fanny and William enjoy 
“eager affection,” “exquisite delight in being together,” “hours of happy mirth and 
moments of serious conference” (MP 21) in their sibling relationship, a relationship 
whose affection moreover is described as “wounded by no opposition of interest, cooled 
by no separate attachment, and feeling the influence of time and absence only in its 
increase” (MP 217). This relationship is idealized in Mansfield Park, but not merely 
because it exists between the heroine and her favorite brother. The close sibling ties 
between the Crawfords are also celebrated as one of their most attractive features for both 
the reader and the novel’s other characters, a merit that Fanny notices even in one of her 
bitterest moments, as she reflects on Mary Crawford, “She loves nobody but herself and 
her brother” (MP 393-94). That Austen means to present such relationships as a positive 
alternative to the strict patriarchal model that exists in the Bertram family seems 
increasingly plausible. As John Wiltshire points out,
...the dialogues between Mary and Henry emphasize their mutual rapport. They seem to have a family style, teasing, humorous, generous, that contrasts with the absence of anything like wit or style among the Bertrams. One never sees Julia and Maria, who are said to get on well, for example, in conversation... (63-64)

It is almost difficult to remember that the Bertram children share with each other the same category of relationship that exists between Fanny and William, or Mary and Henry. Even Edmund, although he feels concern for the well-being of his brother and sisters, seems to reserve his affection for his cousin. This is yet another manifestation of the faults of the education given to the Bertram children, faults that are attributable to the paternalistic style of Sir Thomas, which has given more attention to the appearance of propriety than to the formation of sound moral judgment, or in this case, strong family bonds. Edmund’s concern for his sisters during the theatricals, for example, centers on issues of reputation and respectability. He objects on the grounds of Maria’s “extremely delicate” situation (MP 117) and the question of proper “decorum” (MP 131), although the narrator makes clear that his sisters’ emotional well-being is also at risk (MP 148).

The contrast that Austen creates between the affectionate relationships that exist between the Prices and the Crawfords and the lack of this affection among the Bertrams is all the more striking when one pauses to consider that these affectionate fraternal relationships have grown, not out of the stability and family unity that Mansfield appears to symbolize, but out of family situations that are much more chaotic, such as the Prices’ overrun household, and lacking in the morality supposedly supported by Sir Thomas as a father figure, such as the household of the “vicious” Admiral Crawford. Once again, surface and appearance are shown to be not enough. While the Bertrams may display
every outward sign of idyllic family life, the most truly affectionate and caring relationships arise from less stable, non-ideal family situations.

Yet even if there are faults of affection and sympathy among the Bertram siblings, their relationships with each other still have a degree of equality that is not to be found in their relationships with their overly intimidating father. During Sir Thomas’s absence, Tom Bertram assumes the role of head of household, yet he allows his younger brother and sisters to do more or less as they please. While Tom’s lack of restraint on his siblings might be attributed to laziness or indifference, Edmund’s lack of influence on his sisters’ behavior certainly does not arise from such causes. He has the wish of directing their behavior, but not the absolute power to do so that Sir Thomas appears to have. Instead, Edmund is compelled to try to reason with Maria and Julia to give up their roles in the projected play, of which he is convinced their father would disapprove (MP 131-32). As Austen presents it here, the relationship between brothers and sisters requires that women be treated as peers to be reasoned with, and therefore neither subordinate nor incapable of reason. A brother’s reasoning, however, does not carry the same weight as a parent’s command and leaves freedom for the sisters to respond, to argue on their own behalf, and ultimately to make up their own minds. The fact that the decisions they come to are not morally sound in the world of the novel is of less importance than that they are allowed this power of choice. Presumably, given a correct and virtuous education that appealed to their worth as reasonable human beings rather than as marriageable property, Maria and Julia would have made their decisions about whether or not to act with better judgment, as Fanny does.
The greater equality that exists between male and female siblings receives considerable attention from Austen in *Mansfield Park*, and is generally approved. If Edmund’s inability to prevail with his sisters in the matter of the play is a less than positive example of this equality at work, William’s forbearance toward Fanny on the issue of Henry Crawford provides a counteracting example, as the narrator states,

William knew what had passed, and from his heart, lamented that his sister’s feelings should be so cold towards a man whom he must consider as the first of human characters; but he was of an age to be all for love, and therefore unable to blame; and knowing her wish on the subject, would not distress her by the slightest allusion. *(MP 348)*

William is practically the only character in the novel that gives Fanny credit for being able to decide for herself in this important matter. Even Edmund, whom we are given to understand would not wish to coerce Fanny into marrying a man she does not love, aligns himself with Sir Thomas in his attempts to persuade her that she feels more for Henry than she really does. In fact, his reply to her declaration that she will never learn to love Henry borders on manipulation: “Never, Fanny! —So very determined and positive! This is not like yourself, your rational self” *(MP 322)*. Whereas William can accept Fanny’s decision without even hearing it from her own lips, Edmund still seeks to make her think differently despite her direct assertion, almost the only such assertion that she makes in the entire novel.

While Sir Thomas must realize his errors as a parent, and Fanny must gain Sir Thomas’s approval in order to solidify her position as a member of the family at Mansfield Park, Fanny must also negotiate a more equitable relationship with Edmund.
Although Fanny herself appears to subscribe to the ideal patriarchal model of family, her desire for personal autonomy is often at odds with this model as it operates in the novel. The suggestion that Austen seems to be making is for marriages based on the fraternal model instead. Lady Bertram may calmly submit to having all of her decisions made for her by her husband, but Austen makes this acquiescence ridiculous by showing Lady Bertram’s equal willingness to submit to almost anyone else’s power of decision, merely in order to spare her the trouble of thinking for herself. Fanny, though she does not always speak her thoughts, is perfectly capable of reaching her own decisions based on her use of reason and her proper understanding of moral values. We have already seen Fanny’s potential capability to work as a good influence in the Bertram family, but in order for her to fulfill this purpose, her influence must be attended to. It seems significant, therefore, that in the section of the novel in which Fanny’s usefulness at Mansfield is finally openly acknowledged and her potential as an influence for good becomes evident, her sisterly relationship with Edmund is simultaneously emphasized in the text. Edmund, on meeting her in Portsmouth after the disasters of Maria’s affair and Julia’s elopement, addresses her as “My Fanny—my only sister” (MP 413). Fanny herself has already compared her own wish to return to Mansfield to nurse Tom and support the other members of the family to the apparent indifference of Maria and Julia, and “she could not comprehend how both could still keep away” (MP 401).

The coincidence of Fanny’s transformation into a more complete sister to Edmund with her growing power in the Bertram family circle seems to hint at Austen’s intention to endorse a more equitable relationship between marriage partners in the younger generation than that which exists between the Bertram parents. In other words,
although Fanny re-enters a patriarchal family structure by returning to Mansfield Park, it is implied that this structure is deteriorating, and being replaced by a structure in which there is greater equality in the relations between the sexes, even if they remain differentiated by strict idealistic gender roles. Fanny, meek and gentle as she appears, has already proved herself to be capable of sound moral and intellectual judgment. While she will undoubtedly adhere to the conventionally proper modes of expression for female power within the domestic circle, at the conclusion of the novel her relationship with Edmund is in such a state that the reader can infer that her influence will be felt and attended to by the family in the future. At last, she has fulfilled her joint projects of achieving family belonging and personal authority, without violating her conception of how to behave as an ideal woman. The oppressive patriarchal power of Sir Thomas still exists, though in an altered form, but the implication is that, in the future, this power will be properly tempered by the more equitable relationship that develops between Fanny and Edmund.

The complicated involvement of power and family interactions in *Mansfield Park* echoes Wollstonecraft’s call for greater educational and moral equality between the sexes, yet without destroying the Burkean construct of the ideal female and her role in both the family and society. Instead, Austen envisions a new type of ideal relationship that allows for men and women to enact their assigned roles within a family system that gives more equal influence to the participants. The hierarchical, paternal system is unfavorably compared to the lateral, fraternal system, which even in only partial deployment allows Fanny much broader scope to achieve her personal goals of family acceptance and personal sovereignty.
Chapter 3: *Emma*

Following *Mansfield Park*, *Emma* is strikingly different from the earlier novel in tone, and in the approach it takes to women’s power, positions, and choices. If *Mansfield Park* can be said to use Fanny Price to illustrate the Burkean ideal of woman and the nature of her power in early nineteenth-century England, *Emma* uses its heroine to present a much more broadly imagined scope for women, both within the domestic sphere and within a larger community. We have already seen how, as a conservatively “ideal” woman Fanny Price can only be permitted—and can only permit herself—to exercise personal power through the approved channel of indirect domestic influence. However, Emma Woodhouse, “handsome, clever, and rich,” wields power of a much different sort, and in a much different manner than her self-effacing fictional predecessor. Emma, despite living with her father, holds complete power within her own domestic sphere, but she also has power outside of this relatively narrow area: she is presented to the reader as a natural leader in the community of Highbury, and she does not hesitate to use her authority in this position.

In portraying a role for women outside of the home and the immediate family, *Emma* expands the potential scope of women’s influence; not only does Emma have social power that extends beyond the boundaries of her own home, but this is also one of the few of Austen’s complete novels to examine positions for women outside of marriage. In addition, the domestic role of women is accorded greater importance in *Emma* than in any of the earlier novels, and the narrative spells out more clearly the national implications of this influence, revealing the real significance of the issue of women’s power. The quest for family belonging that pervaded the heroine’s experiences
in *Mansfield Park* also manifests itself in *Emma*, but in this later novel it takes on some notably different forms, in addition to a much more explicit importance not just for the individual, but for society as well. The experiences of Emma Woodhouse, Harriet Smith, and Jane Fairfax present variations on this “family project,” which, when viewed within the framework of the novel as a whole, both support and modify the Burkean standard for female influence through domestic channels.

In order to examine women’s power inside and outside of the family, it is helpful to consider the three different possible roles that *Emma* suggests for women: wife, governess, and old maid. The novel bases its evaluation of these three possibilities on the degree of social and personal power each affords to the woman who occupies that position. Throughout *Emma*, the roles of wife and of governess especially are directly and indirectly compared on the point of personal autonomy. For example, Mr. Knightley, reflecting on the marriage of Miss Taylor to Mr. Weston, comments to Emma and Mrs. Weston on the improvement of Miss Taylor’s situation, “Miss Taylor has been used to have two persons to please; she will now have but one. The chances are that she must be a gainer” (*E* 9). In this case, the “gain” that Mrs. Weston, née Taylor, experiences is a gain in the ability to have her own way; whereas her position as a governess subjected her to the domestic “rule” of two (or more) individuals, her marriage, although it still subjects her to the will of another person, supposedly allows her greater autonomy by requiring her submission to only one other set of demands. Mr. Knightley goes on to describe the similarities between the positions of wife and governess, subtly hinting at the irony that, although the governess is entrusted with the responsibility of educating, directing, and forming others, in reality she is generally little more than another type of servant in a
prosperous household. Mr. Knightley declares that Mrs. Weston is “very fit for a wife, but not at all for a governess. But you were preparing yourself to be an excellent wife all the time you were at Hartfield...you were receiving a very good education...on the very material matrimonial point of submitting your own will, and doing as you were bid...” (E 33). Perhaps the suggestion, unobtrusively implied here, is that a wife may also be little more than a servant in some households, where nominally she holds the power to command, but conventionally it is her part to obey.

This comparison of the governess and the wife continues throughout, moving from discussions of the past experiences of Miss Taylor to the anticipated experiences of Jane Fairfax. Mrs. Elton’s zeal in her quest for a “situation” for Jane sounds weirdly reminiscent of Mrs. Bennet’s quest to find wealthy husbands for her daughters in Pride and Prejudice. Consider the following speech, made to Jane:

Oh! my dear, we cannot begin too early; you are not aware of the difficulty of procuring exactly the desirable thing [...] you have not seen so much of the world as I have. You do not know how many candidates there always are for the first situations [...] A cousin of Mr. Suckling, Mrs. Bragge, had such an infinity of applications; every body was anxious to be in her family, for she moves in the first circle. Wax-candles in the school room! You may imagine how desirable! Of all the houses in the kingdom Mrs. Bragge’s is the one I would most wish to see you in. (E 270)

Until Mrs. Elton arrives at the wax candles in the schoolroom, she might almost be talking about a potential husband for Jane, rather than a potential situation as a governess. The autonomy of personal choice ascribed by Katherine Sobba Greene to the “courtship”
period of a woman’s life, between her education and marriage, is also present in the situation of a woman such as Jane, who might equally be said to be choosing her future “family.” But in positioning this conversation in reference to work as a governess rather than to the role of a wife, the novel lays bare the economic and social considerations that may hamper a woman’s free choice. Although Mrs. Elton informs Jane that “it will not satisfy your friends to have you taking up with any thing that may offer, an inferior, commonplace situation, in a family not moving in a certain circle, or able to command the elegancies of life” (E 271), Jane herself is aware that her financial situation, were she really to seek a position as a governess, would not allow her to be so choosy: “A gentleman’s family is all that I should condition for” (E 271). Furthermore, in this same conversation, Jane mentions the sale of “human flesh” in the same breath as her own proposed sale of “human intellect” (E 271), a circumstance that is hardly accidental (Johnson 137).

Upon initial examination, in fact, the roles of wife and governess appear very similar indeed in regard to women’s power within these positions, an appearance that contains a certain amount of irony, since governesses were, after all, supposedly independent women in charge of directing their own lives. Despite this supposed independence, Emma decidedly rejects the role of governess as totally lacking in “the delight, the honour, and the comfort” that a woman might reasonably wish for in life (E 271). What may at first seem to be the position of greatest personal autonomy in fact is presented as the least comfortable and desirable. This leaves the roles of wife and spinster or old maid as the only viable alternatives for women in this novel.
The commentary on Mrs. Weston’s change of situation from governess to wife offers a preliminary view of the role of the wife; an examination of the third role, that of the “old maid,” is also necessary. This is the role that Emma Woodhouse proposes for herself for most of the narrative, based in part on her situation with her father, but also on her perception of her own power as a single woman of consequence. Early on in the novel, the reader is informed that Emma is used to “having rather too much her own way” (E 4); despite her father’s presence at Hartfield, Emma is the real head of the household. Moreover, she does not exercise power in her family circle in the passive manner of a Fanny Price, but in an active manner, through the use of logical persuasion of her father, or independent actions undertaken without his explicit knowledge. The operation of Emma’s influence is apparent in passages such as the following:

Mr. Woodhouse was to be talked into an acquiescence of his daughter’s going out to dinner on a day now near at hand, and spending the whole evening away from him. As for his going, Emma did not wish him to think it possible; the hours would be too late, and the party too numerous. He was soon pretty well resigned. (E 187)

While preserving the surface appearance of her father’s authority, Emma’s methods of handling him are revealed by the third-person narration to be really skilful, if considerate, manipulation, which even Mr. Woodhouse himself accepts: “But you will do every thing right. I need not tell you what is to be done” (E 188). Like the Miss Bertrams whose vanity is so well handled that to not particularly observant characters in the novel they appear to have none, Emma’s power over her father is so properly clothed in the attire of respect for her father’s wishes that it appears to her society in general to operate as an
instrument of patriarchal rule, rather than in spite of (or in place of) such rule. Therefore even when Emma does things without consulting her father, such as sending “the whole hind-quarter” of pork to the Bateses (E 153), she is able to camouflage her independent thought and actions as mere response to Mr. Woodhouse’s wishes. This is not to suggest that Emma is not genuinely concerned with her father’s comfort and happiness—the novel repeatedly asserts that she is quite concerned—but merely to illustrate the ways in which Emma is permitted to exercise her personal authority in a direct way within the traditional confines of patriarchy. In fact, as Johnson notes, it is the bond between Emma and her father that “necessitates a dependency upon female strength, activity, and good judgment” in the novel (124).

As the mistress of Hartfield, Emma is unusually powerful in her own domestic circle. This position also yields an unusual amount of power outside of her immediate family as well. As the presiding female of Hartfield, Emma also naturally inhabits the position of the presiding female of Highbury society, and as such she is accorded significant powers to influence her community. Frank Churchill describes Emma as “she who could do anything in Highbury” (E 177), and although this may sound like mere flattery, there is a palpable degree of truth behind it. Consider the scene at the Westons’ ball, when Emma thanks Mr. Knightley for his intervention on Harriet’s behalf. In Northanger Abbey, Henry Tilney compares country dances to the institution of marriage, and states that “in both, man has the advantage of choice, woman only the power of refusal” (NA 64). Certainly this reflects the social conventions of Austen’s period. Emma, however, is generally much too assertive to assume a role that allows her “only the power of refusal,” and her ability to act on this assertiveness, as well as her society’s
acceptance of her action, are reflected in her exchange with Mr. Knightley on this occasion:

"'Whom are you going to dance with?' asked Mr. Knightley.

"She hesitated a moment, then replied, 'With you, if you will ask me'" (E 298).

Although Austen carefully qualifies the moment with Emma’s “hesitation” and the continued insistence that it is Mr. Knightley who must do the actual asking, the fact remains that Emma is both expected and allowed to choose her own partner. In this moment with Emma, we see the full extent of the autonomy of the young, single woman, unrestrained by the type of economic concerns of a woman like Jane Fairfax, or the ideological concerns of Fanny Price. That this degree of autonomy in Austen’s contemporary society was unusual is demonstrated by Allison Sulloway’s statement:

even when there was no dire poverty to make marriage necessary, women’s lives were often deliberately left so empty that without heroic private efforts at self-teaching, often thwarted by parents and by social assumptions, there was nothing else to expect, and even worse [...] nothing else for them to think about. (56)

Emma is in every way the exception to this situation, having no parental authority to “thwart” her in her projects, and possessing social and intellectual freedom that allow her to think about a number of topics other than her own marriage. Marilyn Butler describes Emma as “healthy, vigorous, almost aggressive” and “the natural feminine leader of her whole community” (251), while Johnson characterizes her as “a woman who possesses and enjoys power, without bothering to demur about it” (125). Fanny Price, the embodiment of the Burkean ideal woman, can only exercise power through the properly sanctioned channels of passivity and subtle feminine influence within her own home and
family. Emma represents a very different type of woman, one who can and does exercise power directly, both in the domestic sphere and in the larger community.

With such striking differences between the modes of operation of these two heroines, it is hardly surprising that they have very different goals as well. While *Mansfield Park* relates Fanny Price’s struggle to fit herself into a certain desirable situation through marriage, Emma Woodhouse, already situated in a highly satisfactory position, shows little inclination for marriage. As Emma famously declares of herself,

> I cannot really change for the better. If I were to marry, I must expect to repent it [...] I have none of the usual inducements of women to marry [...] And, without love, I am sure I should be a fool to change such a situation as mine. Fortune I do not want; employment I do not want; consequence I do not want: I believe few married women are half as much mistress of their husband’s house, as I am of Hartfield; and never, never could I expect to be so truly beloved and important; so always first and always right in any man’s eyes as I am in my father’s. (*E* 77).

Emma’s intention of remaining single seems only natural in light of the advantages she enjoys in her single position. The media of marriage and family are much less necessary to her than they are to a woman such as Fanny Price, who lacks social and economic status as well as an assertive personality, and marriage for Emma is presented, at this juncture in the novel, as potentially limiting, because it would generally require her to submit to a husband’s authority (Johnson 124; Butler 252). If marriage and family are viewed in regard to the possession of personal power, Emma’s choice to remain within her family of birth is a logical one, just as the choice to seek out a “new” family is logical.
for women such as Fanny Price and Anne Elliot, whose biological families are largely suppressive.

In order to see this distinction more clearly, it is helpful to devote some attention to the other marriageable young women portrayed in *Emma* in order to see how the "family project" that consists of a quest for optimal personal autonomy takes shape in women who are less privileged than the novel’s heroine. Harriet Smith and Jane Fairfax contrast Emma’s advantageous position through their own lack of social or economic status, and one of the most significant differences between these young women and the heroine is their corresponding lack of personal power. Harriet Smith, as the "natural daughter of somebody" (*E* 19), is relegated to the margins of Highbury society until Emma Woodhouse adopts her as a friend and protégé. Yet this amiable impulse on Emma’s part may actually be viewed as an interruption of Harriet’s subconscious quest for familial acceptance and belonging through her relationship with the Martins of Abbey-Mill farm. In fact, as the novel moves toward its conclusion, it seems to make clear that Emma’s actions in regard to Harriet really do amount to little more than an interruption of the most desirable course for the younger, illegitimate woman’s life.

The text reveals Harriet’s quest for family acceptance gradually, through a combination of third-person narration, free indirect discourse, and the dialogue between Emma and Harriet. Evidence of Harriet’s fledgling romantic feelings for Robert Martin emerge in her relation of memories of her visit with the Martin family. For example, we are told that Harriet “believed every body spoke well of [Mr. Martin]. His mother and sisters were very fond of him. Mrs. Martin had told her one day, (and there was a blush as she said it,) that it was impossible for any body to be a better son; and therefore she
was sure whenever he married he would make a good husband” (*E* 24). Although Mr. Martin is here being discussed in the role of a potential husband, his worth in such a role is evaluated in terms of his value as a son and brother. In other words, Harriet is not just assessing him as an individual romantic prospect, but as part of a family unit as a whole. This becomes progressively clearer as Harriet describes how she “shall always have a great regard for the Miss Martins, especially Elizabeth, and should be very sorry to give them up” (*E* 27), and in her concern for the reaction of the Martin family when she refuses Robert’s proposal (*E* 49-50). Interestingly, the most successful method Emma can devise of distracting Harriet from her depressing thoughts is an alternative image of a suitor amongst his family. She describes for Harriet a scene in which the supposedly lovelorn Mr. Elton “is shewing your picture to his mother and sisters, telling how much more beautiful is the original, and after being asked for it five or six times, allowing them to hear your name, your own dear name” (*E* 50). Emma goes to some length to convince Harriet of the warmth of this family scene, continuing on to imagine how the sight of Harriet’s portrait “diffuses through the party those pleasantest feelings of our nature, eager curiosity and warm prepossession” (*E* 50). Though she may not be aware of it herself, Emma is suggesting a substitute for the loss of the family that Harriet’s refusal of Robert Martin has brought about. She implicitly recognizes Harriet’s interest in marriage as an interest in creating a family niche for herself, in which she can enjoy, at the very least, the power of inspiring affection and kind treatment in those around her. While such a situation may not seem particularly empowering, even on a personal level, it must ultimately compare favorably with Harriet’s situation as a single woman without family of any sort, “left on Mrs. Goddard’s hands to shift as she can” (*E* 56).
While Harriet Smith engages in a project of family-seeking through potential spouses because of her total lack of family, Emma’s other foil in the novel, Jane Fairfax, seems to engage in a similar project due to what is almost an excess of family. Although the Bateses are generally described in very positive terms by the Highbury community, the novel itself does not necessarily endorse this assessment. In particular, Miss Bates’s incessant talkativeness is made the subject of comic treatment at the character’s expense. This domestic environment is implied to be inadequate to Jane’s deserts, as Emma’s narrator tells us:

[...] there had seemed every probability of her being permanently fixed there; of her being taught only what very limited means could command, and growing up with no advantages of connection or improvement to be engrained on what nature had given her in a pleasing person, good understanding, and warm-hearted, well meaning relations. (E 145)

This passage seems to suggest that the Bateses are unable to provide the type of family environment that would be most suited to Jane’s talents and abilities. The novel provides a temporary alternative for Jane Fairfax with the Campbells (E 145-46), but her return to Highbury represents a corresponding return to the unsuitable family situation of her maternal grandmother’s home. This return to her biological relations has serious consequences for Jane; she must change from being “with the Campbells when she was the equal of every body she mixed with” to residing “with a poor old grandmother, who has barely enough to live on” (E 174). Factors besides the purely economic also appear to drive Jane’s search for a more suitable family life. As Mrs. Weston points out in defending Jane’s friendship with the Eltons, “We cannot suppose that she has any great
enjoyment at the Vicarage [...] but it is better than being always at home. Her aunt is a
good creature, but, as a constant companion, must be very tiresome. We must consider
what Miss Fairfax quits, before we condemn her taste for what she goes to” (E 257).
Emma’s later reflection on Jane Fairfax’s situation, “Such a home, indeed! Such an aunt!
[...] I do pity you” (E 328), reinforces this point. Miss Bates may be “well meaning,” but
she can also be exasperating, particularly to a character such as Jane who is so
consistently portrayed as quiet, reserved, and used to “all the rational pleasures of an
elegant society” (E 146). Jane’s individual autonomy is also at risk while she remains in
this situation. Although she is highly important to her aunt and grandmother, Jane’s
wishes are frequently contradicted by Miss Bates’s habits of talkativeness. For example,
when the distraught Jane seeks to avoid a visit from Miss Woodhouse, Miss Bates
candidly reveals to Emma that Jane is not actually in bed, as she claims, and that she did
not make her escape to the bedroom until she realized who their visitor was, both facts
that it is easy to imagine Jane would have preferred to have concealed (E 343). The
various difficulties of a return to her Highbury family, with no better alleviation than a
position as a governess to look forward to, set in motion Jane Fairfax’s quest for a new,
alternative family situation.

Although it does not emerge until the final volume of the novel, Jane has in fact
been engaged to Frank Churchill since shortly before the marriage of the Campbells’
daughter. The proximity of her engagement to her friend’s marriage is suggestive: once
the Campbells’ daughter becomes Mrs. Dixon and moves to Ireland, there will be no
further excuses for putting off Jane’s future position as either a governess or a single
female dependent in her grandmother’s home. The third and clearly most favorable
alternative is marriage into a new family. Jane’s emotional motives aside, marriage to Frank Churchill offers a potentially desirable domestic situation, although there are considerable obstacles to the achievement of this situation prior to the death of Frank’s aunt, the formidable Mrs. Churchill. In order for a marriage with Frank to provide the family Jane Fairfax seeks, two things must happen: Frank must become more closely affiliated with his father and stepmother, Mr. and Mrs. Weston; and Mrs. Churchill’s negative influence over her family must be removed. Once both of these conditions have been fulfilled, Frank can offer new family members of value, and a position of significant personal power and influence within a family. The marriage between Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor provides the basis for favorable family relationships on Frank Churchill’s side, which are attested to by repeated references to the affection that develops between Frank and Mrs. Weston following his visit to his father’s house. Mrs. Weston, on becoming acquainted with Frank, soon “thought well of Frank in almost every respect; and, what was more, she loved him very much” (E 381), while Frank admits to his stepmother, “so long as I absented myself from [my father’s] house, so long I lost the blessing of knowing you” (E 397). The increasing intimacy and family feeling create a new domestic circle that will be welcoming to Jane Fairfax when she eventually enters it, becoming “like a daughter” to Mr. and Mrs. Weston (E 425). Thus one condition of Jane’s family project is fulfilled, and one objection to her marriage with Frank is removed.

The second, stronger objection, the domestic tyranny of Mrs. Churchill, however, remains a material obstacle. Emma’s musings on the Churchills provide some insight into this situation: “The contrast between Mrs. Churchill’s importance in the world, and Jane
Fairfax’s, struck her; one was every thing, the other nothing” (E 347-48). As long as Mrs. Churchill continues to be “every thing” in her family circle, Frank’s cannot be a desirable substitute family for Jane Fairfax. Following Mrs. Churchill’s death, however, the prospects of both marriage and an appropriate family situation become available, as “scarcely are her remains at rest in the family vault, than her husband is persuaded to act exactly opposite to what she would have required […] He gave his consent with very little persuasion” (E 361). The public announcement of Jane Fairfax’s engagement to Frank Churchill marks the fact that Frank’s family situation has finally reached a state that will make it favorable for Jane’s assimilation. As Emma observes to herself, “[Jane Fairfax’s] days of insignificance and evil were over.—She would soon be well, and happy, and prosperous” (E 365). While Mrs. Churchill retained her domineering influence over her immediate family, even if the marriage between Frank and Jane had been sanctioned by the family, Jane Fairfax would have been marrying into a situation that would severely curtail, rather than expand, her personal power and autonomy. Like Frank, she would have become subject to Mrs. Churchill’s whims and humors, and probably possess no influence of her own. Only when Frank’s familial conditions become favorable to Jane’s needs can the marriage become a concrete possibility rather than an uncertain gamble.

Looking at the operation of the quest for suitable families in secondary narratives in *Emma* provides a background of contrast against which it is helpful to examine how this quest is played out in the primary narrative of the heroine. It is important to note, in engaging in this examination, that Emma’s situation represents the reverse of the typical feminine family project as it appears in Austen’s three later novels. As we have already
seen, Emma’s story begins with her almost complete satisfaction in her own power and consequence, both within the family and in her community. What, then, provides the motivation for Emma’s family project? Mr. Woodhouse’s resistance to change is presented humorously in the novel, but Emma herself also has a certain commitment to preserving the status quo, since by doing so, she will preserve her position of power. For Emma, the project of family through marriage is not a project of gaining a position in a new family, but of maintaining her original position as much as possible. That this is the case can be seen through her considerations of potential marriage partners.

Despite Emma’s repeated declarations that she has no interest in marriage, *Emma* contains hints that point to her potential susceptibility. Even as she is telling Harriet that she does not intend to marry, Emma qualifies the statement, saying, “Were I to fall in love, indeed, it would be a different thing!” (*E* 77). Her supposed wish not to meet a man with whom she could fall in love is partially belied by the particular interest that the narrator tells us she has in Frank Churchill:

Now, it so happened that in spite of Emma’s resolution of never marrying, there was something in the name, in the idea of Mr. Frank Churchill, which always interested her. She had frequently thought—especially since his father’s marriage with Miss Taylor—that if she were to marry, he was the very person to suit her in age, character, and condition. He seemed by this connection between the families, quite to belong to her [...]. (*E* 107)

In Emma’s imagination, Frank Churchill is marked out as a possibly eligible suitor even before she meets him, largely on the basis of his connection to her close friends, the Westons, who have become in a sense an extension of Emma’s family through her close
relationship with Miss Taylor before her marriage to Mr. Weston. As she continues her consideration of what would happen "if she were to marry" Frank, Emma is also considering the degree to which such a marriage would allow her to reinforce her current family situation. Even after she meets Frank Churchill and imagines herself in love with him, Emma continues to link the idea of marriage with family situation: "it struck her that she could not be very much in love; for in spite of her previous and fixed determination never to quit her father, never to marry, a strong attachment must produce more of a struggle than she could foresee in her own feelings" (E 237). Emma eventually realizes that her own feelings for Frank have never been strong enough to justify marriage, but she mentally rejects him as a candidate even before coming to this realization because a marriage with Frank would mean a significant change in her family situation. The scenes of proposal she imagines always end with her refusal, a refusal which she consistently phrases as the result of her reluctance to leave her father, revealing both her genuine feelings for her father and her unwillingness to give up her position of power in her father's household. Marriage with Frank would draw her away from her position at Hartfield, where her father allows her to rule their domestic circle, and it would place her in a position of relative subordination in the Churchill family. If Frank, while under the control of Mrs. Churchill, cannot offer a sufficiently autonomous position to Jane Fairfax, how much less would he be able to offer one to Emma, who is so entirely used to having her own way in both private and public circles?

Frank Churchill is, therefore, determined to be unsuitable on the basis of his family situation long before the narrative reveals the true extent of his inappropriateness as a husband for Emma. Emma’s family project, however, does not end with Frank. As
Emma becomes increasingly self-aware, it gradually emerges that Mr. Knightley is really the best, perhaps even the only, possible choice for Emma as a husband who will not interfere with her personal power. The peculiar aptness of Mr. Knightley as a potential husband becomes clear when viewed through the lens of Emma’s commitment to preserving her current family position, along with the authority it affords her. Marriage to Mr. Knightley, rather than removing her from her family, or forming a new family for her, would in fact reinforce Emma’s existing family ties. He is introduced as “not only a very old and intimate friend of the family, but particularly connected with it as the elder brother of Isabella’s husband” (E 7); in other words, he is Emma’s brother-in-law. The affection that Emma feels for Mr. Knightley is characterized as friendly and familial throughout most of the narrative, and even when the reader may fairly begin to suspect that she has other feelings for him as well, these feelings are presented in a way that is closely related to family concerns. Her instant disapproval of Mrs. Weston’s guess that Mr. Knightley will marry Jane Fairfax may give readers a hint that Emma’s interest in Mr. Knightley is stronger than even the heroine herself is aware, but all of her objections are ostensibly based on the family relation between the Woodhouses and the Knightleys:

“Mr. Knightley and Jane Fairfax!” exclaimed Emma. “Dear Mrs. Weston, how could you think of such a thing?—Mr. Knightley!—Mr. Knightley must not marry!—You would not have little Henry cut out from Donwell?—Oh! No, no, Henry must have Donwell. I cannot at all consent to Mr. Knightley’s marrying [...].” (E 201)

Probably it is not difficult for even a first-time reader to guess that Emma cannot consent to Mr. Knightley’s marrying Jane Fairfax because Emma herself is in love with him, but
it is also important to note that her objections are all voiced in terms of family issues. The existing family connection is referred to again at the moment when Emma reveals her engagement to her father, “a plan to promote the happiness of all—she and Mr. Knightley meant to marry, by which means Hartfield would receive the constant addition of that person’s company whom she knew [Mr. Woodhouse] loved, next to his daughters and Mrs. Weston, best in the world” (*E* 423). Mr. Knightley is both a part of Emma’s family and a potential suitor who will not weaken her existing family ties. As such, he is ultimately the only suitor that Emma can seriously consider.

Yet is it certain that marriage with Mr. Knightley will neither disrupt Emma’s original family position nor diminish her personal power? There are many moments in the novel, particularly the episode at Box Hill, in which Mr. Knightley takes on a paternal, didactic role in his exchanges with Emma. Certainly his lecture to Emma concerning her behavior toward Miss Bates tends to sound like a chastising, disappointed parent rather than a friend and social equal: “This is not pleasant to you, Emma—and it is very far from pleasant to me; but I must, I will,—I will tell you truths while I can […]” (*E* 340). Given her comfortable position of power as the female head of her father’s household, why does Emma decide to marry after all? Austen provides us with personal, emotional reasons: Emma is, of course, in love with Mr. Knightley. But beyond the sentimental, what reasons does *Emma* have for supporting the institution of marriage, particularly when Austen has taken the time to suggest and discuss alternative possibilities for women?

On a personal level, Emma’s decision to marry once again reverts to the issue of personal power. Although this is a novel that initially appears to support Emma’s
decision to remain single, events in the narrative eventually suggest that the position that will allow Emma to continue to exercise her unusual degree of authority is actually as the wife of Mr. Knightley. While *Emma* starts off by creating the assumption that Emma holds a natural social importance even outside of her own family circle, eventually the novel shows how this importance may be endangered by Emma’s determination not to marry. Reflecting on the events taking place among her friends and acquaintances, all of which center around domestic concerns, Emma realizes that, “if all took place that might take place among the circle of her friends, Hartfield must be comparatively deserted; and she left to cheer her father with the spirits only of ruined happiness” (*E* 383). As Claudia Johnson puts it, “the great Miss Woodhouse herself is on the verge of dwindling into ‘nothing.’” As beloved friends around her pair off and depart to form new ties of intimacy within their own domestic circles, Emma is left isolated and alone, the mistress of an empty mansion, her domain painfully contracted” (138). Apparently the position of a single woman, even a single woman of consequence, is not as rewarding as Emma at first believes. Marilyn Butler writes:

Emma is vulnerable, and one reason is that her stake in Highbury is not deep. Her very claim to social precedence is so precarious, while she remains a spinster, that she is superseded by Mrs. Elton. When she marries Mr. Knightley, her rank will be secured […] At the end of the novel Emma is about to assume a clearly defined and permanent role in the community […]. (273)

Although Emma enjoys a position of power in her community, this power is in part a result of her potential as a candidate for marriage. By removing herself from the marriage market, Emma removes herself from the possibility of contributing to her
community's growth. When other members of that community begin to form new connections as they marry and reproduce, Emma begins to feel herself marginalized and in danger of losing her influence in the community. As Butler points out and Johnson reiterates, Emma's marriage to Mr. Knightley presents a solution to this threatened loss: “Emma is brought low, and marriage saves her” (Johnson 140). Additionally, by marrying Mr. Knightley, Emma secures for herself connections to both a desirable immediate family—her own—and an extended “family” of community. Mr. Knightley, as the most powerful male figure in his community, is able to offer to his wife a corresponding position as the most powerful female figure. By becoming Mrs. Knightley, Emma both reinforces her personal power as a member of her father's family and opens up for herself the prospect of claiming a real position as a community leader.

To understand the full implications of Emma's power as a wife, it is necessary to return to the conservative family ideology proposed by Edmund Burke, and look at the especial significance accorded to family life in *Emma*. Burke stresses the consequence of proper individual and private manners in preserving “civil freedom” (*Reflections*), and the family becomes the setting in which these manners are formed, cultivated, and practiced. A careful reading of the novel will reveal the importance placed on family interactions and attachments in *Emma*. Mr. John Knightley, husband to Isabella, and Emma's brother-in-law, is more than once characterized as a less than entirely agreeable man, yet the novel praises him on the subject of his family feeling: “there was something honourable and valuable in the strong domestic habits, the all-sufficiency of home to himself [...] It had a high claim to forbearance” (*E* 88). The fact that a strong attachment to home and family can even partially excuse John Knightley's irritability in Emma's (or
the narrator’s) eyes suggests that such an attachment is an important virtue in the novel’s world. Emma, meanwhile, in discussing her initial decision not to marry, admits that there may be a drawback to single life in regard to “objects for the affections, which is in truth the great point of inferiority, the want of which is really the great evil to be avoided in not marrying” (E 78). Clearly the presence of closely related family members ranks high on her list of priorities and comforts in life. Even Mr. Woodhouse, with his selfish tendencies, is remarkably concerned with this issue of family ties, a fact that is perhaps most tellingly revealed in his casual comment to Emma regarding Jane Fairfax’s governess position:

I hope it is a dry situation, and that her health will be taken good care of. It ought to be a first object, as I am sure poor Miss Taylor’s always was with me. You know, my dear, she is going to be to this new lady what Miss Taylor was to us. And I hope she will be better off in one respect, and not be induced to go away after it has been her home so long. (E 350)

He recognizes the value of a governess who can be treated as a family member, and he also somewhat surprisingly recognizes that a woman in such a position might equally become attached to the family for whom she works, even if this realization is tinged with comedy due to his insistence on pitying women who are “induced to go away” by their own marriages.

If family emerges as a persistent concern throughout Emma, it is important to note the closely related theme of female influence in domestic life. Unlike the feminine influence presented in Mansfield Park, which is largely ignored except when most subtly practiced, the power of influence that women have over their husbands emerges again
and again in *Emma*, and is the subject of a significant amount of discussion. Consider how often the novel discusses the influence of women over their husbands' personalities and actions: Mr. Knightley expresses concern over Robert Martin's choice of Harriet Smith because she will not be a "rational companion or useful helpmate" (*E* 55); John Knightley's occasionally bad temper is made worse by "such a worshipping wife" (*E* 84); Mrs. Elton is criticized as a woman whose "society would certainly do Mr. Elton no good" (*E* 244); Mr. Churchill is induced to disown his sister by his wife, who was "the instigator" (*E* 279); Frank Churchill's character, through his marriage to the exemplary Jane Fairfax, "will improve, and acquire from her's the steadiness and delicacy of principle that it wants" (*E* 407); Harriet, considered by Emma as a match for Mr. Knightley, is described as thoroughly unsuitable and potentially having negative effects on his social standing (*E* 375). Clearly this is a novel in which women's characters, actions, and opinions have a substantial impact. According to David Monaghan, "for Jane Austen, the restrictions imposed on the woman's social role do not diminish its importance. Rather, basing her case on contemporary conservative philosophy, she argues that those who control manners and the home have a crucial role to play in preserving the *status quo*" (110). Although not all of the women in *Emma* are necessarily occupied in "preserving the *status quo,*" it certainly seems that they have some "crucial role to play" in the society Austen depicts.

The influence that women have as wives, woven as it is throughout the text, suggests that *Emma* has some important message to impart on this subject. Michael Kramp, in his essay on the national role of Harriet Smith, states that the later portion of the novel "carefully delineates a national duty for Harriet," as "Emma and Knightley join
forces in crafting her as a dutiful female citizen, instructing her in proper culture, and placing her in a romanticized marriage" (149). The national duty for Harriet is to “reproduce English culture and the English race” (Kramp 150), but an essential part of this duty is Harriet’s character and behavior as a wife. Should she turn out to be a bad influence on Robert Martin, as Mr. Knightley initially fears she may, not only will she fail to reproduce valuable aspects of her society, but she may also injure existing assets, such as the prosperous Abbey-Mill farm. Mrs. Elton’s corrupting influence on Mr. Elton is a cautionary example of what can happen when female influence is faulty, or incorrectly exerted, and the novel implies that such negative influence has effects that extend beyond the domestic circle. Mr. Elton, as a clergyman, is supposedly responsible for the moral well being of his parishioners, yet under his wife’s influence, he is capable of outright social cruelty to Harriet Smith (E 294-95). In a society where women are capable of effecting material social change through their influence over their male family members, the issues of female power and family choices become highly important.

While this may seem to reiterate the message imparted in Mansfield Park, there are some significant alterations to the view that is taken of women’s choice and influence in Emma. Rather than supporting the strictly conservative philosophy that underlies Fanny’s position in the Bertram family, Emma appears to modify this philosophy in regard to the power relations between men and women. Although Emma ultimately is shown to have more power as the wife of a powerful man than as a single woman without restrictive parental authority, Austen moderates the strict patriarchal values this conclusion at first appears to suggest by gesturing toward the equality that tends to characterize the relationship between Emma and Mr. Knightley. According to David
Monaghan, “For [Austen], the proper marriage is one in which the two parties operate on a basis of mutual respect” (108). Mr. Knightley may occasionally adopt a didactic role with Emma, but she retains her independence, as evidenced, for example, by her resolve not to mention the mistakes she feels she has been led into by “the worst of all her womanly follies” (E 420), her treatment of Harriet Smith. Also highly significant when considering the balance of power in the match between Emma and Mr. Knightley is the question of where they will live. The decision that allows Emma to remain at Hartfield, and requires Mr. Knightley to give up his own home is a highly unusual one, which suggests that Emma will not be a child in her husband’s care any more than she has been one in her father’s. That this proposed living arrangement represents a negotiating of authority is implied by Emma’s reflection that, “in quitting Donwell, he must be sacrificing a great deal of independency of hours and habits; that in living constantly with her father, and in no house of his own, there would be much, very much, to be borne with” (E 408). Emma thinks of the adjustments to be made by Mr. Knightley in terms of adjustments to her father’s rules and expectations, but as we have already seen, it is really Emma herself who primarily controls life at Hartfield. Therefore Mr. Knightley’s sacrifice of independence perhaps will be as much to Emma’s influence as to Mr. Woodhouse’s. Johnson comments on the novel’s solution to where the married couple will live:

The conclusion which seemed tamely and placidly conservative thus takes an unexpected turn, as the guarantor of order himself cedes a considerable portion of the power which custom has allowed him to expect. In moving to Hartfield,
Knightley is sharing her [Emma’s] home, and in placing himself within her domain, Knightley gives his blessing to her rule. (143)

Perhaps Mr. Knightley does not consciously approve Emma’s “rule,” but neither does he demand her strict obedience. In moving to Hartfield, he demonstrates that both partners in the marriage will be given equal consideration.

In light of this conclusion, we can see that *Emma*, while it continues the theme of the heroine’s project to attain a desirable family situation, takes it in a very different direction from this project’s completion in *Mansfield Park*. If *Mansfield Park* is about fitting oneself into a suitable family, and closing the ranks of the family in order to do so, *Emma* is much more about fitting a suitable family to the individual. Emma Woodhouse, occupying a position of considerable power, shapes her family so that she will remain at the center and can continue to exercise her power. Harriet Smith marries into a family in which the daughters are “quite as well educated” as she is (*E* 27), and which suits her situation in life. Jane Fairfax also marries into a family that suits the lifestyle in which she was brought up, but only after that family has been modified in order to suit her needs for autonomy and the power of influence. Even Mrs. Elton marries into a household and society that easily adapt to her wishes for consequence and dominance. Despite the fact that this novel finally confirms marriage and feminine influence upon a man as women’s most desirable goals, *Emma* also provides a new, much more expansive and direct sphere of influence for women. The novel hints at important ways in which female influence impacts society, in addition to showing a woman who has power to affect society in her own right. The issue of women’s choice becomes more prominent in this novel as well, since Emma does indeed have choices to make regarding her own life, which go beyond
the acceptance or refusal of a marriage partner. She must decide how to run her father’s household, how to act within her society, and how to conduct herself in relation to other individuals such as Harriet Smith, Jane Fairfax, and Mr. Knightley himself. Like all of Austen’s heroines, Emma certainly has agency, but unlike many of them, she also has the means to carry out her own plans and decisions. The issues of class and the power afforded by wealth are undoubtably factors involved in Emma’s ability to choose and to act as well, but the novel’s unique depiction of a nominally patriarchal system that still allows for the individual autonomy of its women is still one of the most striking features of *Emma*.

A second remarkable aspect of the novel is the role that community plays. Although the marriageable women in *Emma* are engaged in the same quest for suitable families, family itself takes a different form in this novel, moving from the tight-knit, exclusionary model described in *Mansfield Park* to a much broader, more inclusive model, in which the community plays a somewhat familial role. In this sense, Emma’s power within her community does not step out of the prescribed bounds of feminine influence, even though it does successfully move beyond the strictly domestic. Isabella Woodhouse may present a “model of right feminine happiness” (*E* 126), but she is not the woman Austen chooses for her heroine. Emma’s incorrect use of her “familial” influence in the wider circle of her familiar society may be flouted, chastised, and even mocked, but when she uses this influence correctly (as when she pays charitable visits on the poor), it is shown to benefit both the individual and the community. *Emma*, while appearing to examine and subsequently discard female roles outside of marriage and the family, in fact *does* succeed in suggesting a new role for women that would extend
feminine influence beyond the strictly domestic sphere. In a society where such a thing is possible, the choices that women make regarding family affiliations become important not just for what these women will be able to do within the family, but also for what they will be able to accomplish outside of the confines of the familial.
Chapter Four: *Persuasion*

*Persuasion*, Austen’s final complete novel, continues the themes of family relations and women’s power addressed in *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, but it takes up the indications of the national importance of female power in the domestic sphere, presented with increasing clarity in *Emma*, and eventually shifts its focus almost entirely from the domestic to the public and the national. The story of Anne Elliot, neglected and overlooked by her father and sister, finally gaining her happy ending through marriage to her long-estranged former fiancé, certainly presents a picture of a domestically oppressed heroine seeking a new family role that will afford her greater personal power, but Anne’s quest for a suitable family comes to encompass considerably more. Through her inclusion of characters associated with England’s navy and her frequent reiteration of the navy’s reputation for exemplary domestic values, Austen makes this novel her clearest, most outspoken statement regarding the possibilities for female power that reaches beyond the purely personal and private and into the national sphere.

Anne Elliot’s search for a new family situation is obvious throughout the novel. She “is nothing” to her older sister Elizabeth, and her father notices her only as she can gratify his pride and vanity (*P* 136-37). Anne’s unhappy domestic situation is repeatedly compared to that of her sisters-in-law, Henrietta and Louisa Musgrove, whom she considers “some of the happiest creatures of her acquaintance” and envies “that seemingly perfect good understanding and agreement together, that good-humoured mutual affection, of which she had known so little herself with either of her sisters” (*P* 39). The desirability of a marriage to Captain Wentworth is largely described in terms of his personal merits, but Anne is also aware that such a marriage would remove her from
her immediate family circle and join her more closely with his sister and brother-in-law, the Crofts, whom she genuinely likes and admires (P 159).

While Fanny Price’s quest for family deals with the desire to gain a place within a certain family group, and Emma Woodhouse’s is concerned with maintaining a family position, Anne Elliot’s search for a new family through marriage is as much concerned with escape from her situation of birth as with attaining a place in a new family. Like Emma Woodhouse, Anne’s motive’s can be partially read through the suitors that she considers and eventually rejects before reaching an understanding with the novel’s hero. For Anne, the most plausible suitor other than Captain Wentworth himself is her cousin and her father’s heir, Mr. Elliot. Described as “completely a gentleman in manner” (P 100), with a “sensible, discerning mind” (P 134), Mr. Elliot in many ways presents an apparently excellent choice for Anne. The degree to which she is tempted to accept him is revealed by the narrator in Anne’s conversation with her older friend Lady Russell, who describes the eligibility of the match in terms of family connection. The narrator provides Anne’s reflections on this comment:

For a few moments her imagination and her heart were bewitched. The idea of becoming what her mother had been; of having the precious name of “Lady Elliot” first revived in herself; of being restored to Kellynch, calling it her home again, her home for ever, was a claim which she could not easily resist […] The same image of Mr. Elliot speaking for himself, brought Anne to composure again. The charms of Kellynch and of “Lady Elliot” all faded away. She never could accept him. (P 150-51)
Mr. Elliot is considered at least as a possible second choice to Captain Wentworth, but significantly, it is immediately after Anne considers that a marriage with Mr. Elliot would fix her in her current family permanently that she realizes she cannot marry him. Particularly telling in this passage, perhaps, is Anne’s imagination of “becoming what her mother had been.” The narrative has already made clear that the former Lady Elliot, though sharing all of Anne’s good qualities, was “not the very happiest being in the world herself” (P 4), presumably because of her marriage to Sir Walter Elliot. Anne, in marrying Sir Walter’s heir, would permanently attach herself to the family and cut off all possibility of leaving “the authority and guidance of a conceited, silly father” (P 4) and the company of a “repulsive and unsisterly” older sibling (P 41). While her continued attachment to Captain Wentworth remains Anne’s primary motive for dismissing the idea of marriage to Mr. Elliot, her reflections that such a marriage would prevent the possibility of escape to a new family situation also seem to bear some weight in her realization that she “never could accept him.”

In removing herself from an undesirable family situation, Anne also begins attempting to create for herself a suitable “family” composed of the friends she values most, truly a family of choice. The first indication of this movement away from the domestic circle defined by biological family ties occurs in the scene that introduces the Harvilles and Captain Benwick. Anne, in observing their interaction with the apparently unattainable object of her affection, is described as feeling that:

There was so much attachment to Captain Wentworth in all this, and such a bewitching charm in a degree of hospitality so uncommon, so unlike the usual style of give-and-take invitations, and dinners of formality and display, that Anne
felt her spirits not likely to be benefited by an increasing acquaintance among his brother-officers. "These would have been all my friends," was her thought; and she had to struggle against a great tendency to lowness. (P 94)

This passage, in addition to Anne’s regret at the novel’s conclusion that in marrying Captain Wentworth she has “no family to receive and estimate him properly” except for “two friends” (P 237), indicates the importance of family as well as its increasingly elective nature. Anne may not have blood relatives that she feels can contribute to Captain Wentworth’s social circle, but she does have friends that she can “add to his list” (P 237). As Johnson puts it, “Peopled more with friends than family […] the society Anne finally selects […] removes itself from the institutions of the country manor” (163).

In observing Wentworth with his friends, Anne reflects that her marriage to him would have brought her into a close-knit group that appears more affectionate and more desirable than the family to which she belongs by birth.

Yet this passage regarding Captain Wentworth’s relationship with the Harvilles also accomplishes something else. Austen’s reference to his “brother-officers,” as well as her more general descriptions throughout the novel of the navy’s domestic nature, draws an explicit connection between this national institution and domestic life. At the novel’s conclusion the narrator relates of Anne that “She gloried in being a sailor’s wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than in its national importance” (P 238). The importance of this connection becomes even clearer in an examination of the primary naval wife depicted in the novel, Mrs. Croft. The Crofts are shown as an affectionate couple who embody the ideals of friendship as a basis for marriage that Mary
Wollstonecraft advocates in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*: "Friendship is a serious affection; the most sublime of affections, because it is founded on principle, and cemented by time" (79). Mrs. Croft often becomes the mouthpiece for Wollstoncraftian philosophy, such as when she scolds her brother, Captain Wentworth, "I hate to hear you talking so, like a fine gentleman, and as if women were all fine ladies, instead of rational creatures" (P 66). This seems to echo Wollstonecraft's exclamation, "I do earnestly wish to see the distinction of sex confounded in society, unless where love animates the behaviour. For this distinction is, I am firmly persuaded, the foundation of the weakness of character ascribed to women" (61). Mrs. Croft insists on the equality of male and female partners that the relatively new ideal of companionate marriage introduced, and Austen shows the results of this equality as favorable. The Admiral's wife influences him with her good sense and good nature, such as when she interferes with his driving, "giving the reins a better direction herself" and occasionally "judiciously putting out her hand" (P 88). The national implications of feminine influence that *Emma* begins to suggest are here carried through to a logical conclusion. Mrs. Croft obviously influences the behavior and decisions of her husband, an influence that he and his companions admit and allow. Yet her husband is more than just an individual man; he is a high-ranking officer in a national institution, a man whose power and authority, outside of his family, are closely concerned in the fate and interests of the entire country. This is the positive example of marriage that Austen provides in *Persuasion*: a marriage between partners who interact as equals, and which allows the woman the opportunity to express her personal power both in the family and in society.
This is also the example that Anne Elliot’s marriage to Captain Wentworth will follow, and in entering into this marriage, Anne will go from being “nothing” in her family of birth to being an influential individual in her chosen circle of associates, as well as a woman with the potential to impact at least some small part of national life. As Lady Elliot, she might have had a greater degree of personal power than as a spinster, and she probably would have had some degree of local influence, if she could escape the overwhelming authority of her father and older sister. Yet as the wife of Captain Wentworth, Anne secures two different types of power. The first is the power to choose her own family, to shape it to her needs and tastes. This is a significant move from the first introduction of the family project in *Mansfield Park*, where the extent of Fanny Price’s domestic ambition was to fit herself into an existing family, but it also represents progress from the project described in *Emma*, which is concerned with drawing an existing family closer and molding its shape to fit the individual. *Persuasion* goes one step further and allows the heroine to create an entirely new family, made up of those to whom she feels closest, and including characters who bear no trace of familial relation to Anne Elliot or Captain Wentworth, as well as those who are directly or tangentially related.

The second type of power that Anne secures through her eventual marriage is the power of influence that can be carried outside of the strictly domestic, or even the immediate community. If, as the narrative hints, Anne and Wentworth are to follow the example of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, they will be a couple in which both partners’ opinions and preferences have equal weight. Following the logic of Burke’s philosophy, in which the domestic sphere provides a model for behavior in the social and political
spheres, the significant influence that Anne is presumed to exercise over her husband is of great importance, as it is influence that will be carried beyond the boundaries of the marriage and into a crucial national institution. In this final novel, Austen expands her examination of the heroines’ quests for suitable families to have implications that reach far beyond the “feminized space” that Green ascribes to the courtship novel (2-3), and beyond the private, domestic sphere stereotypically designated as the natural realm of women by Austen’s contemporary society (Ehmer 287). Viewed in this light, Austen’s three latest completed novels represent a continuous pursuit of a single topic, and follow a logical sequence of thought concerned with women’s roles, both as they were assigned within the confines of the family, and as they might potentially exist in the larger realm of English society.

The issue of women’s personal power and autonomy within a patriarchal society, central to all of Austen’s novels, takes on a new aspect when seen through the lens of family relations and societal importance. These three novels in particular trace a trajectory of both personal agency and social implications. Fanny Price, the most passive and self-doubting of the heroines, conforms most exactly to the feminine ideal lauded by Burke, and seeks to influence only those in her immediate family circle, through indirect and conservatively sanctioned means. Emma Woodhouse, a much more personally confident, outgoing, and active character, still has uncomfortable moments of reflection on her own motives and behavior that appear to require at least some outside guidance, whether it is in the form of a Miss Taylor or a Mr. Knightley. Emma seeks to influence both her immediate family and her surrounding community, and seems likely to demand and achieve an equality in her marriage with Mr. Knightley that Fanny Price, with her
standards of subtle and indirect influence alone, appears unlikely to attain in her role as the wife and daughter-in-law of two didactically inclined men. Anne Elliot, the third and arguably most mature heroine, has a personal agency at least as strong as Emma’s, although she does not always possess Emma’s power of having her own way. Anne has, in a sense, the greatest degree of self-confidence, as she is certain of her own judgment in a way that Fanny often is not, and able to defend her decisions in a way that Emma often cannot. Anne is also the most straightforward and perhaps even the most effective (outside of her immediate family) in influencing others, despite her reported susceptibility to persuasion as a young woman. She frequently gives advice in *Persuasion*, and if it is not attended to in her own family, it is valued by others, as demonstrated by Captain Benwick’s reliance on her guidance in reading materials (*P* 96-97; 123).

The expansion of personal agency that takes shape in the three heroines over the span of the three novels echoes the expansion of Austen’s vision of their spheres of influence. Fanny’s influence will largely be felt in her immediate family circle, “which Austen’s more attractive patricians learn to outgrow” (Johnson 119), and perhaps also in a diluted form in Edmund’s parish once he is established as a clergyman. However, since Edmund soon takes the living of Mansfield, where his own family comprise the principal occupants, much of the impact that Fanny may have over Edmund’s congregation through her influence over her husband becomes a reassertion of her influence within a relatively closed family circle. Emma, on the other hand, has both more personal agency and a wider realm in which to exercise personal power; her more equitable marriage with Mr. Knightley will reinforce her influence in her community as well as in her family, and
secure her position of power. She may be able to use this personal power to shape Mr. Knightley's role as a landholding gentleman in their local society, and she can continue her practices of aiding the poor as well as leading social functions. Michael Kramp hints at the small-scale contributions that Emma's fulfillment of this role in society makes to the preservation of national culture, but this idea of national influence is taken a step further still in *Persuasion*. In this final novel, Anne Elliot, the mature and judicious heroine not only makes wise decisions on her own behalf, but, the narrative implies, will continue to influence such decisions on her husband's behalf once she is married to Captain Wentworth. As an officer of the English navy, and the commander of a ship and crew that materially contribute to the welfare of the nation, Captain Wentworth most overtly occupies a role of national importance. It seems significant that a man who is accustomed to this degree of responsibility and control is willing to listen to and be swayed by an intelligent wife. Anne Elliot uses the personal power that her marriage (presented almost as an escape from her biological family) affords her to form a new family group in which she is an influential figure, but she also is implied to have influence that potentially may be felt on a national level, through her husband's occupation and the equitable nature of her relationship with him.

While it is impossible to do more than speculate as to Austen's views on this subject or her intentions in writing these novels, the ways in which the heroines themselves and their negotiations of family relationships in order to gain advantageous positions of personal power are suggestive. Austen seems careful never to step overtly outside of the boundaries constructed by conservative theories such as Burke's concerning gender roles and domestic models, but her novels are structured in ways that
invite critique of conservative systems that dictate the ways that women should behave and the positions they should fill in society. She begins with a novel and heroine that closely adhere to the values and behaviors advocated by Burke, but gradually moves away from these strictures through the development of *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*, until finally in *Persuasion* the novel seems to be supporting a distinctly Wollstonecraftian philosophy that argues for greater equality between the sexes, at least in terms of the ability to engage in rational thought. Whether or not Austen herself endorsed this viewpoint, of course, remains a matter of speculation, but her willingness to engage with these issues over a period of several years, and in considerable depth, speaks to a definite concern with questions of women’s autonomy and its relation to existing patriarchal structures of family and society.
Notes

1 It is worth noting the specific ways in which Wollstonecraft and Austen through Sir Thomas use the words “understanding” and “disposition.” When Sir Thomas reflects that he has focused too exclusively on his daughters’ “understanding,” he appears to use the term in the sense of the listing and memorization of facts that Maria and Julia boast of as girls, in contrast with Fanny’s “stupid” demeanor (MP 18-19). For Wollstonecraft, on the other hand, the term “understanding” is closely linked to the potential for reason, and thereby virtue. She criticizes common educational practices for women on the basis that “the sex is not much benefited by sacrificing solid virtues to the attainment of superficial graces [...] (36), and asserts that “the grand end, of their exertions should be to unfold their own faculties, and acquire the dignity of conscious virtue” (28). Butler comments on the prevalence of this theme in eighteenth-century discussions of education, noting the belief in “the inferiority of ‘wit’ or ‘cleverness’ to judgement” (220). Austen provides an example of this inferiority in Wollstonecraft’s concept of understanding in her description of Maria Bertram’s reactions to Henry Crawford: “Maria’s notions on the subject were more confused and indistinct. She did not want to see or understand. ‘There could be no harm in her liking an agreeable man—every body knew her situation—Mr. Crawford must take care of himself’” (MP 42-43).


3 It is interesting to note that Fanny, in fact, has formed a “separate attachment” by this point in the novel, but it is to another fraternal figure, her cousin Edmund. Perhaps by keeping her affections limited to her own family, Fanny is able to escape the “cooling” of fraternal love that might have accompanied an attachment to an outsider such as Henry Crawford.

4 Unlike Austen’s other mature novels, Emma contains virtually no widows of particular importance to the narrative, although, as Claudia L. Johnson points out, it is generally widows who occupy the most powerful female positions in the other novels (124). This exclusion seems to strengthen the message that Emma is concerned with the ways in which women’s power operates within the established system of patriarchy rather than on its margins.
Works Cited


