Individual, Family and Society in Jane Austen's Work

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For my wife Souad, the love of my life, "faultless in spite of all her faults."

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ABBREVIATIONS

Sense and Sensibility (*SS*)

Pride and Prejudice (*PP*)

Mansfield Park (*MP*)

Emma (*E*)

Northanger Abbey (*NA*)

Persuasion (*P*)

Minor Works (*MW*)

Lady Susan (*LS*)

Letters (*Let*)

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

My research experience in the border zone between literature and social history began in the 1980s with an early plan to write a doctoral thesis on Jane Austen's work. However, her novels, as well as those of some of her predecessors and contemporaries, made me realise the importance of inheritance issues in English literature and history. With personal motives linked to my own experience as a younger son in my family, my interest and focus then shifted from Austen's work to the study of the history of the English inheritance system of entail and primogeniture and of its representation in literature, with Austen's writings as the early eye-opener never far from my mind. After two more digressions, I have now come back to my early project: "Individual, Family and Society in Austen's Work."

Austen never thought of writing about subjects that she was not familiar with, or had no first-hand knowledge of. She worked on material immediately available to her: intra-family life and inter-family interaction in a limited, mostly rural neighbourhood. Richard Simpson writes: "She never aspired higher than to paint a system of four or five families revolving round a central attraction in a country mansion, or a lodging at Bath, or a house in a country town. This was, indeed, the only society she knew."[1]

As she never married, she spent her whole life inside her family, surrounded and supported as a growingly central individual member to the end of her comparatively short existence. Her fictional work reproduces, particularly in her six full-length novels, the same pattern of a female protagonist's evolution in the middle of her family. Austen did not choose to stretch her imagination beyond the necessary requirements of her deliberate artistic purpose. The family group and interaction therein were then her main focus.

The manner in which her actual family experience was going to be transposed and represented in her fiction is one important aspect of her work that needs to be more thoroughly explored. Indeed, important differences appear immediately. There are, in the family life of her

[1] Richard Simpson, "Richard Simpson on Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by B. C. Southam (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), vol. I, pp. 241-265, quote p. 241.

fictional stories, tensions from which her actual family experience has been usually assumed to be free. There is indeed a striking contrast between what her own family life has been thought to be—affective, supportive and propitious for fulfilment—and the wide-spread disharmony and frictions that characterise most of her fictional families.

Most of her married couples, especially parental couples, are ill-matched. Why she made of matrimonial disharmony such an extensive use in her books needs to be explained. Although the unusually large number of ill-assorted married couples in Jane Austen's work has often puzzled critics, it has hardly been the object of an in-depth study. While bearing in mind that her novels are not meant to be autobiographical representations, one notes conflicts among siblings in her novels which do not seem to correspond to her own experience among her sister Cassandra and five brothers James, Edward, Henry, Francis and Charles.[2]

Somewhat hyperbolically, James Austen-Leigh writes: "Her own family were so much, and the rest of the world so little, to Jane Austen, that some brief mention of her brothers and sister is necessary in order to give an idea of the objects which principally occupied her thoughts and filled her heart."[3] According to R. W. Chapman, in *Jane Austen, Facts and Problems*, "however her writing might absorb her, the family was her first and, I think, her dearest concern. She spent upon it the same talents, and the same affection, as she gave to the creatures of her fancy."[4]

Another remarkable subject on which Austen lays great emphasis throughout her work, with the notable exception of *Mansfield Park*, is heredity and its manifestations in siblings' relationships. Some rare critics have indeed noted and briefly commented on this other important aspect, and fewer still have attempted to investigate the link between disharmony in parental couples and the workings of heredity, including the effects thereof on intra-family relationships and characterisation in her novels.

Austen's family belonged to the lower gentry or "pseudo-gentry," as it is sometimes referred to, and her main fictional families range from the mere gentleman's, to the baronet's, the top gentry rank. The focus in her work is on resident landowning families and their immediate neighbourhoods. These are the limits of the social world to which she confined herself. Except for the comparatively short episodes spent in the London of *Sense*

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[2] Her sixth brother George, a handicapped boy, was excluded from the Austens' family life and entrusted to a family to be taken care of.

[3] James Austen-Leigh, *Memoir of Jane Austen* (London, Melbourne, Auckland, Johannesburg: Century, 1987), p.12.

[4] R. W. Chapman, *Jane Austen, Facts and Problems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 1.

and Sensibility and *Pride and Prejudice* and in the Bath of *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion*, action in Austen's fiction takes place against a rural background. Whether the country is, as it often was in contemporary literature, opposed to the city in Austen's work is another subject worth investigating.

On the other hand, the word "family" as used in Austen's work may refer to contrasting, sometimes conflicting groups. There are, for example, General Tilney's (*NA*), Sir Thomas Bertram's (*MP*), and Sir Walter Elliot's (*P*) families on one side. These correspond to upper landed categories that are distinctly patrilineal in nature and structure. And there are, on the opposite side, Mr. Gardiner's (*PP*), John Knightley's (*E*), and Captain Harville's (*P*) families, representing the conjugal or nuclear type of family associated with non-land, mostly urban, social categories. The coexistence in the work of these two species of families implies a contrast, or even a collision, between two different social outlooks, and that clearly needs to be looked into. Moreover, the attitude of the individual towards both those family structures is of prime importance throughout Austen's work. Indeed, to oppose the conjugal family to the patrilineal family is to raise the fundamental question of the relationship between the individual and society.

Ruth Perry writes:

> Eighteenth-century novels taught me that the meaning of "family" in eighteenth-century England was undergoing a seismic shift; economic and social historians helped me to understand why it happened at that particular time and how it was connected to other more evident material changes in the society.[5]

A rural gentry family is not an isolated group, functioning as a self-contained entity, and cut off from society. Social laws influence intra-family relationships, and are a reminder that family is dependent on society, just as the individual is on the family. And, as Ruth Perry puts it, "the family is the intermediate term between the individual and society."[6]

Perry again interestingly points out:

> Cultural critics assessing the social construction of gender or any other dimension of individual identity often leave out the family, and place the individual directly in the field of immense national forces...without

[5] Ruth Perry, *Novel Relations: the Transfiguration of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1-2.
[6] Ibid., p. 13.

> acknowledging the intermediate shaping influence of the family.[7]

As for Oliver MacDonagh, he asserts:

> It is the group which ultimately sustains each individual and provides him with his measure of harmony and order. But for Jane Austen this group is domestic, not national or regional or economic in basis. Its most obvious form is the family.[8]

Austen's interest, spontaneously expressed, lies in the relationship between the individual and the family or families, not directly between the individual and society. Only, the scrutiny to which she submits that individual/family relationship inevitably leads to society as a whole.

Austen saw the impact of Inheritance laws on intra-family relationships, among siblings and between parents and children. In that regard, Lawrence Stone writes:

> No study of the English landed family makes any sense unless the principle and practice of primogeniture is constantly borne in mind. It was something which went far to determine the behaviour and character of both parents and children, and to govern the relationship between siblings.[9]

Indeed, Austen constantly bore in mind the ways in which entail and strict settlements, the legal frameworks inside which primogeniture operated, affected the lives of all siblings, including, first and foremost, daughters and younger sons. These characters are the permanent object of her special attention and study. In five out of six novels, in addition to the early novella *Lady Susan*, there are contrasting and often antagonistic brothers, and in four out of six novels, incompatible sisters. Action in the novels usually depends on those often tense relationships.

Austen represents the central protagonists as women in all her novels, with special emphasis on their conditions as distinct from men's. Christopher Gillie writes: "All the heroines find themselves suffering under overlapping disadvantages in four categories: material, family, social and personal. Each category varies in importance from book to book."[10] Not surprisingly, attempts have been made to link Austen's focus on the situations of her heroines to the feminist movement. Now, the

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[7] Ibid., p. 13.

[8] Oliver MacDonagh, "Highbury and Chawton: Social Convergence in *Emma*", *Historical Studies*, vol. 18, (1978-79), pp. 37-51, quote p. 43.

[9] Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1985, first published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1977), p. 71.

[10] Christopher Gillie, *A Preface to Jane Austen* (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1974), p. 96.

question as to whether Austen is to be considered as a feminist in spirit and attitude, has somewhat divided her critics, but most of the latter have approached the subject with understandable caution.

On the other hand, younger sons, with very few exceptions, are the object of particular attention in Austen's work. Though the contrast with their elder brothers, as represented in her stories, is not always free from the influence of past stereotyping, younger son do embody some new social-economic values which she supports.

Furthermore, momentous international events and their repercussions in England marked her life. The American Revolutionary War broke out in 1775, the year of her birth, and ended when she was eight years of age. The French Revolution and the wars with France lasted practically from 1789 to 1815. Moreover, Austen could not avoid taking into account, were it unobtrusively, the campaign for the abolition of slave trade and slavery which achieved its first objective in England with the abolition of slave trade in 1807. Some repercussions, albeit cautiously represented, were inevitable, as for example in *Mansfield Park* and *Emma*. Besides, echoes of the past wars can still be heard in *Persuasion* and even in the unfinished *Sanditon*.

Meanwhile, and perhaps more than ever before, the English landowning family was considered to be, an essential constitutive social unit, and a bulwark against those upheavals, on condition that it should be strong and healthy enough. Landowning families from the untitled gentry to the nobility were still seen as the basic units of a national network, of what Edmund Burke calls "the fabric of English society." And, when the family was ailing, society was assumed to be suffering too. In other words, the state of health of the family was an indication of the state of the nation.

Burke writes: "The power of perpetuating our property in our families, is one of the most valuable and interesting circumstances belonging to it, and that which tends the most to the perpetuation of society itself."[11] Long before, in Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*, Miss Byron writes: "My Grandfather used to say, that families are little communities; […] and that they help to make up worthily, and to secure, the great community, of which they are so many miniatures."[12] A man writing to *The Spectator* asserts:

> I look upon my Family as a patriarchal Sovereignty, in which I am myself both King and Priest. All great Governments are Nothing else but Clusters of these little private Royalties, and therefore I consider the Masters of

[11] Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: John Dent and Sons Ltd, 1967), p. 49.
[12] Samuel Richardson, *Sir Charles Grandison* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), vol. 1, p. 25.

> Families as small Deputy Governors presiding over the several little Parcels and Divisions of their Fellow-Subjects.[13]

However, Austen was fully aware of the profound changes taking place in England. England had been in the process of breaking with the feudal system and embracing capitalism. Land was continuing to lose ground to new economic forces. Trade people were thrusting their way upwards, as Austen's work amply shows, and social mobility was indeed gathering pace. Bourgeois ideology was pervading all sectors of activity. However, while the wars lasted, landowners benefited from the rising prices of corn and enclosure by acts of parliament, unwelcome to lower landed or landless social categories, was in the social background throughout Austen's life. Rural communities were undergoing pressure from enclosure by acts of parliament, with their detrimental effects on local populations. Where Austen's work stands in relation to those changes is one more subject to examine.

The first part of the present book deals with the dangers threatening both family and society. Austen shows what is wrong with the smaller and the larger social groups. As Richard Simpson points out, "She began by being an ironical critic."[14] On the following page he confirms: "That the critical faculty was in her the ground and support of the artistic faculty there are several reasons for believing." Mary Lascelles for her part asserts: "In Jane Austen it was the critical faculty that would not be quieted."[15]

The first chapter shows family suffering from widespread marital disharmony resulting from ill-matched couples. There are, indeed, an amazing number of ill-matched couples throughout Austen's work. What explanation for that pervasive phenomenon can one venture to put forward?

The second chapter focuses on the question of heredity which, as we shall try to ascertain, seems to be inextricably linked to the ill-matched parental couples dealt with in the first chapter, and which accounts for the diversity of characterisation and the potential conflicts among siblings. One must add that inheritance further complicates relationships between siblings. Moreover, the inheritance in the form of landed estates, with all the duties attached to them, is often mismanaged by the heirs. Besides, the educational and cultural heritage that is part of the legacy is being wasted.

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[13] Joseph Addison, Richard Steele and others, *The Spectator* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1958), vol. 4, p. 79.
[14] Simpson, p. 242.
[15] Mary Lascelles, *Jane Austen and her Art* (London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 21.

And all these deficiencies are the object of Austen's scrutiny.

Such is also the case with religion. With three clergymen in her family, her father George and her brothers James and Henry, Jane Austen could not avoid dealing with rectors, vicars and curates. The clergymen of her work do mix with the families. Yet, Austen can be merciless towards sycophantic parsons like Mr. Collins (*PP*), or worldly, conceited ones like Mr. Elton (*E*), or else epicureans like Mr. Norris or Dr. Grant (*MP*). However, with promising clergymen such as Edward Ferrars (*SS*), Henry Tilney (*NA*), and especially Edmund Bertram (*MP*), all hope is not lost for the Church. It is noteworthy in that regard that most improvements are usually projections for the future. On the other hand, with her two other brothers Francis and Charles making remarkable progress in their careers in the navy, she admired sailors, who are so prominently represented in *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*.

The second part of the present book is devoted to Austen's reformism. The first chapter concerns Austen's heroines as central individuals in their respective family groups, both as critical observers and active members, as well as potential, unobtrusive agents of reform. They thus deserve that central position in the families, and in the structure of the present book. Their attitudes to family and society are of prime importance. The third and fourth chapters of the second part attempt to define respectively the kind of society and of family those central characters aspire to.

As far as Austen's apprenticeship as a writer is concerned, Park Honan points out that "her family gave her the incentive to polish, repolish, experiment, dare and attain the final results."[16] Her family was thus her experimental workshop, and her first readers. As for her relationship with the broader family of contemporary writers, it was rather peculiar. In fact, Austen was a writer in her family, away from the contemporary family of writers. Simpson says: "Not they, but their books, influenced her—their writings, not their company and conversation. She belongs to them as a student and follower."[17] However the latter terms best apply to older masters, such as Richardson and Johnson.

Samuel Richardson was indeed an important source of inspiration for Austen and has been given his due as such, I believe. His influence cannot be overestimated. This by no means implies that Austen always agreed with him, neither can she be said to have always approved of all the ideas expressed by the more conservative Samuel Johnson, whom she yet immensely admired. I nevertheless feel as though I need to apologise in

[16] Park Honan, *Jane Austen, Her Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), p. 62.
[17] Simpson, 241.

advance for the very frequent quotations, particularly from *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, as well as from Johnson's journals or from his biography by James Boswell *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Simpson writes: "Richardson was a favourite with her; so was Dr. Johnson; and in poetry Crabbe and Cowper were her special delight."[18] These Last two are also prominently present in this book.

[18] Ibid., 242.

PART I

FAMILY AND SOCIETY IN PERIL

CHAPTER ONE

IN THE BEGINNING, MARITAL DISHARMONY

For many critics of Jane Austen, one of the most puzzling aspects of family life in her works is the unusually high rate of ill-assorted couples. Disharmony in the parental couple is often invoked or at least inferred, even after the death of the father or the mother. This has been all the more perplexing as one would look in vain for an obvious explanation in Austen's family history. Jane Aiken Hodges refers to "the comment of some critics that her books never show happy, established marriages, or functioning parents."[19] On the same page she seems to rule out any autobiographical connection with that aspect: "There is absolutely nothing to suggest that Mr. and Mrs. Austen senior were not a happy couple. It seems more likely that they were, if anything, too contented with each other."

Be that as it may, action in Jane Austen's novels almost always results from the basic circumstances of the main parental couple, with usually either both father and mother alive but ill-assorted, or separated by death after being divided, to varying degrees, by temperamental incompatibility, with either the father or the mother surviving.

In *Jane Austen, Facts and Problems* R. W. Chapman writes:

> The first fact that strikes me is that in only two of the six novels is the central family furnished with two living parents. The second is that in all, except perhaps *Sense and Sensibility*, we know or can infer a marked disparity, moral or intellectual or both, between the partners.[20]

On the following page Chapman further argues: "It may well be, I think, that she deliberately gave herself a flying start, from ill-assorted parents or by killing one parent in advance and so leaving his or her character to be inferred."[21]

In the six novels, and even in the early novella *Lady Susan*, the main characters' parents are represented as follows: In *Sense and Sensibility*,

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[19] Jane Aiken Hodge, *The Double Life of Jane Austen* (London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), p. 88.
[20] Chapman, p. 186.
[21] Ibid., p. 187.

Elinor and Marianne Dashwood have a living mother and a dead father. Edward Ferrars also has a living mother and a dead father; in *Northanger Abbey* Catherine Morland has two living parents who have a comparatively marginal role in the story. As for Henry Tilney, the hero, he has a living father and a dead mother. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet has two living parents, and Fitzwilliam Darcy two dead ones. In *Mansfield Park* Fanny Price has two living biological parents and two living adoptive ones, the Bertrams, Edmund, the hero, being their biological younger son. In *Emma*, Emma Woodhouse has a living father and a dead mother, while George Knightley has no living parents. Lastly, in *Persuasion*, Anne Elliot has a living father and a dead mother, and Captain Frederick Wentworth has no living parents. To these may be added an important character in the early *Lady Susan*: Frederica Vernon, Lady Susan's daughter, has a dead father and a living mother.

Jane Nardin rightly points out that "The dead parent is invariably the more intelligent, sensible parent."[22] Such is indeed the case with old Mr. Ferrars (*SS*), Mrs. Tilney (*NA*), Mrs. Woodhouse (*E*), and Lady Elliot (*P*), that is one father to three mothers. Among the unwise living parents there are three mothers: Mrs. Ferrars (*SS*), Mrs. Bennet (*PP*) and Lady Bertram (*MP*). There are besides two unwise fathers: General Tilney (*NA*) and Sir Walter Elliot (*P*). Other living parents like Mrs. Dashwood (*SS*) and Sir Thomas Bertram (*MP*) prove to be capable of improvement, while Mr. Bennet (*PP*) remains incorrigibly ironical and detached, yet unalterably congenial. Lastly, Mr. Woodhouse (*E*) is, from beginning to end, the anxious valetudinarian, ever apprehensive of draughts and change, yet affectionate and courteous, a harmless and even quite likeable old gentleman. Perhaps the exception is the Vernon elder brother, Frederica's unwise dead father in *Lady Susan*, who is outlived by a depraved mother, Lady Susan.

[22] Jane Nardin, "Children and Their Families in Jane Austen's Novels," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, ed. by Janet Todd (New York, London: Holmes & Meier, 1983), pp. 73-87, quote p. 79.

Chapman wants to be clear on one point: "I mention, to reject it, the theory that she was not interested in married happiness, or was interested in married life only as it gave opportunity to her satiric talent."[23] Here again, while expressing the same puzzlement, Chapman's observation excludes any connection between Austen's fiction and her actual experience within her family. Perhaps Chapman was responding to such statements as were made by early critics like Julia Kavanagh who contended that Jane Austen "could not paint happy love. Did she believe in it? If we look under the shrewdness and quiet satire of her stories, we shall find a much keener sense of disappointment than of joy fulfilled. Sometimes we find more than disappointment."[24]

Austen's own family and intra-family relationships having been her original and constant focus, it would be unreasonable, indeed, to rule out an autobiographical element in her special emphasis on marital disharmony either. She may have scrutinized all the actual couples around her, and perhaps concluded that they seldom, if ever, came up to the idea of married felicity which she no doubt entertained all along. One could confidently add that, if Jane Austen had thought that all was well in family and society, she would not have written the kind of novels that have earned her universal fame.

Alistair Duckworth quotes Reginald Farrer as asserting about Austen: "nowhere does she give any picture of united family happiness… This…speaks volumes, in its characteristically quiet way, for her position towards her own family. She was in it; but she was not really of it."[25]

Sometimes a passage in one of her books may seem to point in that direction. Take the example of Emma's attempt to justify to George Knightley Frank Churchill's behaviour: "You are the worst judge in the world, Mr. Knightley, of the difficulties of dependence. You do not know what it is to have tempers to manage." (*E*, 146)[26] On the same page she adds: "It is very unfair to judge of any body's conduct without an intimate knowledge of their situation. *Nobody, who has not been in the interior of a family, can say what the difficulties of any individual of that family may*

[23] Chapman, p. 186.
[24] Julia Kavanagh, "Julia Kavanagh on Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen, The Critical Heritage*, ed. by B. C. Southam (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), p.194.
[25] Alistair Duckworth, *The Improvement of the Estate* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), p. 6.
[26] All references to Jane Austen's novels are to *The Novels of Jane Austen*, ed. R. W. Chapman, 5 vols. (Oxford University Press, 1933)

be." (Emphasis added) One wonders whether such a statement can be entirely free from autobiographical insinuation. Particularly the last sentence may cast doubt on the imperturbable serenity of family life usually supposed to have been Austen's happy lot throughout her life.

D. W. Harding writes:

> To her [Jane Austen] the first necessity was to keep on reasonably good terms with the associates of her every-day life; she had a deep need of their affection and a genuine respect for the ordered, decent civilisation that they upheld. And yet she was sensitive to their crudenesses and complacencies and knew that her real existence depended on resisting many of the values they implied. The novels gave her a way out of this dilemma.[27]

Harding underlines "Jane Austen's typical dilemma: of being intensely critical of people to whom she also has strong emotional attachments."[28]

However, marital disharmony could have also been mostly an imaginary situation, a convenient dramatic device, and one of the springs of action, not necessarily to be interpreted as the representation of an autobiographical reality. One of the early critics of Jane Austen, Richard Simpson offers for his part a notably different explanation for what he sees as a coherent purpose in her work:

> Her plots always presuppose an organized society of families, of fathers and mothers long married, whose existence has been fulfilled in having given birth to the heroes and heroines of the stories. Now, these people are almost always represented as living together in fair comfort; and yet there is scarcely a single pair of them who have not, on the usual novelist's scale of propriety, been woefully mismatched. Sense and stupidity, solidity and frivolity, are represented as in everyday life cosily uniting, and making up the elements of a home with the usual average of happiness and comfort. […] There is enough in her evident opinions, in her bywords, in her arguments, to prove to any sufficiently clear sight that it would be, after all, much the same whether the proper people intermarried, or whether they were mismatched by some malevolent Puck. […] Miss Austen believed in the ultimate possible happiness of every marriage. The most ill-assorted couples may get used to one another.[29]

While Simpson is right in emphasizing the prevalence of disharmony in married couples in Austen's novels, yet he is no doubt mistaken about the author's supposed willingness to reconcile herself to matrimonial

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[27] D. W. Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," *Scrutiny*, 8, 1939-40 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 346-361, quote p. 351.
[28] Ibid., p.355.
[29] Simpson, p. 245-46.

incompatibilities. Simpson takes the example of the first Chawton novel: "Indeed, in *Mansfield Park* she [Austen] speculates on what would have followed if Henry Crawford had not run wild, and if the hero had consequently married the anti-heroine, and the heroine the anti-hero; and she anticipates that they would have been happy enough."[30] However, precisely before Henry "runs wild," Fanny Price excludes the possibility of married happiness with Henry Crawford, being "unfitted for each other by nature, education, and habit." (*MP*, 327) Addressing her uncle, she says: '"I cannot like him, Sir, well enough to marry him."' (315) She expects "her uncle to calm down and to feel, as a good man must feel, how wretched, and how unpardonable, how hopeless and how wicked it was, to marry without affection." (324) "'There never were two people more dissimilar,'" she further argues: "'we have not one taste in common. We should be miserable.'" (348) Even about the Edmund Bertram/Mary Crawford envisaged match, Fanny warns: "He will marry her and be poor and miserable." (424)

As will be shown further on, Austen even sees these ill-matched couples as the root cause of many dangers threatening the family, and beyond the family, society itself. The question remains then why exactly Jane Austen has so often chosen unsuitable parental couples for her stories.

Understandably, given her practically exclusive focus on family in her writings, she could not construct her plots on a harmonious, placid family life. This was a necessary condition for bringing out the interaction of intra-family dynamics with social rules. As we shall also see, some of her literary predecessors, particularly Samuel Richardson, certainly influenced in that regard her choice of subjects, as well as the choices of other novelists that came before her. "What miseries spring from these ill-suited marriages!" Maria Edgeworth's Belinda exclaims.[31] But let us concentrate for the present on the amazingly numerous cases of ill-assorted couples in Austen's work, from beginning to end.

Indeed, from her juvenile writings to *Persuasion*, Austen almost invariably clings to the marriage disharmony theme. In *Lesley Castle* (1792)—she was only seventeen when she wrote this story—Margaret Lesley's brother has a daughter by a woman "who had so wantonly disgraced the Maternal character and so openly violated the conjugal Duties." Conversely,

> Never was there a better young Man! Ah! how little did he deserve the

[30] Ibid., p. 245.
[31] Maria Edgeworth, *Belinda* (London and New York: Pandora, 1986), p. 17.

> misfortunes he has experienced in the Marriage state. So good a Husband to so bad a Wife! for you know my dear Charlotte that the Worthless Louisa left him, her Child & reputation a few weeks ago in company with Danvers & dishonour. (*MW*, 110)

In Austen's early novella *Lady Susan* (1794), Lady Susan's retrospective assessment of her former married life with the Vernon elder brother suggests total unsuitability, as she considers herself "little indebted to my Husband's memory for any happiness derived from him during an Union of some years." (*MW*, 300)

There are no living harmonious couples in *Sense and Sensibility*, her first published full-length novel (1811); there are only promising couples in the making: Elinor Dashwood/Edward Ferrars or Marianne Dashwood/Colonel Brandon. For the latter we have to depend on the narrator's projections as to the harmony of their future married life. There are no other really significant happy pairs in this novel, unless the John Middletons and the John Dashwoods, with the shallow, ostentatious social conviviality of the former, and the shared meanness and avarice of the latter, can be said to be well-matched. However, to do justice to John Dashwood, it is said—albeit ironically—that "had he married a more amiable woman, he might have been made still more respectable than he was:—he might even have been made amiable himself." (*SS*, 5)

In *Northanger Abbey* the parental couple (General Tilney and Mrs. Tilney) is separated by death after having been a temperamentally discordant couple. The incompatibility between General Tilney and his dead wife, Mrs. Tilney, is clearly on the minds of his daughter Eleanor and younger son Henry, though it was not so profound and dangerous as Catherine Morland's Gothic-warped imagination has claimed it to be. And yet later, after being shaken out of her Gothic fantasies, she is still under the impression that she "scarcely magnified his [General Tilney's] cruelty." (*NA*, 247)

The disagreement between General and Mrs. Tilney is metaphorically represented by separate paths followed for their usual walks: the husband avoids "that cold, damp path" which was his wife's "favourite walk," and which has become Miss Tilney's "so favourite a walk." (179-80) Mrs. Tilney's preference for a "cold, damp path" is a somewhat mysterious symbol, for even her daughter Eleanor "used to wonder at her choice," though "her memory endears it now." (180) Was it the "delightful melancholy" which Catherine experiences there, or, perhaps, the aspiration for independence and isolation which used to draw Mrs. Tilney to that path, despite the cold and the dampness? Be that as it may, the husband chose "another course." One may add, by the way, that those separate

paths do fuel Catherine's Gothic speculations over the couple's past: "The General certainly had been an unkind husband. He did not love her walk:—could he therefore have loved her?" (180)

Apart from the commercial middle-class Gardiner couple, there are no living harmonious couples in *Pride and Prejudice*. There is just the promise of true harmony in the Charles Bingley/Jane Bennet, and the Elizabeth Bennet/Fitzwilliam Darcy matches.

The elder Bertram couple in *Mansfield Park* cannot be said to be a well matched couple. As the first sentence in this novel informs the reader, Maria Ward, "with only seven thousand pounds, had the good luck *to captivate* Sir Thomas Bertram, of Mansfield Park, in the county of Northampton, and to be thereby raised to the rank of a baronet's lady." (Emphasis added) The word "captivate" is used by the narrator in *Pride and Prejudice* to describe Mr. Bennet's matrimonial deception. Lady Bertram is as indolent, passive, and motionless, as Sir Thomas is geographically, and even, to some degree, morally and emotionally mobile. Lady Bertram "was a woman who spent her days in sitting nicely dressed on a sofa, doing some long pieces of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children." (*MP*, 19-20) "Lady Bertram did not think deeply, but, guided by Sir Thomas, she thought justly on all important points." (*SS*, 449)

Mary Lascelles passes two particularly severe judgments on Sir Thomas Bertram's spouse: "Lady Bertram signally fails to distinguish herself from her sofa."[32] On the same page Lascelles further refines her judgment by referring to the disparity "between Lady Bertram's human form and vegetable soul." As for Lionel Trilling, he writes in a similar vein:

> In the person of Lady Bertram it affirms with all due irony, the bliss of being able to remain unconscious of the demands of personality (it is a bliss which is a kind of virtue, for one way of being solid, simple, and sincere is to be a vegetable).[33]

And yet, Sir Thomas's return from Antigua rouses into visible excitement a Lady Bertram,

> who was really extremely happy to see him, and whose feelings were so warmed by his sudden arrival, as to place her nearer agitation than she had been for the last twenty years. She had been *almost* fluttered for a few

[32] Lascelles, p. 140.

[33] Lionel Trilling, "*Mansfield Park*," in *Jane Austen: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian Watt (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 124-140, quote p. 140.

> minutes, and still remained so sensibly animated as to put away her work, move Pug from her side, and give all her attention and all the rest of her sofa to her husband. (*MP*, 179, author's emphasis)

The scene may even be interpreted as distinctly sex-charged.

Perhaps the present Mansfield parsonage couple, the Grants, may be regarded as fairly happy. But such would not be Mary Crawford's opinion, since, for her, the best couple would be a different match: "My own sister [Mrs. Ward] as a wife, Sir Thomas Bertram as a husband, are my standards of perfection." (361) As for Mr. and Mrs. Price, the heroine's parents, they live a miserable life in their squalid Portsmouth home, "the abode of noise, disorder, and impropriety," (388) "the scene of mismanagement and discomfort from beginning to end." (390)

In *Persuasion* the narrator points out that,

> with the exception of Admiral and Mrs. Croft, who seem particularly attached and happy, (Anne could hardly allow any other exception of that level among the married couples) there could have been no two hearts so open, no tastes so similar, no feelings so in unison, no countenances so beloved. (*P*, 63-64)

The Harvilles, also naval people, should be counted among the happy few. Moreover, the Musgroves senior, a couple belonging to the squirearchy, unlike the ill-assorted younger Charles Musgrove/Mary Elliot couple, live a happy and unpretentious life. To the short list of happy couples could be added the Gardiners in *Pride and Prejudice*, as already mentioned, as well as the Westons and the John Knightleys in *Emma*.

Also in *Persuasion* Mr. William Elliot and his first wife "were not a happy couple." (*P*, 200) As for parasitic Mrs. Clay in the same novel, she "had returned, after an unprosperous marriage, to her father's house, with the additional burthen of two children." (15) Even among the younger generation in *Mansfield Park*, the Maria Bertram/James Rushworth marriage quickly ends in divorce, and the only truly promising match in that novel is Fanny Price and Edmund Bertram's union.

In *Emma* the senior Woodhouse couple is divided by death. However, their temperamental differences, which are clearly acknowledged, do not seem to have had any adverse effects on their obviously harmonious family life.

In the choice of marriage partners by her characters, Jane Austen stresses the idea of the husband or the wife being *taken in*, the unsuitableness of the matches resulting from the initial deception. In *Mansfield Park*, the following exchange between Mary Crawford and her half-sister, Mrs. Grant, about marriage, lays much emphasis on the wrong choice of the marriage partner and the resulting disillusionment, exaggeratedly

presented as an almost universal rule:

> 'I think too well of Miss Bertram to suppose she would ever give her hand without her heart.'
>
> 'Mary, how shall we manage him?'
>
> 'We must leave him to himself I believe. Talking does no good. He will be taken in at last.'
>
> 'But I would not have him *taken in*, I would not have him duped; I would have it all fair and honourable.'
>
> 'Oh! dear—Let him stand his chance and be taken in. It will do just as well. Every body is taken in at some period or other.'
>
> 'Not always in marriage, dear Mary.'
>
> 'In marriage, especially. With all due respect to such of the present company as chance to be married, my dear Mrs. Grant, there is not one in a hundred of either sex, who is not taken in when they marry. Look where I will, I see that it *is* so; and I feel that it *must* be so, when I consider that it is, of all transactions, the one in which people expect most from others, and are least honest themselves.' (*MP*, 45-46, Austen's emphases)

The unhappy case of her aunt Crawford, witnessed and endured by her and her brother Henry in the home where they were received and grew up, explains in part Mary's appalling statistics: "My poor aunt had certainly little cause to love the state," she points out. (*MP*, 46) Indeed, the disagreement between Admiral and Mrs. Crawford was almost total, with yet one notable exception: "Admiral and Mrs. Crawford, though agreeing in nothing else, were united in affection for these children." (*MP*, 40) In other respects, Admiral Crawford is said to be "a man of vicious conduct." (*MP*, 41)

The idea of being "taken in" in the search for the appropriate marriage partner can be traced back to one of Austen's favourite and most assiduously studied novelists, Samuel Richardson. James Austen-Leigh, Jane Austen's nephew, writes in that regard:

> Her knowledge of Richardson's works was such as no one is likely again to acquire, now that the multitude and the merits of our light literature have called off the attention of readers from that great master. Every circumstance narrated in *Sir Charles Grandison* […] was familiar to her.[34]

Austen's exceptional familiarity with Richardson's novels, as emphasized here by her nephew, may help explain her no less exceptional indebtedness

[34] Austen-Leigh, p. 89.